

“I am what I’m not.” A corpus-based study of negative
self-identification in UK web forums



Eva Triebel

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Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Triebel', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Eva Triebel

Graz, Austria/Lancaster University, UK

April 2021

Abstract

This thesis analyses a corpus of 936 instances of the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite noun phrase” and its variants, as used in UK web forums. Making assertions about one’s identity in the negative not only provides information about what one claims not to be, but also indexes various aspects of, and potentially modifies, the interpretation of the textual and non-textual context in which such assertions are used. The thesis develops a theoretical and methodological framework to qualitatively and quantitatively identify the multifunctional, context-dependent meaning potential of the structure in focus. The corpus was qualitatively analysed and tagged for conceptual categories of identifying NPs as well as for formal and functional features of the co-texts in which the structure appears. A conceptual profile of negative self-identifiers was developed, and the experiential meanings of the immediate context of the structure were examined, as were their relations of co-occurrence with particular conceptual categories of negative identifiers. By investigating whether users of English in particular co-texts negate self-identification with noun phrases from particular conceptual domains in patterned ways, the study identified certain conceptualisations that were implicitly acknowledged as relevant for people’s self-representation in these discourse contexts. Key findings include: (a) negative identification with expertise is a frequent linguistic choice in the context of presenting one’s knowledge; and (b) negative identification with preferences is a frequent linguistic choice in contexts describing one’s experience. These findings are discussed in light of the wider sociopolitical context, suggesting an ideological struggle around – and a possible reconceptualisation of – the notion of epistemic authority.

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I could either write a separate thesis on who I am grateful to for which reasons, or keep it simple. I'm not a woman of few words, so the acknowledgement section might exceed its conventional scope. About five years ago, I was at a crossroads in my life, not knowing for certain whether I would ever want – or get the chance to – seriously engage with linguistics, or anything academic, anymore. My first idea for a PhD project had turned out to be unfeasible, I had run out of funding, and prospects were bleak. I then heard that a fellow student from Graz University, Susanne Kopf, had just embarked on a PhD project, working in Vienna whilst pursuing a PhD as part-time Lancaster student. She's the first person to whom I am grateful today. If she had the courage to do this, I thought, I might try as well, and I spent several hot summer weeks reading and smoking and thinking and trying to write up a proposal for a thesis. I knew that only if someone at Lancaster accepted this proposal, and thus me as their student, would I be allowed there. When I got the letter of acceptance, I almost smashed my front tooth (for the second time, but that's an entirely different story) against my laptop, laughing. I moved to a new flat, started a new job to finance my studies – teaching the present simple tense to the jobless and translating absurd brochures – and here I was: a brand-new Lancaster PhD candidate. Looking back now, this was one of the best turning points in my life, and my journey towards submitting this PhD has been a shaky funky foamy road of success and defeat, joy and despair, conferences, various jobs at various institutions, thousands of files being stored on countless flash drives, Skype calls, train journeys, music, poetry, and me becoming much more of what I am – and am not, as it were – today.

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¹ This title, in turn, is inspired by the song “I am what I am” featured in the musical *La Cage aux Folles*, composed by openly gay Jerry Herman and released as a Gloria Gaynor single in 1983. While the song is considered a gay/LGBTQ anthem, the notion of, and interest in, identity in this thesis is a more general, discourse-based one, as questions about identity are approached by linguistically analysing what(ever) speakers participating in web forum discussions claim not to be.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background to and motivations for the study

This thesis explores how speakers use language to discursively manage their social identities in informal communicative situations. More precisely, it investigates the discursive and social functions served by variants of one particular linguistic structure – negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + not + indefinite NP” – in English language as used by writers in UK online discussion forums. Representing informal written conversations and, thus, highly interactive discourse, these forums are a promising discourse site for studying negative self-identifiers. The data for this study is a randomised corpus of 936 variants of the structure in their co-text of usage, annotated for formal, semantic and functional aspects. This corpus was examined both qualitatively and quantitatively, the latter with the help of the concordancing software WordSmith 5.0 (Scott 2008).

Negative self-identifiers are pragmatically interesting structures because they serve to defeat explicit or implicit identity claims present in the immediate co-text, the situational context or the wider cultural context of the utterance and thus “display significant contextual and interpersonal meanings in addition to their ideational sense” (Jordan 1998: 706). For instance, while the utterance *I am not a doctor* could be a direct response to the question *Are you a doctor?*, it also has the potential to interact with and modify its co-text and context, guiding the interlocutor’s interpretation of the speaker’s utterance. To take two examples from my corpus, the negative self-identifier in *Sounds like asthma to me, but I’m not a doctor* reduces the epistemic status of the speaker’s diagnosis; in *I’m not a doctor and this is just my experience*, the negative self-identifier serves as background against which the (preceding or following) text referred to by *this* is represented as “just experience” and thus as epistemically inferior and hedges the clause coordinated by *and*.

Being or not being a doctor – and the motives for making this relevant in the context of a forum discussion – might also have implications beyond the local discourse context: certain discourse functions of the structure might transtextually correlate with certain contexts of usage, pointing to patterns of meaning-making or conceptualisations underlying how speakers routinely manage the interpretation of their utterances on web forums. Web forums are “web-based application[s] that bring[] people together with shared interest and mind-set” (Biryai & Thomas 2014), allowing individuals with ever-more specific interests to informally interact across spatial distance, irrespective of factors that might separate them in real life. In these discourse contexts, marked by similarities rather than differences between participants, the question of what functions negative self-identification serves, becomes particularly interesting. In other words, in certain communicative situations, ‘not belonging’ might be more important than ‘belonging’ to a particular social group, and this might relate to higher-order conceptualisations of the social situation enacted and the social world represented in these communicative situations.

Difference and differentiation, rather than sameness and identification, appear to be key paradigms of contemporary social life, characterised by a reconceptualisation of identity towards individualisation (Giddens 1991, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001, Bauman 2012, Rosa 2013). Next to globalisation, marked by an ‘outsourcing’ of e.g. governance functions of the state to supranational bodies, individualisation is the second constitutive feature of late modernity. Individualisation can be defined as a process by which the individual becomes the centre of social agency, i.e. an ‘insourcing’, foregrounding individual choice and responsibility, as well as backgrounding the role of membership

in more traditional social categories and the constraints they impose (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001). In this context, the categories people choose to identify with – and conversely, the pool of categories they choose *not* to identify with – might be proliferating, as social life, just like the free market, is increasingly diversified, i.e., fragmented into ever-smaller fields of interest, expertise and consumption choices. Because social life and relations are also increasingly fast-paced, identity might also become an increasingly unstable, fluid and continually transforming category, leading people to identify with a plurality of concepts and to highlight different aspects of their self-identities from one situation to the next, self-consciously weighing the risks and benefits involved in identity representation and negotiation.

According to Rosa (2013: 4), “social changes can be either analysed ‘macrosociologically’ as alterations in ‘objective’ social or systemic structures or investigated ‘microsociologically’ from the viewpoint of a subject-centred social science as a transformation of logics of action and self-relations”. By microlinguistically examining the pragmatic functions of negative self-identifiers, this study seeks to contribute insights into how persons interacting on web forums linguistically manage their utterances and, thus, their social relations, in informal written conversations. It also seeks to find if particular functions served by particular variants of the structure can be observed across texts, and if so, what underlying conceptualisations structure such functional patterns. Thus, my study aims to bridge the gap between studying local instances of language in use and addressing questions on the level of the macrosociological context from a critical discourse analytical perspective.

1.2. Research Questions

Table 1.1 below presents the research questions addressed in this study. They are arranged in a way as to indicate that considerations about the social world in which the examined forum discussions are embedded play a role for each research question, and that the results for each research question are consequently discussed in terms of their sociopolitical implications. The table also indicates in which chapter the respective RQs will be answered.

	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
	Chapter 7	Chapter 8 & Chapter 9	Chapter 10
A	What are the nouns and noun phrases with which people posting to web forums negatively identify?	What are the formal-functional relations of negative self-identifiers in my corpus and their clause-internal and clause-external co-texts?	If there are patterned relations between certain conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers and particular types of discourse contexts, what do these reveal about conceptualisations potentially structuring speakers’ self-representation in web forums?
B	To which conceptual categories can these nouns and noun phrases be assigned, and how prominently – in terms of frequency and lexical variation – are the emerging categories represented in the corpus?	What are the meanings and functions of co-texts with certain formal links to the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP”, and how frequently are they represented in the corpus?	
C		Do co-texts with particular meanings and functions occur together with particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers in patterned ways?	
What implications, if any, does this have for the broader sociopolitical context?			

Table 1.1: Research questions addressed in this study

1.3. Structure of the thesis

To answer these questions, Chapter 2 of this thesis theorises negation in general, and negative self-identifiers specifically, from the perspectives of formal semantics, grammar and pragmatics. Thus, the chapter lays the theoretical foundations for studying the effects realised by the meaning potential “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” as used in authentic discourse contexts. The chapter also discusses the considerations based on which certain variants of the structure were selected as data for the analysis.

Chapter 3 theorises negative self-identification from a functional perspective, explaining how structures like negative self-identifiers in use can be approached as multi-indexical meaning potentials, the functions of which depend not only on the value of the identifying NP, but also on the textual, situational and broader social contexts in which they are used. To explicate possible relations of individual utterances and (what is considered to constitute) the context, various linguistic theories which approach the relations of language in use and various levels of context are reviewed, starting with those that consider little textual and/or social context, such as traditional Speech Act Theory and Conversation Analysis, before moving to theories whose very departure point is textual and social context, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and corpus-based approaches which study paradigmatically compiled discourse samples to quantitatively observe (micro-)linguistic choices across texts. I then go on to explain how a corpus-based pragmatic study of negative self-identification can be embedded into the superordinate framework of corpus-based (Critical) Discourse Analysis (CDA), which seeks to reveal conceptual configurations structuring meaning-making in discourse as part of social practice. The chapter concludes with presenting the discourse model for studying negative self-identifiers underlying this study.

While Chapter 3 considers negative self-identification in relation to different conceptualisations of textual and non-textual context, seeking to theoretically bridge the gap between the linguistic structure in focus and the contexts in which people use language to contrast themselves with particular concepts, Chapter 4 contextualises this study and the social research interests it pursues. It reviews literature on different conceptualisations of identity and the self, with a focus on how different linguistic approaches view the relation between language, mind, the self and the social world. It also positions the present study in a wider contemporary social context, raising questions about late modern identity conceptualisations that can be addressed in a critical study of negative self-identifiers in use. This chapter also discusses web forums as the local discourse context in which negative self-identification is studied, explaining what makes them well-suited sites for exploring how people discursively manage their identities in informal written conversations.

How precisely the corpus of 936 instances of negative self-identification as used in web forum discussions was collected and what metatheoretical and methodological principles guided the process of data collection and analysis is discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 then elaborates on the approach taken in the analysis by introducing a formal-functional framework which provided the conceptual basis for annotating the data and analysing the meanings of, and meaning relations between, negative self-identifiers and their co-texts. It also introduces the annotation scheme applied prior to and refined during the analysis of the data.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 report and discuss the results of the analysis of negative self-identifiers in use. Chapter 7 presents a conceptual profile of identifying noun phrases in all instances of the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” in the corpus to answer RQ 1. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of the results of this analysis, formulating expectations about conceptual strategies assumed to play a role in the usage of negative self-identifiers on web forums. Chapter 8 answers part

A and partly part B of RQ 2, presenting qualitative and quantitative analyses of the formal relations between negative self-identifiers and their immediate co-texts and of the experiential functions of sentences and clauses formally related to the structure in focus. Based on the results of these analyses, the meanings and functions of particular co-texts with formal links to instances of the structure are examined in greater detail in Chapter 9, which thus answers parts B and C of RQ2. To bridge the gap between micro-linguistic analysis of local functions of the structure and questions about the wider social context, this chapter also provides a qualitative analysis of two instances of the structure, discussing their functions in relation to their co-texts and situational contexts in more detail and relating them to questions regarding the social world at large.

The final Chapter 10, then, answers RQ 3, summarising the results of the study and critically discussing their sociocultural implications.

2. Theoretically contextualising negative self-identifiers

This chapter lays the theoretical foundation for studying negative self-identifiers in English with the aim of creating a formal-functional profile of instances of the structure in use. First, a brief discussion is provided of how the notions of form, function and meaning are understood in this thesis. Then, negative self-identifiers are theoretically contextualised by reviewing theories on negatives.

2.1. Studying forms, meanings and functions

This thesis adopts a functional perspective towards studying variants of a formally defined structure, viz. negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP”. It assumes that “meaning resides in systemic patterns of choice” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 23) and that choice is dependent on the functions language is employed to serve in its context of use. This means that in this study, negative self-identifiers are viewed as lexicogrammatical choices in particular co-texts in certain social situations, embedded into larger social contexts. My thesis takes a corpus-based approach to studying the discourse-pragmatic functions this structure serves in forum discussions. This means that it focuses on the (potentially patterned) communicative effects of negative self-identifiers. Corpus-pragmatic studies, as Aijmer (2018: 555) explains, are “form-based, [...] mapping words or constructions onto a range of functions”. It is in this sense that the term *formal* is used in this thesis (except in the established collocation *formal semantics*²).

The functions of negative self-identifiers crucially depend on the ideational meanings of the nouns and noun phrases with which speakers contrast themselves. These are the semantic meanings of lexemes, understood as meaning potentials encoded by particular words, used to differently carve up speakers’ experience of the world (Allwood 2003: 16). To differentiate between NPs in the instances of the structure examined here, these were qualitatively analysed and annotated in the corpus (Chapter 6) and conceptually profiled, through quantitative analysis (Chapter 7).

Negative self-identifiers may be pre- and postmodified clause-internally, and they can be linked to other clauses. These co-texts, representing particular (formal) grammatical categories (e.g. conjunctions, adverb phrases or coordinated clauses), were annotated in the corpus so that they could be studied functionally. The clause-internal co-texts of the structure were analysed in terms of their discourse-pragmatic functions (e.g. adverb phrases serving to index stance). The clause-external co-texts of negative self-identifiers were first analysed in terms of their experiential functions, drawing on the transitivity framework (Chapter 8). Then, they were studied in terms of their overall communicative function (e.g. to provide advice) (Chapter 9). Since negative self-identifiers can also functionally interact with functional units above sentence level, such units of text were identified by means of qualitative analyses, and their (potentially patterned) relations with particular conceptual categories of the focal structure were examined.

2.2. Theorising negatives

In the following, I will first define negatives in general and discuss negative self-identifiers from a formal semantic perspective (section 2.2.1). I then go on to explain how negation can be formally and syntactically expressed, what the meaning differences between these different realisations of negation

² As Partee (2016: 3) explains, “[t]he word *formal* in “formal semantics” is opposed to informal and reflects the influence of logic and mathematics in the rise of scientific approaches to philosophy and to linguistics in the twentieth century”.

are and what can be said about their frequency of usage (section 2.2.2). The next section briefly discusses the issues of presupposition and scope, that is, the question of what it is that negatives negate (2.2.3). In section 2.3, I characterise negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” more specifically by explaining the considerations based on which negative self-identification with noun phrases, rather than with, e.g. adjectives, was explored in this study. Section 2.4, then, presents the results of a pilot study that sought to find if speakers, upon being presented with a number of prompts, would actually use the structure in focus (2.4.1), and discusses the use of the structure in the spoken component of the British National Corpus (BNC) (2014) (2.4.2). Chapter 3 explores how negative self-identifiers can be studied to learn about their functions in interaction.

2.2.1. Negation in formal semantics

First and foremost, negation can be characterised from a formal semantic viewpoint, representing “a phenomenon of semantic opposition” (Horn & Wansing 2020: online). This explanation of the meaning of negatives is based on truth-conditional semantics. Representing an approach anchored in a “philosophical tradition with strong relations to logic” (Widell & Harder 2019: 735), truth-conditional semantics is concerned with speakers’ competence allowing them to know the conditions under which any sentence of their language is true (Carston 1994: online). Negation, as a logical operator, reverses the truth value of statements. This means that if, and only if, a proposition P is true, then $\sim P$ is not true. So, from a formal semantic viewpoint, neither can P and $\sim P$ both be true, nor can they both be false – this is called the Law of the Excluded Middle (Horn 2001). An NEG-operator can cancel itself, to the effect that, for example, ‘not impossible’ entails ‘possible’ – this is the Law of Double Negation.

Negation poses a problem for truth-conditional semantics insofar as it is not possible to say what conditions have to be met for negative sentences to be true. For instance, it is possible to set up necessary and sufficient conditions under which the sentence *Eva is a snake* is considered to be true. Taking a compositional approach to meaning (Jönsson 2008), we could claim that the meaning of “snake” consists of the components [reptile] and [legless] and that consequently, the sentence is only true if both the propositions *She is a reptile* and *She is legless* hold true. However, we run into problems as soon as we are trying to set up similar conditions for negative sentences: thus, *Eva is not a snake* could be true for several reasons: She might not be an animal, she might not be a snake, but a dinosaur, or maybe for the speaker, she might not just be *a* snake, but *the* snake (representing the most special of all snakes). Formal semantics relies on De Morgan’s law to solve this problem, which postulates that the logical negation of any proposition P and any proposition Q is equivalent to the negation of either P or Q or both. It is represented as follows:

$$\sim(P \wedge Q) \equiv \sim P \vee \sim Q$$

This means that a sentence is negative if any or all of the propositions that conjointly have to be fulfilled for the sentence to be true are false (Horn & Wansing 2020: online). Accordingly, the entire sentence is false if only one of these propositions does not hold (cf. Kempson 1977: 119–20); consequently, the sentence *Eva is not a snake* would be considered as true if Eva has legs.

While truth tables can perfectly explain sentences if viewed in terms of truth values, they cannot account for the kind of utterances examined in this study, which is concerned with the functions of negative self-identification for speakers’ identity management in discourse. Think, for instance, of the utterance *I’m not an expert*. The ‘truth’ of this statement depends on what is seen as representing expertise in the particular communicative situation, and it may not only serve to make a descriptive

statement about the speaker, but perform a range of rhetorical functions in relation with its co- and context (but see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion about these relations).

That discourse-oriented approaches are more apt to studying negative self-identifiers in actual textual events also shows in the fact that, while contradictions are logically impossible, they can make perfect sense in authentic situations of language use. For example, I could say that *my dad is not my dad* to convey that the person that has been taking care of me all my life is actually not my biological father. In terms of Gricean Maxims, this could be explained as flouting the Maxim of Quality (Grice 1975), which involves saying anything that is obviously wrong to create additional meanings. In a similar vein, relevance theorists (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1986) explain the acceptance of contradiction in natural language by arguing that hearers look for a meaningful interpretation of contradictory utterances by assuming one of the propositions to be the one that is actually true (in my example this would be that the subject in question is not my *biological* dad, which will make the hearer look for alternative interpretations of my reference to this subject as *my dad* and infer that this is intended to convey something like ‘the person who acts as/appears to be my father’) (Hidalgo-Downing 2000: 216).

2.2.2. Formal realisations

Negation can also be viewed in terms of the various ways in which it can be formally realised and interact with other operators (Horn & Wansing 2020: online). This means looking at negation from the perspective of (formal) grammar, i.e. grammar considered as the “outward form taken by systemic choices” construing particular meanings (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 23). In basic terms, there are four types of negation in English, viz. *not*-negation (or VP-negation), *no*-negation (also referred to as NP-negation), morphological negation and inherent negation (Givón 1993: 202).³ According to Payne (1985), the most prototypical case of negation is a negative as opposed to a positive verb phrase (e.g. *I’m studying a lot* vs. *I’m not studying a lot*). Negation can also refer to noun phrases (e.g. *I’m no girly girl*), to pairs of antonymic lexemes, where the use of the marked form suggests a negation of the unmarked form (e.g. *I’m happy* vs. *I’m unhappy*), and to lexemes which have ‘negative’ as part of their semantic meaning (e.g. *I’m happy* vs. *I’m sad*).

To begin with the most frequent form, *not*-negation is formed by inserting the negative particle *not* or its contracted form *n’t* after the operator, i.e. the verb used for clause negation or for forming interrogative clauses, which can be an auxiliary verb, the copula *be*, or the auxiliary *do* as a dummy operator. The following (invented⁴) examples serve as illustrations:

2.1. *He can’t do it.*

2.2. *He’s not a good writer.*

³ It could be argued that a fifth category is constituted by *no*, which can be used as an elliptical form, e.g. as an answer to a *yes/no* question (e.g. *Do you like George Clooney? – No.*), as an interjection expressing the polarity of a clause following an explicit proposition (e.g. *Well, the Conservatives are always telling us how the poor are poor because they want to be... not because they have no opportunity to lift themselves up, no, that couldn’t be the reason* (COCA, Davies 2008)), or as an interjection cataphorically expressing the polarity of a clause (e.g. *and for the last time, no, I am not a shill for Miles or Morath and So, no, if an American band did the same thing, the Swat Team would NOT be called* (COCA, Davies 2008)).

⁴ The usefulness and acceptability of working with invented sentences in linguistics (as done, e.g., by generative grammarians such as Chomsky 1987) can be subjected to critique: arguably, introspectively generated examples are neither objective nor empirical (Talmy: n.d.), but they can be useful as illustrations, serving to facilitate the reader’s comprehension (Cook 2002: 264).

2.3. *He doesn't like writing.*

In spoken language, negation usually takes the shape of a contraction being attached to the word preceding it. Depending on what word precedes the contraction, we can distinguish between verb contraction and negative contraction, which are complementarily distributed, i.e. they can never co-occur in the same clause. Verb contraction occurs with the verbs *be*, *have*, *will* and *would*, which attach as contracted forms to a host – a pronoun, proper name or *wh*-word – preceding them (e.g. *She's not listening*, *Eva's not coming*, *Why's he leaving?*). In contrast, in negative contraction the contracted negator attaches to the operators *be*, *have*, *do* or a modal verb preceding it (e.g. *He just can't cook*, *there wasn't enough beer*). While verb contraction is favored with first and second pronoun subjects (*You're not being nice* rather than *you aren't being nice*), negative contraction is preferred with the verbs *have*, *will* and *would* (*He won't do it* rather than *he'll not do it*) (Peréz 2013: 260). There are six verbs which, unlike lexical verbs, do not need a dummy *do* because they can serve as operators themselves, viz. *have*, and the semi-modals *have to*, *need*, *dare*, *used to* and *ought to*. For example, both *you don't need to cry* and *you needn't cry* are possible, albeit with differences in style and frequency of use (the latter being used very infrequently and exclusively in British English though, according to Biber et al. 1999: 484).

As for *no*-negation (or NP negation), it is used less frequently than *not*-negation, especially in spoken communication. According to Biber et al. (1999: 170), only one out of ten conversations, and three out of ten samples of written language in use, feature *no*-negation; this finding is also supported by Xiao and McEnery (2010: 111), who examine the FLOB and the BNCdemo. In contrast to *not*-negation, the negation marker *no* introduces an NP as a determiner, e.g.:

2.4. *I'm no lady.*2.5. *He gave her no choice.*

Alternatively, negation can be incorporated into pronouns or pronominal adverbs such as *nothing*, *nobody* or *never* (Givón 1993: 205) as well as into quantifiers such as *few* (Horn & Wansing 2020: online), so for example:

2.6. *Nobody came to the party.*

Both the negator *not* and the determiner *no* can be used for clausal negation and convey the same propositional content (compare, for example, *She had no clue* and *She didn't have a clue*). However, corpus findings by Biber et al. show that the usage of the two types of negation significantly varies according to register and that, overall, *no*-negation is used considerably less frequently, especially in spoken communication. They report that only one out of ten conversations, and three out of ten samples of written language in use, feature *no*-negation (Biber et al. 1999: 169–70); this finding is also supported by Xiao and McEnery (2010: 111), who examine the FLOB and the BNCdemo. Additionally, in cases where *no*-negation and *not*-negation can be used interchangeably to convey the same propositional content, *no*-negation has been argued to be the more emphatic choice (compare, e.g. *he's not a head of department*, which suggests that the person simply does not have that job vs. *he's no head of department*, which could be used to say that the referent does not have the appropriate leadership qualities) (Biber et al. 1999: 169).

Sentences with a negative word such as *nobody* as subject cannot be expressed by *not*-negation in Standard English. As Martínez (2013) argues, however, double and multiple negation as well as other non-standard variants of negatives, like *innit* (invariably used as question tag) and the adverb *never* (used as a negator in statements in the past tense) are becoming more frequent in spoken modern English. Non-standard negation is also discussed in depth in Anderwald (2002).

As for morphological and inherent negation, these patterns, in contrast to syntactic negation, are only possible with particular lexemes, i.e. they are more idiosyncratic. Morphological negation means that a negative affix (e.g. the prefix *un-*) is attached to the unmarked positive form and the sentence is thus marked as negative. An example cited by Givón (1993: 202) is *I think she's unhappy*, which, because the adjective *unhappy* is the morphologically marked form of *happy*, is perceived as negation of the 'unmarked' assumption that she is, in fact, happy. Negative morphemes can, of course, attach not only to adjectives, but also to verbs and nouns. As for verbs, morphological negation is mainly realised by the prefix *dis-* as in *disapprove*⁵; nouns can be turned into negatives by adding the prefixes *dis-*, *de-*, or *anti-* as in *disadvantage*, *dehydration* or *anti-Marxist*. A closer look at morphological negation, however, reveals that there are very few cases in which the lexeme marked for negative can be used to actually express the negation of its positive counterpart. While logically it could be argued that *He is not happy* is equivalent to *He is unhappy* because both sentences formally express negations of the proposition *He is happy*, not being happy doesn't necessarily mean being unhappy in real life⁶ (Stubbs 1983: 111). Likewise, just because you are not a Marxist this does not necessarily mean that you are an anti-Marxist. And it would be very difficult to argue that *He suffers from dehydration* could equally well be expressed by *He doesn't suffer from hydration*.

Finally, inherent negatives feature lexemes that have an inherently negative meaning, e.g. *I doubt his story* as opposed to the corresponding affirmative proposition explicitly stated or implicitly present in our background knowledge, i.e. *I believe his story*. Like morphological negation, inherent negatives do not represent prototypical cases of negation because, in many cases, the conceptual domain they are part of cannot be clearly divided into a binary opposition between affirmative and negative (firstly, a doubt does not equal disbelief, and secondly, belief could be expressed by other nouns such as *scepticism*.)

Just as lexical words can come in pairs where one is marked for positive or negative, there are paired grammatical operators associated with a positive or negative context. This phenomenon of complementarily distributed, i.e. mutually exclusive, grammatical forms is called polarity. Examples of such polarity items are adverbs like *already* vs. *yet* and *too* vs. *either* or determiners like *some* vs. *any*. While negative polarity items are sensitive to syntactic negation, they do not seem to care about morphological and inherent negation. So, for example, it is fair to say *John isn't happy and Tim isn't*

⁵ With other negative affixes like *de-* or *un-*, I think it is more difficult to argue that they realise negation – at least in the sense of 'the opposite of affirmation' – because they seem to be used to describe a different kind of process rather than to negate an implied affirmation. For example, while *I disagree* could also be expressed by *I don't agree*, when Joe Cocker sings "unchain my heart", he is not asking the implied addressee not to 'chain' it – in fact, she already has his heart, so expressing the song's hookline by "don't chain my heart" would tell a completely different story. So from a logical point of view, it seems that unchaining and chaining cannot both be true (given that it is the same chain and the same body part, etc.), but they can both be false, if no action involving any chain, metaphorical or literal, is performed.

⁶ This observation was, by the way, a subject of interest for Plato, who noted that being ugly is by no means the same as not being beautiful, in his discussion of negation in *The Sophist*: "When we assert non-being, it should seem what we assert is not the contrary of being, but only something other" (Taylor 1971: 164).

either, but combining *either* with the morphological negative *unhappy* doesn't work (**John is unhappy and Tim is either*). Polarity is also closely tied to syntax: As Martin (1981, cit. in Stubbs 1983: 112) points out, polarity is closely tied to syntax: so, for example, only positive polarity clauses can be exclamative (which is why **What a horrible lecture this wasn't!* is ungrammatical). In contrast, negative polarity items are used in questions (*Any news about the scholarship?*), in conditional clauses (*Call me asap if you have any problems*) and, for example, in comparative constructions (*He's better than anyone else*⁷).

2.2.3. Scope and presupposition

Describing the meanings of negatives in natural language means taking a pragmatic perspective on negation, considering negative propositions as speech acts (Searle 1969: 10). In this section, I briefly discuss two issues that have been explored by (micro-)pragmatic approaches to account for the meanings of utterances featuring a NEG-operator, namely the scope of negation and the relation between negation and presupposition.

Generally, it can be said that negation differs in scope, which means that it can affect single words or phrases (local negation) or the entire clause. The parts of the utterance that do not fall under the scope of negation are positively presupposed, that is implicitly understood as asserted. As for local negation, optional arguments in the clause (i.e. benefactives, associatives and instrumentals or adverbs of time, frequency and place) attract the focus of negation and thus define what is to be taken as presupposed and as negated information (Givón 1993: 198–9, Biber et al. 1999: 88), as can be seen in the following examples (which were invented for illustrative purposes):

2.7. *I'm not a feminist right now.*

(→ The focus of negation here is on the adverb of time (*right now*), so the utterance does not mean that I am generally not a feminist.)

2.8. *He didn't insult her on purpose.*

(→ While it is presupposed that he insulted her, what is negated is that he did it on purpose.)

2.9. *I don't want to be in a relationship with you.*

(→ Just because the speaker does not want to be in a relationship with the implied hearer, this does not necessarily mean that she generally does not want a relationship.)

The same is true for presuppositions coded in relative clauses, verb complements and adverbial clauses:

2.10. *I love the drummer who's playing in that blues band.*

2.10'. *I don't love the drummer who's playing in that blues band.*

(→ Whether I love him or not, he's playing in that band)

2.11. *He knew that she was at home.*

2.11'. *He didn't know she was at home.*

(→ But it is still true that she was at home)

⁷ 'Comparative' might not be the perfect term to use here, since true comparisons in the sense of *A is better than B* are expressed with positive polarity items: while *He's better than someone else* is a comparison, stating that *he is better than anyone else* means that he is, in fact, the best.

- 2.12. *Not feeling well, I cancelled the meeting.* 2.12'. *Despite not feeling well, I didn't cancel the meeting.*
 (→ I still wasn't feeling well)

Finally, negation can be located in adverbials, in which case it does not affect the rest of the clause. For example, Biber, Conrad and Cortes (2003: 245) mention adverbials like *unexpectedly*, the negation of which does not influence the interpretation of the rest of the clause:

- 2.13. *Not unexpectedly, he turned up late for the meeting.*
 (→ He *did* turn up late for the meeting, but it was not unexpected).

The question of the scope of local negation is relevant for the research conducted here insofar as there are instances of negative self-identifiers where the negation only applies to adjuncts, like the adverb *right now* in the example above, in which case the negative self-identifier can be classified as a merely 'temporally valid' one, serving different communicative functions than instances where the entire proposition is negated.

The fact that presuppositional inferences are not affected by *not*-negation poses a problem for truth-conditional semantics when dealing with sentences containing non-referential noun phrases presupposing the existence and uniqueness of their referent. See Russell 1905, Atlas 1974, Karttunen & Peters 1979 for the long-standing debate on sentences such as, notoriously, *The (present) King of France is not bald*, which is ambiguous between a narrow-scope reading, where the negation only applies to the claim that the mentioned king is not bald, and a wide-scope reading, where the presupposed existence of the king also falls under the scope of the *not*-negation. Because my study considers utterances with first-person subjects, i.e. utterances whose referent is clear from the situational context, the questions of the scope of negation in clauses containing non-referential NPs does not represent a problem, apart from the mentioned cases where a negative self-identifier contains a locally negatable element, with functional implications.

Not considered either, for reasons of space and relevance, are cases of presupposition-cancelling negation such as *I haven't stopped smoking – I've never smoked in my life* (but see Horn 1985 and Carston 1988 for discussions of metalinguistic negation): even if marked uses of negatives such as the one just cited occurred in my corpus, approaching them by discussing the semantics of the NEG-operator would not explain what they are used to do in the actual written conversations examined here. The notion of presupposition does matter for the present study, though: as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, from a cognitive pragmatic perspective, negatives can indeed be considered in terms of what they presuppose, namely an expectation which they serve to defeat (Givón 1993: 188).

Another topic relating to the scope of negation is negation in complex clauses (e.g. Bond 2011). Complex clauses display two patterns of negation, according to whether the NEG-operator is in the main or the complement clause. Depending on the complement-taking verb (the verb introducing the complement clause), these two negation patterns can either yield two distinct senses or not (Givón 1993: 201). This can be seen from the (invented) examples below:

- 2.14. a. *I didn't know you were a feminist.* vs. a'. *I knew you weren't a feminist.*
 b. *You didn't ask me to help you.* vs. b'. *You asked me not to help you.*

- c. *I don't want you to leave.* vs. c'. *I want you not to leave.*
 d. *You couldn't greet him.* vs. d'. *You could not greet him.*

The distinct senses of examples 2.14a and a' can be explained in terms of logic, since the negated proposition is the main clause ($\sim I \text{ knew}$) in one case and the complement clause in the other ($\sim you \text{ were a feminist}$). With non-implicative verbs such as *want*, the two senses are similar from a logic viewpoint, but structurally different and used to perform different speech acts: while in *I don't want you to leave*, the speaker is the subject of the negated verb *want* and the focus is thus on her wish, the negation in *I want you not to leave* takes scope over the verb *leave*, whose subject is *you*, and the utterance thus conveys a stronger directive sense. The same difference in scope of negation can be observed, with an even bigger meaning difference, when comparing d and d': while the NEG-operator attaches to the modal *could* in d, conveying the meaning that the speaker was unable to perform the greeting, it takes scope over *greet* in d', meaning that the speaker has the option of choosing not to greet. To sum up, the complement-taking verbs in the above examples yielded two different senses of negation depending on whether the NEG-operator is in the main or complement clause.

In English (and other languages, of course), there are also so-called implicative verbs (Karttunen 1971). These are verbs which carry presuppositions about their complements in that the truth of a proposition they express implies the truth of the proposition stated by their complement. An example of an implicative verb is *manage*. While the affirmative use of this verb in 2.15a implies that the essay was finished, negating the predicate in 2.15b implies that the speaker did not finish the essay. As 2.15c shows, the 'swap' of negation illustrated in 2.14 above is not possible with implicative verbs at all without effecting a complete change in meaning. (Because of the positive semantic prosody of *manage*, managing *not* to do something appears as an odd linguistic choice except, perhaps, in ironic uses – for instance, I could utter example 2.15c self-ironically to highlight, say, that despite the vast amount of time I had to write the essay in question, I still did not do it eventually).

- 2.15. a. *He managed to finish the essay.*
 b. *He didn't manage to finish the essay.*
 c. *He managed not to finish the essay.*

For the present study of negative self-identifiers, however, the relation between complement-taking verbs and negatives does not play a role, as only negative self-identifiers in the first-person singular are considered. This means that the only possibilities of negative self-identifiers occurring as complements in complex clauses are the invented examples *I know I'm not a maths genius* or complex sentences with a non-first-person subject in the main clause, i.e. of the type *You know I'm not a metal fan*. Even if such cases occurred, the question of different senses of the structure examined depending on the syntactic position of the NEG-operator does not arise, and therefore will not be discussed any further.

Another issue that should briefly be mentioned is negative raising, which can be defined as a meaning-preserving transformation that moves the NEG-operator out of its position in the complement clause of a so-called negative raising predicate, where it is interpreted, to a higher clause, where it is pronounced. From a semantic perspective, this means that certain sentence-embedding predicates, if negated, imply an affirmative sentence in which negation extends into the dependent clause they

introduce (Fillmore 1963, Gajewski 2007: 289). Compare, for example, the negative raising verb *think* in 2.16a. with the non-NR predicate *say* in 2.16b. below (both examples are invented).

- 2.16. a. *She didn't think [he would be home]. → She thought [he wouldn't be home].*
 b. *She didn't say [he would be home]. → She said [he wouldn't be home].*

While the negative sentence in 2.16a. can be turned into a corresponding affirmative sentence in which the negation has taken scope over the dependent clause introduced by *think*, this is not possible for example b. because here, the affirmative has a different meaning: just because you don't say A, this does not automatically imply that you said ~A. This is just possible with a small number of verbs. Horn (1978) provides a list of NEG-raising predicates, grouped into five semantic fields:

- a. [OPINION] *think, believe, suppose, imagine, expect, reckon, feel*
- b. [PERCEPTION] *seem, appear, look like, sound like, feel like*
- c. [PROBABILITY] *be probable, be likely, figure to*
- d. [INTENTION/VOLITION] *choose, plan*
- e. [JUDGMENT/OBLIGATION] *be supposed to, ought, should, be desirable, advise, suggest*

Regarding the present study, NEG-raising could play a role if self-identification in the affirmative, occurring as dependent clauses over which a NEG-operator in the superordinate clause has scope, were considered in the analysis. So, for instance, the corpus compiled for this study could theoretically also include utterances like *I don't think I'm a feminist*. However, it makes a conceptual and functional difference whether identification with a particular concept is only epistemically modified by a superordinate clause, or whether the copula linking a subject and an identifying NP is directly negated, to the effect that the negative is part of the proposition expressed, rather than only of the sentence-embedding predicate: *I'm not a feminist* is, clearly, a stronger case of negative self-identification. Apparently, self-identification (whether negative or not) has a different communicative effect depending on whether it is used in an independent sentence or as a complement clause after a verb of opinion, perception etc. So, to create another example with a verb from Horn's list, *It appears that I'm not a feminist* can be argued to represent a weaker instance of negative identification than the unembedded and thus unmitigated *I'm not a feminist*. Also, with most verbs in Horn's list, it is not even possible to invent sentences featuring (negative) identifiers with first-person subjects because they combine with infinitive constructions (e.g. *I choose not to be a carnivore*). While utterances such as this one – which arguably serves to contrast the speaker with the group of carnivores – could, theoretically, be analysed as part of this study, they are not included in the corpus examined here for reasons of feasibility. An even clearer case can be made against considering negative self-identifiers in clauses dependent on matrix clauses with a different subject, i.e. direct quotations (e.g. in *He said "I'm no liar"*), representations of mental processes of different subjects (e.g. *He thinks that I'm not a liar*), because obviously, these represent other people's identity ascriptions and not the speaker's.

To conclude, this section has characterised negatives and negative self-identifiers from the perspectives of formal semantics, (formal) grammar and (micro-) pragmatics, explaining why they are relevant for the study of negative self-identifiers, or why they do not need to be considered in the analysis. It was outlined which types of negation exist, how negatives can be approached in terms of

formal semantic truth conditions, and how negation can be theorised to take scope over certain parts of propositions or negate them in their entirety depending on formal and semantic aspects. Because formal accounts of negatives lack explanatory value when it comes to exploring their effects in authentic discourse contexts, the subsequent chapters will adopt a functional perspective on negative self-identification. Before discussing approaches to account for the functions of negative self-identifiers, I will in the next section briefly formally and conceptually characterise the second, syntactically defined variable of negative self-identifiers examined here, namely nouns and noun phrases.

2.3. Theorising the identifying noun phrase

The element that is, obviously, decisive for the function of a negative self-identifier is what speakers contrast themselves with – in this project, this means the noun or noun phrase with which forum participants negatively identify. The reason for the decision to examine negative self-identification with nouns and thus to omit negatives with similar functions such as *I'm not normally jealous*, is the special ontological status of nouns in contrast to other word classes and their distinctive conceptual and linguistic properties: nouns are conceptually more stable and autonomous than verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions, which code temporally limited and dependent relations. Therefore, it makes a conceptual difference whether I say that *I'm not active* or *I'm not an active person*: while negating being active is likely to be interpreted as description of a more or less temporary state (e.g., think of *I'm not active on social media at the moment*), negative identification with the compound *active person* suggests that the speaker negatively identifies more generally and permanently with the concept of being active, in the sense of regularly engaging in physical activity (Givón 1979: 321, Langacker 1987: 58).

What is more, the combination of (negated) copula and noun allows for the closest material (in terms of linguistic signs) and cognitive (in terms of association between concepts) proximity between the subject and a potentially relatively complex conceptual unit. The following invented examples – invented for illustrative purposes – show this:

2.16. *I'm not a linguist.*

2.17. *I'm not working as a linguist.*

2.18. *I'm not interested in linguistics.*

Saying *I'm not a linguist* construes a different identity for the speaker than saying *I'm not working as a linguist* or even *I'm not interested in linguistics*. This, of course, relates to the different process types represented by these examples and the different participant status of the nouns *linguist* and *linguistics*: in example 2.16, the negative self-identifier is an identifying relational process (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 2019) negating membership of the speaker in the conceptual category *linguist*. In example 2.17, what is negated is not category membership but the (non-)engagement of the speaker in a material process – *working* – the field of which is specified further by a circumstantial, viz. *as a linguist*. This means that the conceptual prominence of the noun's meaning in relation to the speaker's identity is lower than in the first example (which also shows in the fact that even though I might not currently be *working* as a linguist, I might still identify as such). In example 2.18, the speaker talks about what they are (not) interested in – namely *linguistics*, which could not even be used to refer to the speaker's identity and, in terms of thematic progression, is only of secondary importance in this representation. Thus, the linguistic and conceptual relevance of *linguistics* for the speaker's identity is highest in the

first example, which is the reason why this study focuses on negated identifying relational processes (specifying *be* as the copula of choice) with the speaker in the role of the token and an indefinite NP in the role of the value.

Regarding the types of nouns examined here, this study deals with count nouns, which are conceptually distinguishable from mass nouns. This is reflected in the fact that count nouns can be referred to by means of determiners – the indefinite article *a(n)* in the case of the structure “*I* + copula + indefinite article + NP” – and that they can be quantified, i.e. counted, and qualified, i.e. ascribed properties by means of pre- and post-modifiers (e.g. *a nice doctor*, *a doctor with good online rankings*) (Radden & Dirven 2007: 65).

Syntactically, a noun may constitute or – if modified by dependents – serve as heads of phrases, i.e. syntactic constituents. The following variants of indefinite noun phrases are possible and of relevance for the analyses that were conducted for this study:

- Pre-modifier + noun: *a real fan*
- Noun + post-modifier: *a fan of the new Audi TT*
- Noun + (reduced) relative clause: *a fan who attends every game/attending every game*
- Noun + Noun: *an Audi fan*

This distinction matters because meaning is componential, i.e. the meaning of the identifying phrase is created by the way different meaning components are structurally related. For example, it makes a difference whether I negatively identify with *fan of the new Audi TT* or the compound *Audi fan*: in the first case, I primarily contrast myself with the noun *fan*, only specifying the kind of fandom in the noun’s periphery by using a post-modifier, while in the second case, I combine the meanings of the two nouns into a compound with *fan* as head and *Audi* as modifier, thereby creating a conceptual unity which is assumed to have a special status in our mental lexicon. When two concepts are combined, their meanings are not just added to each other, but they interact based on a particular relation established by the speaker, which in turn is shaped by, reflects and influences their world knowledge (Gagné & Spalding 2010). For instance, the compound *TF evangelist* (taken from my corpus of negative self-identifiers) is more than just a merger of the meanings of the nouns *TF* (standing for Teach First, an educational programme in which graduates are put into teaching in schools) and *evangelist*: the latter is used in its metaphorical sense here, whereby the relation between an actual evangelist and a TF evangelist could be described as “dogmatically believing in something”. Negative identification with compounds like this one appears interesting in the context of this study, because informally and effortlessly contrasting yourself with a relatively complex conceptual combination might suggest that the relation between the two concepts is taken as natural, based on your knowledge of the world. In other words, my analysis considers not only the overall meaning of the noun phrases that speakers negatively identify with, but also their formal appearance and, thus, different meaning structures.

2.4. Exploring the use of the structure “*I* + copula + NOT + identifying NP” in British English

To test if negative self-identifiers of the type “*I* + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” in fact represent structures used by native speakers of English to contrast themselves with particular concepts, and to shed light on negative self-identification from a practical, usage-based perspective, I carried out a small-scale pilot survey with native speakers of English in the initial stages of this project. The results of this web survey are presented in the next section, which represents a first step towards bridging the gap between formal theorisation of negatives and the functional study of authentic cases of negative

self-identification. The subsequent section, then, explores the use of the structure in focus in a corpus of spoken British English, viz. the BNC 2014, to find which formal variants of the structure appear most frequently in a different dataset than the one studied here, and which conceptual categories of identifying NPs feature most prominently in this corpus (a detailed conceptual profile of identifying NPs of the corpus used for this study is presented in chapter 7 of this thesis).

2.4.1. A written Discourse Completion Task on negative self-identification

The goal of this pilot survey⁸ was to ensure that no relevant formal variants of the “I’m not a”-structure would be left unconsidered in the corpus. The questionnaire used for this survey was a written Discourse Completion Task (Blum-Kulka 1982, Jebahi 2011: 650), in which I presented 17 participants with three different kinds of prompts destined to elicit variants of the “I’m not a”-structure.

The first type were seven questions asking respondents whether they identified with a particular category, to which respondents had to provide answers of more than just one word (to avoid simple *yes/no* answers). To make sure that respondents’ answers would not be influenced too much by the wording of the questions posed, I varied the identifying verbs, not always using the structure “Are you a(n) (+ noun)”, but also verbs like *identify*, *consider* etc. The goal of this question type was to find whether said structure would be used by speakers to directly position themselves in relation to the respective NPs, explicitly referring to the noun in question, or whether they would react more indirectly. A concrete example of a more indirect response I obtained is *I eat animal products on a regular basis* as a response to the question *Are you a vegetarian?*. Secondly, I presented them with sentences making affirmative assertions about their identity, such as *You’re a pessimist*, asking them to react to these claims reusing the indefinite NP in their statement. Thirdly, I asked them to form sentences of prompts merely consisting of a first-person pronoun and a noun in brackets, e.g. “I (philosopher)”. The aim of prompts of the second and the third type was to establish whether constructions with *be*, or other verbs, would be used by speakers, and whether being directly confronted with a claim about their self-identity or being free to form sentences featuring an NP would make a difference.

It should be mentioned, though, that this pilot survey represents an informal, exploratory research and has several limitations: firstly, the sample of 17 L1 English speakers is relatively small. Secondly, although I included a variety of nouns from different semantic categories in the prompts, assuming that they might spark different reactions and expressions of (negative) self-identification (nouns referring to particular professions, e.g. *gardener*, *philosopher*; health identifiers, e.g. *diabetic*, ideological identifiers, e.g. *socialist*, preference identifiers, e.g. *football fan*, *stamp collector*, etc.), these terms cannot be considered representative of identity categories potentially more relevant to the respondents. Thirdly, the answers to these prompts do not represent natural language in use, as they are certainly influenced by the fact that they are elicited, constituting (often, apparently, willingly humorous) responses to my questions rather than instances of language in use as they appear in naturally occurring conversation. The results of the survey are represented in table 2.1 below.

⁸ The full survey is included in Appendix 3.

	Prompt Type 1 “Are you a/n (+ indefinite NP)?”? “Do you consider yourself a/n (+ indefinite NP)?”? “Do you identify as (+ noun)?”?	Prompt Type 2 “You are a/n (+ indefinite NP)”.	Prompt Type 3 “I (noun)”
Number of questions	7	5	9
Number of responses	104	75	161
Use of <i>be</i> (in % of all responses in that prompt category) ⁹	31%	60%	48%
Use of another copula-like predicate constructions (in % of all responses in that prompt category) (e.g. <i>consider myself, label myself, characterise myself</i>)	10% ¹⁰	9%	8%
Use of non-copulative verb to (negatively) identify with noun or concept it designates (in % of all responses in that prompt category) (e.g. <i>I have some socialist beliefs, I am developing a passion for flowers</i>)	-	4%	11%
One-word-affirmation/negation, often followed by some kind of explanation or opinion statement in many cases (in % of all responses in that prompt category) (e.g. <i>nope, yes, absolutely</i>)	47%	14%	7%
Statement about the noun or the concept it designates (in % of all responses in that prompt category)	-	9%	25%
Others (in % of all responses in that prompt category)	12%	4%	1%

Table 2.1: Results of the pilot DCT

Overall, the pilot survey revealed that about half of the constructions used by respondents to self-identify, or negatively self-identify, with the noun of the prompt, featured the verb *be* (155 of 340, i.e. 46% of responses). As can be seen, the highest proportion of responses to type-1-prompts (i.e. questions about the respondents’ identity) were one-word affirmations or negations (though often followed by explanations, e.g., *yes women are the dominant sex* as a response to the question *Are you a feminist?*). I attribute this to the type of prompt – a question invites a simple yes/no answer, and many respondents obviously ignored my request not to provide one-word replies. This highlights that, as assumed, eliciting negative self-identifiers is a difficult task: while questions are the most direct way of eliciting statements about participants’ identities, they also bear the risk of being answered not by a longer reply that features a negative self-identifier, but merely by *yes* or *no*. This result is still

⁹ This includes cases where a self-identifier takes the form of an infinitive phrase with *be*, complementing a conative verb (e.g. *I try not to be a pessimist*), cases where a self-identifier is projected by a verb of perception, cognition, emotion, and desideration (e.g. *I wish I was a socialist*), or, like in *It's impossible for a hard-core capitalist like me to be a socialist*, occurs in infinitive phrases with *be* in impersonal constructions.

¹⁰ Most of these responses answer a question with a copula-like predicate, e.g. *Do you consider yourself a feminist?*; so one reason why this percentage is rather high is that elliptical responses such as *No, I don't* (as a response to questions like the one just cited) were considered in this category.

interesting, insofar as it suggests that negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” are not used assertively particularly often as responses to questions. Regarding prompts of the third type (*I* + noun), almost half of responses represented constructions of the type “I + copula [+/- NOT] + indefinite NP”. 25% of responses to this prompt constituted statements not about the speaker, but about the concept designated by the noun in question, e.g. “I (politician)” resulted in the sentence *I distrust most politicians*. This suggests that while negative self-identifiers featuring the copula *be* appear to be the default response to prompts of this kind, respondents also felt invited by these prompts to express their opinion on the concepts in question. As for (negative) self-identification using other copula-like verbs than *be*, 22 out of 340 responses featured other predicates, namely *consider myself* (14 instances), *become* (2), *label myself* (2), *identify as* (2), *characterise myself*, *describe myself*. In 8 cases, the copula-like predicate of the question was implicitly taken up in elliptical responses such as *No, I don't*. It can be concluded from this that while other copula-like verbs are used by speakers to negatively self-identify with particular concepts, they occur rather seldom in comparison to the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP”. Also, the usage some of these verbs by respondents might relate to the fact that they appeared in the prompts. This was taken to provide support for the decision to focus on negative self-identifiers expressed by variants of this structure in my study and not to take variants with other copula-like predicates and verbs into consideration. Exactly which formal variants of the structure were examined in this study, how and from what kind of data source they were collected is explained in Chapter 5.

2.4.2. The use of the structure in the Spoken BNC2014

As will be discussed in more detail, I decided to create a corpus of instances of the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” in English as used in UK web forums for three main reasons: firstly, because web forum discussions are considered the “quintessential form” of authentic, unmediated linguistic interaction (Meredith 2019: 242) (see 3.2.3); secondly, because web forums represent sites where individuals across the world can informally discuss and exchange expertise on issues of common interest in “collapsed contexts” (boyd 2014, Heyd 2014, Pendry & Salvatore 2015) (see Chapter 4); and finally, because existing corpora of CMC were found to present no advantages in comparison to a self-compiled corpus of instances of the structure in focus (see Chapter 5).

To learn about the representation of the structure in focus in a different type of data than the one examined here (presented in detail in Chapter 5), I also consulted the Spoken British National Corpus 2014. Using the corpus analysis tool CQPweb (Hardie 2012), I searched the corpus for the same formal variants of the structure that were included in the corpus created for this study. This yielded the results presented in table 2.2 below. This table displays both the results of searching the corpus for the variants specified (optional elements are displayed in brackets), i.e. before sorting the data, and the actual frequencies of variants of the target structure after sorting the data, removing false positives¹¹ and duplicates.

¹¹ Examples of false positives are cases where the indefinite article is not actually followed by an identifying NP, e.g. in cases where the speaker does not complete the phrase (e.g. *maybe I'm just not like a*) or where what has been tagged as noun in the corpus actually modifies an adjective (e.g. *I'm not a hundred percent sure*) or represents a different POS (e.g. *I'm no rubbish at serving pasta*). Also excluded from further consideration were cases where the identifying phrase is represented by words that could not be transcribed by virtue of being unintelligible (e.g. *I'm not a –UNCLEARWORD*) or were not included in the corpus for ethical reasons (e.g. *I'm not a –ANONnameF*).

Formal variant	<i>I'm</i> (adverb) <i>not</i> (adverb) <i>a/n</i> (adverb) (adjective) + identifying NP	<i>I</i> (adverb) <i>am</i> (adverb) <i>not</i> (adverb) <i>a/n</i> (adverb) (adjective) + identifying NP	<i>I'm</i> (adverb) <i>no</i> + identifying NP	<i>I</i> (adverb) <i>am</i> (adverb) <i>no</i> + identifying NP	<i>I'm</i> (adverb) <i>a/n</i> (adverb) (adjective) + identifying NP
Example from BNC	<i>I'm not an expert on Chinatowns of course we don't have a Chinatown here</i>	<i>I am not naturally an athlete or a gymnast it's just that I'm choosing to do things like that now</i>	<i>I'm no expert skier and I love but I love it just being in the mountains</i>	<i>I mean I am no expert and by no means do I think that it's perfect</i>	<i>I'm an introvert but I'm an introvert that flits between extroversion and introversion depending on my mood</i>
(Raw and relative) frequency before sorting data	301 matches in 225 different texts (in 11,422,617 words [1,251 texts]; frequency: 26.351 instances per million words)	9 matches in 9 different texts (in 11,422,617 words [1,251 texts]; frequency: 0.788 instances per million words)	10 matches in 10 different texts (in 11,422,617 words [1,251 texts]; frequency: 0.875 instances per million words)	2 matches in 2 different texts (in 11,422,617 words [1,251 texts]; frequency: 0.175 instances per million words)	716 matches in 393 different texts (in 11,422,617 words [1,251 texts]; frequency: 62.683 instances per million words)
(Raw) frequency after sorting data	246	9	10	2	

Table 2.2: Frequencies of the respective formal variants of negative self-identifiers in the Spoken BNC2014

While of course only providing a first step towards studying the use of negative self-identifiers in authentic British English language, these results show that the variant of the structure in focus by far most frequently used in spoken English is “I’m not a/n + identifying NP”. The uncontracted, *not*-negated variant, in contrast, is used extremely rarely, as are *no*-negated variants of the structure. Since interpreting the frequency of a particular phrase is difficult without a reference value to compare it with, I also searched the corpus for the non-negated variants of the structure, i.e. self-identifiers in the affirmative. These occur about 3 times as often as negative self-identifiers. The findings of this search support findings on the differences in register use of *no*- and *not*-negation as reported by Biber et al. 1999 (this chapter) as well as the different status of affirmative and negated utterances, with the latter representing the marked option, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. The set of negative self-identifiers produced by this corpus search is revisited at the end of Chapter 7, which presents a conceptual profile of negative self-identifiers used in web forum discussions.

2.5. Summary

This chapter has contextualised negation by, firstly, discussing how it can be viewed as a logical operator in formal semantics and, secondly, explaining how it is dealt with in formal grammar and pragmatic accounts concerned with the conventional meanings of negative utterances. The purpose of this was to contextualise the phenomenon examined in this thesis, namely negatives of the type “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP”, to delineate which forms of negative self-identifiers are to be considered in a study such as this one and to explain what questions about their effects can be raised.

As has been shown, however, what negative self-identifiers actually do in real-life contexts of language use often transgresses the boundaries of what is explicable on purely formal pragmatic grounds, and, vice versa, topics often discussed in formal pragmatics frequently refer to marked, invented cases which are not very likely to be encountered in a corpus of authentic instances of the structure in use. This chapter has also justified the decision to engage with negative self-identification with nouns and explained which formal variants of identifying NPs there are, and what conceptual and thus functional differences these make. Finally, the results of a written DCT exploring negative self-identification from another perspective and evidence of the use of the structure in the Spoken BNC2014 were presented. As for the survey, it revealed that the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” is frequently used and thus appears a promising phrase to be studied by means of a corpus-based analysis. The corpus search of negative self-identifiers showed that in spoken British English, the variant “I’m not a/n + identifying noun” is, by far, the one most frequently used, and the fact that self-identifiers in the affirmative occur three times more frequently in the corpus suggest that negative self-identifiers are a marked linguistic choice. The next chapter provides a functional account of structures like negative self-identifiers, explaining how the relation between a linguistic form with a meaning potential and its textual and non-co-text can be theorised.

3. Functionally conceptualising negative self-identification

[A]lthough the formal mechanisms which enable the construal of meaning are inherent to language by virtue of its being a semiotic system, the actual semantic reservoir of a language [...] is in fact responsive to the speech community's uses of language in the contexts of their social life. (Hasan 2009: 259)

This chapter approaches negative self-identifiers from a functional, discourse-based perspective and provides the conceptual basis for the theoretical and analytical model according to which negative self-identifiers will be analysed in the empirical part of this thesis. This means that they will be considered both as situated microlinguistic interaction and as a transtextually appearing 'type' of (microlinguistic) interaction interpretable in light of macrosocietal questions. After showing why negative self-identifiers are better approached as speech acts than solely from a formal grammatical and semantic perspective if we want to learn what they are used to do, I will discuss the notion of context in more detail. This is crucial to account for linguistic structures like negative self-identifiers which, as will be demonstrated, can serve different functions depending on the textual, situational and wider cultural contexts in which they are used. I will thus move from a pragmatic characterisation of negative self-identifiers as speech acts towards a discussion of approaches to language in use that theorise the relation between linguistic structures and (different notions of) context.

3.1. Negative self-identifiers as speech acts

[I]t may not even be appropriate to seek to compare the informational levels of positive and negative statements in language use, as they serve totally different purposes. (Jordan 1998: 709)

So far, I have reviewed key issues in connection with negation that have been researched in grammar and formal semantics. However, one question which has not been addressed so far, but has vital importance for the goals of my study of negative self-identifiers, is: why do people make use of negation at all? Traditionally, the use of negation has been considered a 'second choice': Leech (1983: 100), for example, views negative assertions as "pragmatically less favored than positive ones" because they are "less informative than their positive counterparts".

For Leech (*ibid.*), negation is a marked option in terms of Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, because it is normally avoided in favour of a positive statement. This is a consequence of a combination of what he calls the "Sub-Maxim of Negative Uninformativeness" and the Maxim of Quantity: viewed in isolation, negative utterances are less informative than positive ones, and, because of their more complex syntax, harder to process. For this reason, it would be odd for B to respond to A like this:

- 3.1. A: *What's new?*
B: *I didn't win the lottery.*

This view of negation is, in principle, shared by Givón (1993:191), who argues that negative utterances are pragmatically less likely because they are cognitively less salient than positive assertions: using the figure-ground distinction from Gestalt psychology, he argues that non-events can be imagined as cognitively non-salient ground – inertia – against which positive assertions, i.e. events or change, stand out as figures. By presupposing a corresponding affirmative as situationally relevant, shared knowledge, and thus as 'norm', negative assertions, like the structure of interest in the present work, serve to make a counter-normative statement. Rather than seeking to provide new information, negative assertions in Givón's view serve to "correct[] the hearer's mistaken beliefs" (1993: 190). Because of this function, seen as representing "a robust discourse-pragmatic component", Givón

(2018: 188) argues that negative assertions are to be distinguished from the three traditionally recognised speech acts, constituting a type of speech act in their own right. Indeed, negatives represent a ‘breach’ with the norm, in that they are used considerably less frequently than affirmatives. For example, Jordan (1998: 714) cites a corpus study by Huddleston et al. (1968) which revealed that only 4.5 per cent of all clauses examined were grammatically negative. Halliday and James (1993), found that the ratio between positive and negative polarity in finite clauses in written texts is 0.9 to 0.1 in the 18 million-word written component of the COBUILD corpus. Another aspect of negation, which, according to Givón (1993: 193), shows that using negatives is the exception to the rule, is its somewhat delicate status in social interaction. Disagreement, for instance, is usually mitigated by softening devices such as modals or adverbials: e.g., in many contexts, speakers are likely to say *Maybe that’s not the best idea* or *That might not be a good idea* rather than *That’s not a good idea*. Similar observations come from Stubbs (1983: 177-8), who cites studies on the elliptical forms *yes* and *no* which found that refusals are rarely expressed by simply saying *no* – so negation, disagreement and refusal are culturally less favored than affirmatives. The ‘problematic’ status of negation is precisely the reason why negatives – especially when the utterances in which they occur concern the speaker’s self-identity – appear to be a choice worthy of closer examination.

Why make a ‘counter-normative’ statement about yourself by saying what you are not, when you could simply assert what you *are*? As I have argued, approaching negative self-identifiers in terms of formal semantics, i.e. in terms of truth conditions, is not sufficient to account for the communicative functions they realise in actual, authentic linguistic interaction. After all, as Jordan (1998) points out, while utterances like *My cook is not a man* and *My cook is a woman* are the same in terms of their ideational meaning, the use of the ‘norm-reversing’ negative assertion implies additional textual and/or interpersonal meanings created in interaction with the textual and non-co-text in which this utterance is made (Halliday 1973).

This claim can easily be supported with examples: introspectively playing around with the negative self-identifier *I’m not a doctor* by placing it in different linguistic contexts shows that its meaning seems to change depending on its textual surroundings. Even if there is no co-text, the negative self-identifier seems to evoke a situational or even wider cultural context allowing for its interpretation:

- 3.2. A: *Are you a doctor?*
B: *No, I’m not a doctor.*
- 3.3. A: *Do you think I can take another Aspirin?*
B: *I’d say yes, but I’m not a doctor.*
- 3.4. *I’m not a doctor, can I still join the forum?*
- 3.5. *Tonight, I’m not a doctor – let’s get this party started.*
- 3.6. *I’m not a proper doctor, just a linguistics PhD.*
- 3.7. *No doctors.*

While in example 3.2, the negative self-identifier is used assertively, uttered in response to a question, it is used in 3.4 to mitigate the epistemic status of speaker B’s answer. In example 3.4, negatively identifying as a doctor triggers background assumptions about the mentioned forum as the situational context of language use (namely, that it is normally only used by doctors). In example 3.5, the negative self-identifier is used to deny assumptions about doctors implicitly present in the wider context of

language use – perhaps that doctors are not normally expected to celebrate. In example 3.6, the negative self-identifier is used to divide up the concept of doctors into ‘proper’ and ‘not proper’ ones, with the speaker self-identifying with the second category, which might have implications for their self-concept or, at least, self-representation in that situation and, possibly, for the cultural meanings associated with different research degrees. The last example, 3.7, presupposes a normative affirmative in which doctors are allowed (to wherever) and, incidentally, also illustrates that the “mutual contextual beliefs” (Bach & Harnish 1979: 5) activated by and relevant for the interpretation of this utterance include knowledge about the wider cultural context: most of us would probably expect “No doctors” to be written on a sign, placed on the door of a building, for example, and wonder why just doctors are forbidden to go there (for similar examples, cf. Jordan 1998: 713).

These examples demonstrate that the contexts which negative self-identifiers evoke and interact with could be anything from linguistic elements directly surrounding them to the broader cultural context in which they are used and against which they are interpreted. Depending on their contexts of usage, negative self-identifiers realise different meaning potentials, thus serving different communicative functions. According to Givón (1978: 22), “all it takes for the linguist to discover these communicative functions of negation is to probe the discourse context within which negative clauses are used in natural communication”. Indeed, exploring negative self-identifiers from a usage-centred perspective appears a promising endeavour, yielding new insights into how the grammatical and lexical properties of negatives in use interact with their textual and contextual environments to create meaning in interaction. As Jordan puts it:

Studies of direct and implicit negations in their true textual and contextual environments are needed to determine the ways by which negations display significant contextual and interpersonal meanings in addition to their ideational sense. No amount of scholarly debate regarding the ‘meaning’ of such negative and positive statements can be complete without considering their contextual, textual and interpersonal roles in natural language. And for this we need to study actual communicated examples of negation within their contexts of situation (Malinowski, 1935) and use. Thus, truly pragmatic studies are required. (Jordan 1998: 706)

A core assumption in pragmatics is that utterances do not have fixed, situation-independent meanings, but that “meaning-making is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of the utterance” (Thomas 1995: 22). The aim of pragmatic analysis of language is to find out what makes language use effective in a particular context, or, to put it in van Dijk’s (2008: 6) words, to study “appropriateness, that is, the rules that adapt text and talk to the constraints of their social environments”. To answer this question, we can look at language from essentially two viewpoints: we can either look at what forms can be used to successfully, or appropriately, realise a particular function, asking questions of the type “how do people use language to do X?”, or we can explore what functions a particular form fulfils (Cameron 2001: 72). My study falls into the second category, because it examines the functions of a formally defined linguistic phenomenon.

As was first proposed by John Austin’s Speech Act Theory (1962), language is used to do things in the real world, and, accordingly, utterances of the type “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” are not just sentences expressing a proposition, but speech acts, which can be successful (‘felicitous’, in Searle’s (1969) terminology) or not, depending on a set of conditions (the so-called felicity conditions): so, for instance, I cannot appoint a new Austrian chancellor merely by saying that I do, because I do not have the authority to do so; and while Donald Trump can take back what he said at a press conference, he

cannot build a border wall just by saying so and Mexico will not pay for it either, just like he most likely cannot convince many women of the innocence of his – to use his own term – ‘locker room banter’, because being persuaded by something depends on the hearer’s perceptions, and not only on the speaker’s intentions.

With some speech acts, the relationship between what is formally expressed (the locution), what is intended by the speaker (the illocution) and what is understood by the hearer (the perlocution) is relatively straightforward: when someone utters a performative, i.e. uses a linguistic form which denotes its function, in most cases they perform the illocutionary act denoted by the verb. Thus, the utterance *I promise not to cheat*, by containing the explicit performative *promise*, can easily be interpreted as a promise, which means that in this case, form and function are easily interpretable without any contextual information. Negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” examined in this study share with performatives that they seem to lose their effect (which, apparently, does not depend on the predicate, as with performative utterances, but on other, clause-internal and clause-external factors) when used in other tenses: just like changing the tense in the example just cited (e.g. *I promised not to cheat*) “remove[s] the ‘performative effect’ of this utterance” (Condoravdi & Lauer 2011: 1), negative self-identifiers serve different functions depending on the tense in which they are used: only instances of the structure in the present and present perfect tense serve as self-representations by the speaker in the context of the ongoing communicative situation (and not, for instance, negative self-identifiers in the past tense such as *I was no vegan in 2012*). In this study, therefore, only negative self-identifiers with present focus (i.e. in the present and present perfect tense) are examined.

Trying to map a particular form onto one particular effect is problematic in general, because, as Cameron (2001: 73) would argue, the relationship between form and function is in most cases not one-to-one, but many-to-many: a form might realise many different functions and one and the same function might be expressible by different forms. Things are already a bit more complicated with non-performative utterances, i.e. utterances that do not contain lexical elements that can be directly associated with a particular illocutionary force. The utterance *I’m not interested in other men* could be used to perform the same speech act as the explicit *I promise not to cheat*; however, it could also serve completely different functions. Imagine a woman rejected a man’s amorous offer and he reacts by saying *so you’re in love with someone else* – answering by stating that she is not interested in other men might even be more insulting to the rejected suitor, indirectly conveying something like *no, even if you were the last man on earth, I would not be interested in you*.

There are even cases where an utterance’s force cannot be determined without contextual information despite containing an explicit performative: to stay with my example, imagine you were secretly hoping that your relationship would soon be over without you having to end it. In such a context, utterances like *I promise to stay with you till death do us part* might not even function as a promise: after all, according to Searle’s (1969) rules for the felicitous performance of a speech act with its intended function, a promise must be in the hearer’s best interest to work as such (and eternally binding commitments might not be in everybody’s best interest). As we have seen, with negative self-identifiers, it does not seem to be possible at all to relate form to function without knowledge of the co- and context in which they occur: the only propositional content they have is that the speaker does not associate themselves with the category specified by the indefinite NP, which means that without knowing the context, the utterances *I’m not a murderer*, *I’m not a ticket inspector* and *I’m not a carrier of the coronavirus* are all the same in terms of speech act theory – they are negated assertives whose

illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect can only be guessed on the basis of the meaning of the indefinite noun phrase. We thus might assume that in all three examples, the perlocutionary effect is relief.

Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and its four maxims do not seem to work as an initial approach to negative self-identifiers, either: this theory posits that speakers are cooperative when they interact verbally, in the sense that they implicitly draw on rational and logical principles that enable purpose-oriented, rather than random and pointless, communication. This means that we assume, per default, that our interlocutors communicate rationally and want to say something meaningful with what they utter. As mentioned above, negative self-identifiers (and negatives in general) always constitute a problem in terms of these maxims if viewed in isolation, because asserting what you are not technically violates the Maxim of Quantity by providing non-information: thus, if someone asks me what I do for a living and I answer by saying *I'm not a lawyer*, the person would probably think I am playing games (except in certain contexts, e.g. a situation where being a lawyer is the default option and the negative self-identification points to a second option evident from the context). In fact, the only case in which this structure is to be taken as a direct speech act observing all maxims and intended to provide information is when it is used as an answer to questions of the type *Are you a/n X?*

While speech act theory and Gricean Maxims are of little use in analysing decontextualised instances of negative identification, they can help to account for certain cases of negative self-identifiers as used in (real or imagined) textual and situational contexts. For instance, it would be possible to argue that the utterance *I haven't been a member of this forum for long* counts as an apology for having violated certain forum rules. Gricean Maxims have explanatory power in cases where negative self-identifiers are used to flout these maxims and hence create conversational implicatures. For example, the following arm-chair inventions of mine might theoretically occur and require recourse to Gricean Maxims for explanation:

- 3.8. A: *Do you want to take a bet on the outcome?*
 B: *I'm not a betting person.* (Implicature → *No, I don't want to.*)
- 3.9. A: *Will I succeed at the exam?*
 B: *I'm not a clairvoyant.* (Implicature → *I don't know.*)
- 3.10. A: *Did you understand what I was trying to say?*
 B: *I'm not an idiot.* (Implicature → *This is a stupid question, of course I have understood.*)

In example 3.8, B flouts the Maxim of Quantity by providing an answer which contains less information – though expressed in more words – than necessary. While a simple “No” would suffice as an answer to A's invitation, B negatively identifies as betting person, thus avoiding a clear answer and coming across as either more polite – indirectness might be perceived as friendlier than direct rejection – or, indeed, as rude – declining by negatively identifying as betting person implies that A can be classified as such. In 3.9, B's answer is not directly relevant to A's question, but from their background knowledge, A probably knows that clairvoyants are people who (pretend to be able to) predict the future and could thus answer her question and can thus arrive at the implicature created by B's negative self-identification. In 3.10, just like in 3.8, a negative self-identifier is used instead of a simple yes/no answer, flouting the Maxim of quantity and thus constituting an answer that expresses B's annoyance at A's question.

While applying Gricean Maxims to account for cases such as these works quite well, it should be kept in mind that real-life instances of language in use do not normally consist of otherwise decontextualised question-answer pairs, but are surrounded by written or spoken text (as we have seen, this also represented the main problem with the written DCT presented in section 2.6). This context, in turn, is shaped by and indexes aspects of the situation in which language is used, which is conditioned by who is talking to whom about what and with which goals as well as by, ultimately, what can be said, known, and done at a particular moment in time and space. In fact, the question of what precisely represents the ‘context’ of an individual utterance with which it is deemed to interact is hard to answer once we depart from examples prototypically used to explain speech act functions, like the ones above. This is why context and related questions – such as the possibility of explicating the context-sensitivity of linguistic expressions and the role of social factors in epistemological matters – are not only the subjects of philosophical debates (cf., e.g. Cappelen & Lepore 2005, Goldman & O’Connor 2019), but also present a practical problem for linguistic analysis of discourse meanings created by forms with a meaning potential. As Akmana and Bazzanella (2003: 322) put it, while “context appears to be crucial both on the theoretical and on the applied levels”, it is “difficult to analyse scientifically and grasp in all its different demeanors”. Yet, if negative self-identifiers in authentic language use obtain their meaning in relation to their textual, situational and perhaps wider sociocultural context, the question arises how precisely we can describe, collect and analyse this context. According to Aijmer (2013: 12), “if meaning is selected in the communication situation, we need a description of the contextual factors which interact with the meaning potential of the lexical item”. The next section therefore discusses what various linguistic theories have to say about the relation between linguistic forms with meaning potentials and the context.

3.2. Negative self-identifiers as context-dependent meaning potentials

“[T]he meaning of text is made through time, and never wholly predictably: the aggregate probabilities for each choice that are the system are not only re-weighted for each situation and each text, but dynamically shift during the process of text-production itself.” (Lemke 2000: online)

This section explains how negative self-identifiers, as speech acts indexical of aspects of the situational and broader cultural context, can be approached on different levels of textual and non-textual context and, thus, discourse (see section 3.3.3). It provides the conceptual basis for the theoretical and analytical model according to which instances of the structure will be analysed in the empirical part of this thesis – both as situated microlinguistic interaction and as a transtextually appearing ‘type’ of (microlinguistic) interaction interpretable in light of macrosocietal questions.

As has been demonstrated earlier, in many cases negative self-identifiers are not – like in examples 3.8–3.10 above – used to react to what someone else has said, but seemingly arise out of nowhere: Imagine, for instance, a situation at a conference where someone from the audience utters the following in the Q/A session: *I’m not a linguist, but I’m not sure if I’m convinced by your data collection method*. Here, the negative self-identifier firstly relates to the rest of the speaker’s own utterance, premodifying the coordinated clause introduced by *but*, which, viewed in terms of the preparatory condition, presents a contrast to the negative self-identifier as the speaker expresses criticism despite mitigating their authority to do so, and which itself is epistemically modified (*I’m not sure*) and thus very tentative. But beyond that, it could be argued that the use of the negative self-identifier indexes various aspects that are relevant on the level of the communicative situation, and possibly the wider sociocultural context: by stressing their non-membership with the social group of linguists, the speaker might be acknowledging that it is seen as (socially, professionally) problematic if a non-linguist

expresses doubts about a linguist's work at a linguistics conference. Thus, their utterance might be interpreted as reflecting and reproducing the social conventions shared (or assumed by the speaker to be shared) among the conference participants in this communicative situation and even in the context of academia in general.

The example thus shows, once again, that structures like negative self-identifiers can only be sufficiently accounted for if considered in relation to their textual and (more narrowly or more broadly conceived) non-co-text of usage. The further away we move from the meaning of the structure in its local co-text, towards particular contextual variables interacting with particular linguistic variables in patterned ways, the more we move away from traditional pragmatics into the realms of sociolinguistics and variational pragmatics and, ultimately, discourse analysis. From a discourse analytical perspective, (potentially) recurrent functions of negative self-identifiers with particular meanings in forums as historically situated sites of language use with particular characteristics can be evaluated in terms of their (potential) sociocultural implications. In my study, I adopt analytical concepts from different linguistic and discourse-analytical accounts of meanings in context to be able to relate the local use of negative self-identifiers to questions about the social world. These approaches, amongst other things, differ to a lesser or greater extent with respect to what precisely the notion of "context" involves and on what basis we can claim that a particular speech act reflects, constructs, or is embedded into a certain context. In the following, I will discuss some of the issues that arise when trying to answer this question and review – though by no means exhaustively – approaches to the relation between utterances and their context-dependent and context-altering functions that are most relevant for my study.

3.2.1. Pragmatic context models

In pragmatics, as a part of theoretical linguistics, the focus is on abstract principles of language use rather than on concrete instances of communication. Levinson (1983: 9), for instance, defines pragmatics as "the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language". Accordingly, the object of interest in in Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1969) is "the speaker's (S), as well as the hearer's (H), ability to process, construct, and decipher the meaning of communicative utterances" (Chakrani 2007: 43). Therefore, context is conceptualised "as a cluster of actual states of affairs or events of various kinds, related to the issuing of an utterance and to its intended force" (Sbisà 2002: 422). In other words, context in formalist pragmatic approaches represents an abstract set of conditions the adherence to or violation of which determine the success of a speech act.¹² These conditions are widely considered to be primarily cognitive in nature. They are described as "mutual contextual beliefs" by Bach and Harnish (1979: 5), in terms of hearer's assessment of the relevance of the speaker's utterances by Sperber and Wilson (1986), while van Dijk discusses them in terms of cognitive context models, conceived of as participants' subjective representations of what is pragmatically appropriate in particular communicative situations stored in episodic memory, serving as an interface between discourse and social situations (2008). Studying negative self-identifiers from this perspective means identifying the textual and non-contextual conditions under which using a negative self-identifier is appropriate, and

¹² This conceptualisation of context as a mere "disambiguator, or accidental helper in interpretation" (Hasan 2009: 255), has been subject to criticism by functionalists. For example, Hasan (ibid: 254) argues that "language proved so effective in the performance of human practices not because it presents itself as sounds or graphs. Rather, to prove effective, it must have possessed the property of being meaningful: its elements must have been capable of relating to the experiences of the users".

what conclusions the identification of recurring utterance–context relationships allows regarding speakers’ representations of contexts in which negatively identifying with a particular category is deemed appropriate.¹³ The direction of influence here is not just one-way: Indeed, as Rasmussen (1997: 257) states, “interlocutors have influence not only on the context they are creating, but also on the larger context that is society”. This is of theoretical relevance for my study as analysing how people use negative self-identifiers in and across web forum discussions can show how speakers strategically, and potentially routinely, manage the interpretation of what they say in these discourse contexts, which in turn can be seen as pointing towards their underlying assumptions about how best to represent themselves to achieve their communicative goals.

3.2.2. Context in (interactively oriented) sociolinguistics and variational pragmatics

Being interested in the relations between language users and their social identity and language use, sociolinguistic approaches (e.g. Labov 1972, Hymes 1974) theorise context in more social terms, seeking to describe how particular contexts systematically constrain people’s talk, thus characterising “the communication conduct of a community” (Hymes 1974: 9). Referring back to the pragmatic approaches described in the previous section, where context mainly serves to evaluate the appropriateness of certain speech acts, these approaches could be argued to examine the relation between context and text the opposite way by taking social and situational variables as their starting point to investigate linguistic difference.

Seeking to account for how individuals – rather than contextually defined communities of practice – manage their discourse in particular communicative situations, variational pragmatics assumes that speech acts are both contextually influenced and “context-changing actions” (Sbisà 2002: 434). If we conceptualise negative self-identifiers as context-changing speech acts and examine their functions in terms of their adherence to interpersonal maxims and of managing social distance, we might, for instance, explain how they are used to communicate politely (Brown & Levinson 1987), or even impolitely (Culpeper 2009). For instance, I recall myself saying something like *I’m not a virtuoso like you, but I happen know what staccato is* to mock-politely hint at the arrogance of an overly self-confident fellow guitarist. Viewing negative self-identifiers as speech acts strategically used for face-management implies a perspective according to which these structures are not only linked to their immediate co-text, but also to a range of non-textual aspects specified for the context of the communicative situation. How to perform an FTA greatly depends on the social identity of the participants and especially their relationship: What plays a role here, amongst other things, is horizontal social distance (i.e. how well the interactants know each other) and vertical social distance (i.e. the interactants’ respective position in a social hierarchy), but also other aspects of social identity such as discursive roles, group membership etc. All of these aspects are of interest in this study, since it seeks to find if speakers informally interacting online routinely index non-membership with particular social groups to strategically manage the interpretation of their contributions in online forums.

Assuming that structures like negative self-identifiers can serve a variety of purposes means adopting a multidimensional view of context and, conversely, a multi-indexical view of structures with a meaning potential. In other words, structures like negative self-identifiers are considered to potentially index different aspects that are considered ‘contextual’. An approach which emphasises this

¹³ Cf. section 3.3.3 on discourse for a more thorough discussion of why it is important to acknowledge the difference between theorising the effectiveness of utterances under particular circumstances and examining already existing texts in concrete contexts.

multidimensionality of text–context interaction is interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1996, Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 2008). Criticising traditional linguistic analyses for viewing context as a “relatively static, external and determining reference point traditionally added to language analysis as something of an afterthought” (Rampton 2017: 16), interactional sociolinguistics postulates that “context is an understanding of the social world activated in the midst of things, an understanding of the social world that is interactionally ratified or undermined from one moment to the next as the participants in an encounter respond to one another” (ibid.). Interactional sociolinguistics sees speech events and situational and cultural context as inseparable and normally examines face-to-face interactions, focusing on social differences between interlocutors and concerning itself with “interpretation and understanding and how they are intertwined with the construction of shared common ground” (Auer, Heller & Roberts 2014). Since culture is seen as “constituted in and through situated speaking practices”, it is proposed “to take the speech event as the unit of analysis rather than community-wide linguistic and cultural norms” (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 2008: 536; Auer & Roberts 2011: 385). Language, from this perspective – which draws on Silverstein’s (1992, 1993) discussion of indexicality – is “pervasively indexical” (Rampton 2017: 16), which entails that “small-scale interactions” (Jacquement 2011: 475) are seen as reflecting and affecting not only the immediate situational, but also the wider sociocultural context.

Interactional sociolinguistics puts forward two important concepts to describe the processes of interpretation and understanding in linguistic interaction, namely inference and contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1982, 1996). Inference refers to the process by which individuals draw on their linguistic knowledge as well as on knowledge gained from previous experiences to make sense of incoming signals in the form of language or other forms of semiosis, while the concept of contextualisation cues captures the view that language, produced and interpreted by skilled agents in dynamic interaction, indexes much more than propositional content, reflecting language users’ awareness of contextual aspects and influencing the context. This simultaneously acknowledged and interactively construed and modified context is understood to comprise both aspects of the immediate communicative situation as well as the wider cultural context (e.g. particular norms of behaviour of language towards which language users orient themselves in ongoing discourse) and, hence, allows “performing microanalysis of interaction in light of macro-societal issues” (Gordon 2011: 67). (In this respect, interactional sociolinguistics draws on Goffman’s (1974: 11) concept of framing, which refers to negotiation among interactants of what is defined as situation, and what this situation means for norms of interaction associated with it.)

To explicate what precisely negative self-identifiers, conceptualised as context-sensitive and -modifying meaning potentials, can be used to index in interaction, the framework by Ochs (1996) is useful. Criticising studies that “dwell on the relation of linguistic forms to only one situational dimension”, Ochs (1996: 418) names five socio-cultural dimensions that can be considered in linguistic studies interested in the functions fulfilled by the usage of forms with meaning potentials, namely participants’ social identity, the social act performed, the activity speakers engage in, as well as affective and epistemic stance. Regarding the question of how a linguistic form with a meaning potential and, more concretely, negative self-identifiers, can be claimed to be indexical of these aspects, the example of stance illustrates quite well how meaning potentials can be used to modify the interpretation of what is said and, thus, have an effect on the situational context (Aijmer 2013: 15).

This can be illustrated by reference to examples from the corpus used for the empirical analysis presented in Chapters 7–9, such as 3.11 below. Incidentally, the switch from invented examples to

corpus examples to illustrate this point in itself supports the argument for considering negative self-identifiers as multi-indexical meaning potentials rather than as mere speech acts with particular functions. It is quite easy to explain certain pragmatic phenomena using made-up sentences which, under certain, equally easily imaginable circumstances, can be interpreted in a certain way. However, the effects of real-life language used in real communicative situations and surrounded by co-texts cannot be explained in terms of simple form-function mappings and are more difficult – if not impossible – to make up. Thus, from now on, all examples cited come from my corpus unless indicated otherwise.¹⁴

In example 3.11, the negative self-identifier *I'm not a robot* negates an identity claim that cannot be assumed to be 'presupposed', as the speaker¹⁵ most likely does not believe the hearer to consider them to be a robot,¹⁶ and is thus only relevant if interpreted metaphorically. The function of this utterance, however, can only be identified when considered in relation to its co-text, in this case the turn by the previous speaker and the rest of the speaker's utterance preceding and following it:

- 3.11. A: *No one likes change, so no matter who they put in there, the avid fans were going to protest to get the old back. And I acknowledge my post does not have any spoilers either, but I would like to read about some if anyone has them. Thank you :)*
- B: *[Name], I love TG, but I have a mind of my own, a sense of what is good and what is bad, and I don't think the Seaver character is good. **I'm not a robot** that someone can program into liking this or that [...]*

In this exchange, B averts A's indirect relativisation of their dislike of a new character in a TV show ("Seaver") by saying that she has her own *sense of what is good and what is bad*. The negative self-identifier here intensifies B's rejection of A's relativisation (and generalisation about "avid fans") and is thus an example of meaning potentials which, in Aijmer's (2013: 15) words, have "a rhetorical function allowing the speaker to take up a stance of alignment or disalignment to the hearer or to what is said". The negative self-identifier thus simultaneously interacts with A's turn and with B's own utterance to index their stance, namely their unwillingness to be convinced by A's relativisation of their dislike. Stance, according to Ochs (1996), can in turn be seen as linked to social identity – in the example, the negative self-identifier could also be seen as interacting with A's generalisation about

¹⁴ Based on considerations of ethics (all information potentially revealing speakers' identity has been deleted) and gender equality, I am referring to speakers using 3rd person plural pronouns. If this is not possible, I am per default using the female form.

¹⁵ Because the examined data represent informal written asynchronous conversations, I am consistently referring to people posting to forums as 'speakers' rather than 'writers'.

¹⁶ This, incidentally, supports claims by pragmaticists such as Sbisà (2002: 426). She argues that "the goals of the conversation determine against which (and how fine-grained) aspects of the same object or event the truth/falsity of the speech act is to be evaluated". Further, she explains, "the situatedness of the speech act goes hand in hand with the delimitation of its context". Thus, the utterance *I'm a robot*, used in a per default assumed real-world context in which people like me cannot (yet) be robots, flouts the maxim of quality and is likely to be interpreted as a metaphor. If negated, the utterance is literally true (except in a different context, like, e.g. the fictional world of *Blade Runner*, where robots try to pass for real people). In this case, however, the utterance includes explicit or implicit identity claims in the textual or non-textual context according to which the speaker is identified as an actual robot or ascribed robot-like qualities. To give an example of the first case, Google has web users confirm that they are real people and not robots; as for the second case, the utterance could be uttered in response to the question "Have you answered all the emails yet?", and thus serve as metaphor.

what *no one* does, and serve to distance B from the general crowd of *avid fans* and thus, perhaps, to position her as an individual with her own opinion.

Regarding the relevance of variational pragmatic approaches to the present study, studies of discourse markers according to the framework just described focus on identifying “conventionalized meanings that are part of the speaker’s grammatical knowledge” (Aijmer 2013: 30). This is not possible or aimed for in the present study, as negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” contain a semantic variable, viz. the indefinite NP, and thus cannot be examined for conventional meanings. What is analysed, however, is the extent to which negative identification with the same, or semantically related, NPs can be found to realise similar functions across a sample of local interactions.

To sum up, the main contributions from sociolinguistics and interactively oriented pragmatics to theorising the relation between language use and social context presented in this section are, firstly, sociolinguistics’ theorisation of contextual parameters to describe how contexts systematically constrain people’s talk, and secondly, the view of context and text as mutually influencing each other, whereby context is seen as multidimensional and linguistic structures are believed to reflect and index more than a single dimension of the communicative situation.

3.2.3. Context in Conversation Analysis

As the example above has shown, meaning potentials often obtain their function not only in interaction with the rest of what the same speaker says, but also in relation to contributions by other speakers, e.g. when they are used to signal disagreement. As Thomas (1995: 196) argues, “almost all speech acts are collaborative” because “collaboration is necessary for the speech act to ‘succeed’”; force, she claims, is in fact also up for negotiation. Online forum discussions, while representing a written genre of CMC, are marked by a high degree of informality and a low degree of social distance and can therefore be considered a conceptually oral, as opposed to a conceptually scriptural, activity type (Janich 2017: 44; see Darics & Koller 2018: 11 for a discussion of why the distinction between oral and written might be losing its relevance when discussing contemporary communicative practices, which, they argue, can better be studied in terms of their purpose). This is why online forum discussion can be approached from the perspective of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Jefferson 1972; Sacks 1984a, b, 1992; Schegloff 1988 and, more recently, e.g. Gibson 2009; Meredith 2017). This section discusses what my project shares with, and where it diverges from, CA projects interested in online conversations and their understanding of the role of context.

CA studies authentic linguistic data and explores the role of language in interaction, which it considers the “primordial site of sociality” (Meredith 2019: 241). Having its roots in ethnomethodology, CA is interested in how social order is created as speakers interact linguistically, sequentially structuring their talk and thus collaborating to achieve successful communication. CA is centrally concerned with recording and analysing naturally occurring language data, seeking to study language as it is used with as little researcher intervention as possible during data collection, processing and analysis. While traditionally, CA has mainly recorded and transcribed oral face-to-face interaction (Mondada 2013: 35), recently it has increasingly focused on written online conversations, like the forum discussions explored in the present study, considering them to represent data ideally suited for studying authentic interaction.

As for the role of context in CA, the general view among CA practitioners is that “contextual features should only be taken into account if observably relevant for specific interactions” in order to avoid “treating participants as ‘puppets’ of socio-cultural forces” and to minimise the danger of imposing the

analyst’s interpretation on the talk (de Kok 2008: 886, cf. also Cameron 2001: 88). Being interested in the linguistic and thus conceptual categories language users routinely contrast themselves with in their everyday interactions, structuring their experience of social life, my study shares with CA an interest in members’ own categories, tackled in CA by Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) (Wooffitt 2005). Studying which categories are referred to across interactional situations on forums, my study is also interested in the relation between potentially patterned functions of negative self-identifiers in talk-in-interaction and the wider sociocultural context.

Contextual features are also of relevance in CA, and for the present study, in so far as it is assumed that the technological specificities of the mediums through which interaction takes place “can both afford and constrain the interactional potential” (Meredith 2019: 243). The effects of such “affordances” (Hutchby 2001) are particularly accentuated in written online communication (see section 3.2.6 for a discussion of other aspects of online contexts). For example, online forums typically display a different organisation of turn-taking than spoken conversations. As Meredith (2019: 245) explains, individual postings in forum discussions tend to contain several turn constructional units (TCU), for example, and speakers may choose to respond to all or just some of them in their response; certain turns may not even be answered at all. This is likely to relate to the tendency for forum discussions to be asynchronous instead of quasi-synchronous (as would be the case with chatroom discussions), which means that more time passes in between contributions by different speakers, leading participants to write longer postings including more TCUs. Transition relevance places (TRP), too, play a different role in forum discussions, as they are normally simply represented by the end of a posting and not by pauses or completion of particular speech acts, for example, as would be the case in synchronous conversations. In terms of turn management, speakers in forums mostly self-select, responding for example to a question asked in a thread-initial posting. Speakers may also be selected by others, for example through mentioning or through tagging their names, depending on the design of the forum.

As will be explained in more detail in section 5.2.2, considerations of the sequential organisation of forum conversations had an impact on the way the data for this study was collected and annotated. In terms of data collection, co-textual postings were included based on their relevance for interpreting the posting containing the negative self-identifier. Regarding the way the data was annotated, I marked up turns by different speakers, acknowledging though the different conceptualisation of what constitutes a turn in online written conversations. Example 3.12 below illustrates some of the features just discussed. In this exchange, the speaker using the negative self-identifier *I’m not a great fan of textbooks* (speaker A) asks three questions (shaded in grey) in their initial posting. In a spoken conversation, these would probably constitute separate turns. In their response, speaker B does not directly respond to them, but instead replies with a question which appears more as a critical comment on their interpretation of the questions asked (namely “*Are you expecting the maths book to do the teaching for you?*”), implying that A might have problematic expectations about teachers’ books. While in a spoken conversation, A would probably answer this question right away, thus using this TCU as a TRP, to fend off the criticism implied. This, however, is not the case in this written conversation because B’s posting does not end upon completion of this first TCU.

3.12. A: [SUBJECT] *Anyone familiar with Target Maths books who could help me?*

Just started in a new school and the class are working from 'Target Maths' books with which I am unfamiliar. Trying to get my head round how to introduce the topic of work for the page. I like the idea of having 3 levels all on one page but often the LO doesn't differentiate between

the 2 levels (easy to adapt but why put it there then? I ask as anon-specialist Maths person.)Is there a Teacher's book which provides some starters/ideas to introduce the concepts? I'm sure once I get used to the books it will be fine, I just feel at the moment I and the children are struggling.Any help would be welcome. I have used Maths Sphere in the past and am thinking of subscribing.Would this fit alongside, do you think?

B: *I'm a bit confused by this. Are you expecting the maths book to do the teaching for you? I've been using Target Maths/Maths on Target for years and usually use them to provide pupils with practice questions once we've gone through something. My middle group tend to work with them perhaps twice a week. It's not a maths scheme to just go through page by page. We've just got MyMaths (have missed it for the past few years and used it frequently at my previous school). Again, I wouldn't use that to ask the children to teach themselves with it. They use it to practise and consolidate content we have covered.*

A: *Good point [NAME of B]. No I'm not expecting the book to do the 'teaching', but just personally I find the 'reminders' (teaching point) at the top of the page, not incredibly helpful to the children when they settle to the exercise.and I always have a raft of hands up.Really I feel I would prefer to ditch the books and do my own exercises, based on my own input, but with reports a new job/class I'm just not finding the time to prepare my own. **I'm not a great fan of textbooks** and prefer to dip in and out of a variety, but at this school I just have this one and feel I'm expected to use this the previous teacher did and I'm trying to provide continuity for the children. There are good points about them and I do like the differentiated exercises. It's possibly because I'm used to teaching in themes/topics for a a week at a time, moving on depending on how the class do and this book seems to move on quite rapidly from one aspect to another. It probably is because I'm not used to them and once I get my head round it will be fine.Thanks for your help everyone.*

In addition to considering individual postings by different speakers as turns in written online conversations, this study refers to CA concepts such as adjacency pairs to explicate the local functions of negative self-identifiers. Adjacency pairs are turns by different speakers that are related, in that particular first-pair parts are usually followed by particular second-pair parts. The very structure of forum discussions means that question-answer adjacency pairs are particularly relevant in the examined data: forum conversations are usually started with a thread-initial posting, referred to as topic initiation (Meredith 2019: 251) and normally featuring a subject line. This posting prototypically contains one or several questions or can be considered as such by virtue of seeking response from other speakers, but it may also (and simultaneously) represent a first-pair part of other types of other adjacency pairs such as greeting-greeting. An example of a negative self-identifier featuring in a response in a question-answer adjacency pair is 3.13 below. Here, the negative self-identifier contained in B's turn not only modifies their own utterance (epistemically mitigating their answer to A's question), but also responds to the presupposition contained in this question, namely that there are "legal experts" around in that forum:

3.13. A: *Pretty grim stuff. Any of the legal experts know if he's likely to be facing a custodial sentence?*

B: ***I'm not a legal expert**, but from that I would suggest that the answer to your question is 'yes'.*

What needs to be considered in this regard is that adjacency pairs in online conversations may need to be approached differently than the ones occurring in offline conversations in that first-pair parts (FPP) and second-pair parts (SPP) of adjacency pairs may be further apart, separated, for instance, by other speakers' postings. A case in point is 3.14 below, where the posting by speaker C, containing the

negative self-identifier and serving as answer to A's initial posting, is preceded by a contribution by another speaker (B), who does not answer A's question (but critically comments on their question instead).

3.14. A: [SUBJECT] *Account Hacked - AGAIN*

I have used a professional to virus scan my computer, have updated all the security software on my computer, now use the 2 step verification sign in process. [...]

However, within a couple of hours the listings were made 'active' again, which suggests to me that the 2 - step verification process is not working, that security on my computer is not the issue and the hackers are able to access my account from within Amazon.

If anyone is able to shed any light, I would be hugely grateful.

I have had a good run with Amazon, but if it takes another month to resolve this I am going to have to review selling my products on Amazon.

[NAME]

B: *Sorry, but that is utter rubbish. Anti virus programs are effective. If they weren't, why would anyone bother using them in the first place. [...]*

C: *Hi, It is listed in other Threads that Amazon Buyer accounts have been used to send unsolicited emails to Sellers (Turbo your listings etc), as well as Bogus Security alerts. The source of this intrusion is not necessarily your PC, but could be from a bogus buyer message. I'm no expert (so will bow to superior knowledge), but wouldn't this bypass AVG etc, clicking on this "amazon" message? Just a thought.....*

The possibility of adjacency pairs being further apart in online conversations than in face-to-face interactions is relevant for this study because negative self-identifiers may occur in SPPs responding to relatively remote FPPs. These FPPs needed to be recovered and annotated as such in the data collection and annotation phase.

Summing up, this study adopts analytical concepts from CA as it examines negative self-identifiers used in written, informal interaction on web forums, which means that the sequentiality of talk – i.e. the co-text in the form of contributions by speakers other than the one using a negative self-identifier – is relevant for their interpretation. This means drawing on concepts such as turn-taking and adjacency pairs, which, as has been argued, need to be conceived of slightly differently when studying online conversations. While my project does take the impact of the affordances of web forums into account in the way data was collected and analysed, its main focus is to explicate the use of negative self-identifiers in the context of these discussions and not to conduct a fully-fledged CA of the data (in this respect, my study can be considered to take into account less of the situational conversational context than a prototypical CA project). At the same time, analysing what negative self-identifiers are used for in which co-texts across written online conversations, my study also seeks to identify patterns of using negative self-identifiers and its findings are interpreted with a view to the wider cultural context, which might not be considered in the same way by CA projects.

3.2.4. Context in Systemic Functional Linguistics

The approach to language in use in which context plays a central role at all levels of theorisation, in that language is seen as having evolved according to the functions it serves in the social world, is

Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1978: 4, Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). What distinguishes the SFL perspective on context from that of sociolinguistics, which, as we saw in 3.2.3.2, is also centrally concerned with context, is that it sees itself as an integrated theory of language (Bartlett 2017: 375). SFL constitutes what Hasan refers to as an exotropic theory of language, because it “embed[s] its object of study in a context where the processes of its evolution, stability and change can be seen to originate in the interaction of the object of study with other universes of human experience” (Hasan 2005: 155). SFL considers language as systemic potential used to realise particular functions in context (an idea also put forth by Vygotsky (1978)). Context in SFL plays a role at all levels (or strata) of theorisation, from the social context in which language is used (SFL has a Marxist orientation, being interested in the material conditions of language use) to meanings expressed by lexicogrammatical choices in the context of particular communicative situations. The idea is that, depending on the metafunction language serves in a particular situation, distinct lexicogrammatical choices with contrasting meanings are made to realise this function. For SFL, “[w]hat humans do with language in our social lives, and how language is itself organised, are two sides of the same social-semiotic coin” (Lukin 2016: 143). Assuming every linguistic choice to serve a function in context and thus seeing language use as inextricably linked to the material conditions of language users, SFL constitutes the theoretical foundation of critical approaches to linguistic analysis (see section 3.3 below).

My study of negative self-identifiers draws on the concepts of transitivity, mood and information structure to describe the interaction of negative self-identifiers with their context. Referring to the ideational metafunctions as one of three metafunctions of language distinguished in SFL, it is amongst other things of relevance whether negative self-identifiers occurring in complex clauses are textually related to material, mental, verbal or relational processes: for instance, if a disclaimer of expertise such as *I am not a doctor* is coordinated with the subordinate clause *but I think this is an eczema*, representing a mental process by which the speaker provides a diagnosis, then the negative self-identifier could be interpreted as simultaneously disclaiming expertise and providing a diagnosis. The interpersonal metafunction, too, matters for the analysis. Imagine, for instance, the same disclaimer was coordinated with *but you should definitely see one* – then the subordinate clause can be said to function as advice by virtue of having the addressee as its theme and containing the deontic modal *should*. Regarding information structure, it makes a difference whether a negative self-identifier occurs as an independent clause, making the speaker the theme of the utterance, or as a subordinate clause, in which case it has a different informational status.

The three metafunctions of language proposed by SFL are seen as associated with the context of situation, which is both defined by language and conditions it. For Hasan (1995: 219) context of situation in SFL comprises all those aspects of the non-linguistic surroundings of a particular speech event that are made relevant by language use. More precisely, it is assumed that a situation can be conceived of in terms of three aspects, viz. field (what is being talked about), tenor (the relationships negotiated by the interlocutors) and mode (what role language plays in the interaction and whether it is spoken or written). Each of these three aspects, in turn, is related to one of the three metafunctions of language (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 12, Bartlett 2017: 381). Tenor, field and mode can configure to form situation types, that is, situations known as typical in a society, such as lectures or casual chat among friends. Situation types have an impact on register. For instance, a medical consultation might be characterised as 1) a highly specialised field, 2) involving experts talking to laypeople and, thus, a power difference, social distance and formality, and 3) a spoken, (largely) unprepared face-to-face interaction. The notion of register as a particular configuration of language functions linked to particular situation types is inseparably linked to the concept of genre, which can be defined as a text

type defined by its purpose and associated with a particular structural organisation and register (Bhatia 2002, Derewianka 2016).

While the present study does not primarily aim to examine UK web forum discussions as a genre, but rather explores the functions of only one particular formally defined speech act as used in the context of these forums, genre-based approaches to linguistic analysis are relevant when accounting for negative self-identifiers interacting not only with their immediate textual surroundings, but framing, or pre- or post-modifying the interpretation of textual components above sentence level. One useful concept to explain how negative self-identifiers may fulfil functions with respect to the macro-organisation of a text is that of moves. A move is a discourse segment serving a communicative function, i.e. a semantically coherent stretch of text that can be related to the writer's purpose (Swales 1981, 1990, 2004). It can be theorised as having a particular macro-theme (e.g. most explicitly the heading of a posting), providing the point of departure for a larger stretch of text, as well as hyper-themes, i.e. the "packaging of information within phases of a text" (Forey & Sampson 2017: 134). As shown by the following example from my corpus, where the negative self-identifier interacts with the entire story preceding it, it is necessary to consider the macro-structure of postings to web forums containing negative self-identifiers to explain how the negative self-identifier pre- or post-modifies discourse segments, rather than just individual clauses:

3.15. *My neighbour has a poxy little Dog...*

It appears she has invited a friend to stay tonight with a similarly poxy little Dog, only knowing her own poxy Dog doesn't mix well with other Dogs they've had the bright idea of shutting the similarly poxy Dog upstairs in the room backing onto our bedroom while they go and drink themselves (even more) stupid. The poor f'ucker has been barking all evening and now all I can hear is it whimpering and crying in between it's attempts to bark despite essentially barking itself horse.

***I am no Dog lover** but the whole thing has royally pissed me off.*

The negative self-identifier *I am no Dog lover* in example 3.15 follows a lengthy account of a situation whose theme, the speaker's neighbour's dog, is introduced by the heading (or macro-theme). By negatively identifying as a dog lover, the speaker post-modifies the interpretation of the entire story, which serves to express criticism of the dog owners (whose *bright idea* is ironic, just like the fact that they *drink themselves (even more) stupid*) and sympathy for the neglected dog (*the poor f'ucker*). By distancing themselves from the category of dog lovers, the speaker even underlines the severity of the described case, as it is suggested that it presents the exception to the normal state.

SLF not only theorises functional components above sentence level, but also provides the theoretical basis for discussing local instances of language in use on a 'supra-situational' level, i.e. in relation to social values on a wider scale. Defining the context of situation as the "environment in which meanings are being exchanged" (Halliday & Hasan 1989: 12), SFL sees language use in particular situations as "specific instance[s] of a larger system, the context of culture, which comprises the set of systemically contrastive behaviours possible within that culture" (Bartlett 2017: 381). Thus, if particular forms (here, negative self-identifiers) are routinely used in particular textual environments to fulfil certain pragmatic functions, this could indicate speakers' orientation towards orders of indexicality, which, defined as "systematically reproduced, stratified meanings" (Blommaert 2005: 73), influence what can be said in particular situations and how. To find how particular negative self-identifiers interact with their co-texts across forum discussions, this study adopts a corpus-based perspective to studying the

structure in focus. The next section will therefore be concerned with corpus linguistics and, more specifically, corpus pragmatics.

Summarising important concepts explaining the relation between text and context in SFL, this theory views language as intrinsically functional and as therefore construing and being conditioned by context. Context, from this perspective, is considered on the level of the social system, the level of the communicative situation (differentiation of situation types associated with context-dependent configurations of particular language functions), and the level of language in use (serving three metafunctions realised by the lexicogrammatical choices available to the speaker). Integrating the dimensions of language system, language function and social context, SFL is an important theoretical and methodological basis for the project presented here. The next section will review corpus pragmatics as an approach which provides a framework for studying forms, realising particular functions, across texts selected for analysis for particular linguistic features and features on the level of the situational and wider, cultural context.

3.2.5. Context in corpus pragmatics

In corpus pragmatics (and, indeed, in any corpus-based approach) context has a special methodological and theoretical status. Unlike approaches seeking to explicate the relations between (real or invented) linguistic forms and (actual or theoretically assumed) contexts, corpus-based approaches necessarily pre-define aspects of the textual and non-co-text which the language they examine is embedded: thus, while traditional pragmatic approaches explore the relation between the formal and semantic properties of an utterance and the social situation in which it is appropriate (which implies an *ex ante* perspective on language, focusing on language competence), corpus-based approaches examine situated instances of language use as (presumably appropriately) used in particular contexts, thereby seeking to find out what they have in common (which implies an *ex post* perspective on language use, focusing on performance as finite realisations of infinite possibilities of expression and the rules that are established as speakers communicate effectively). In this respect, corpus-based approaches can be considered an inversion of the generative grammatical approach to linguistic inquiry (Spitzmüller & Warnke 2011: 29). Corpus-based approaches study language use transtextually and quantitatively by examining instances of particular linguistic elements or structures across texts. This means that while corpus analysis, by definition, studies contextually situated language use, at the same time it always involves decontextualisation by taking a ‘vertical’ or paradigmatic perspective on language use. This perspective stands in sharp contrast to the ‘horizontal’, syntagmatic reading traditionally employed in pragmatics, where “texts are received and interpreted in the same temporal order in which they were produced and received” (Rühlemann & Aijmer 2014: 3). Because of this, corpus linguistics and pragmatics were long regarded “as parallel but often mutually exclusive” (Romero-Trillo 2008: 2). However, since “the impact of corpora has been such that observers speak of a ‘corpus revolution’” (Rühlemann & Aijmer 2014: 4), there have been an increasing number of pragmatic studies employing corpus linguistic methods over the last two decades, with the result that corpus pragmatics is now a firmly established approach within pragmatics. Corpus pragmatics is particularly fruitful when applied to studying the functions of linguistic forms with context-dependending meaning potentials, as a “corpus-driven, bottom-up” approach allows “the discovery of more or less different functions [...] depending on the linguistic and discourse context” (Aijmer 2013: 29).

Corpus-pragmatic studies focus on “either a discourse particle with a fixed form that can easily be retrieved from a large corpus, or a speech function that is generally realised in a small number of variant patterns” (Jucker, Hundt & Schreier 2009: 4). My study, too, has a relatively fixed linguistic

structure as its starting point and combines qualitative analysis (closely examining the co-text in which the various conceptually differentiated negative self-identifiers occur), with quantification (counting the instances of identifying nouns pertaining to a particular conceptual category and cross-categorising them with particular functions realised by elements of the co-text, cf. also Marko 2015b). Exploring meaning-making in online interaction by taking a corpus-based approach, according to Knight (2015: 20), is “ideally situated to contribute to the investigation of digital discourse” as it can reveal “patterns of language use in large-scale bodies of [...] digital discourse”.

Relying predominantly on forms to explicate function and selecting only a few elements of the co-text of a particular linguistic structure to be examined across texts, instead of looking at the full local co-text of usage, is not entirely unproblematic. According to Archer and Culpeper (2018: 496), for example, approaching instances of language in use this way usually means not paying enough attention to “the (situational, social and cultural) dynamics of context, particularly at the local micro level”. This criticism is, at least to a certain extent, also justified with respect to the present study. The reason why a form-based, corpus-pragmatic approach is still chosen – at the expense of fine-grained analysis of the local discourse contexts of the structure in focus – is the present study’s interest in potentially patterned relations between particular types of negative self-identifiers and particular types of discourse context.

To close this gap between micro-linguistic corpus-based analysis of negative self-identifiers in their immediate co-texts and the interpretation of functional patterns in light of macro-sociopolitical issues (reviewed in Chapter 4), section 3.2.6 below reviews literature that accounts for the specificities of online contexts influenced and designed by speakers’ linguistic choices in digital interactional settings such as web forums. In Chapter 9, then, the micro-linguistic analyses of the interaction between negative self-identifiers and their co-texts are supplemented by a qualitative analysis of two instances of the types of negative self-identifiers most frequently instantiated in the examined data (see section 9.3).

3.2.6. Context in studies of online communication

Within studies of computer-mediated communication (reviewed in Chapter 4), the unprecedented specificities of online contexts have received much attention. A key idea about social networking sites, such as Facebook, is that they “collapse diverse social contexts into one” (boyd & Marwick 2011: 10) by merging potentially very different social networks in one single virtual realm. In the context of communication in collapsed online contexts, i.e. contexts joining participants from (super-)diverse social backgrounds on online platforms (boyd & Marwick 2011), participants “imagine and respond to a particularly complex set of contextual variables as they design their posts and interactions” (Tagg et al. 2017: 20). Not only are the audiences of what is posted online widely unknown to the speaker, hard to delimit and potentially growing and changing, but they are also likely to be extremely diverse. This has important implications for online self-representation, affecting, e.g., what people decide to share about themselves and how they design these postings with a view to their imagined audience.¹⁷

¹⁷ It should be mentioned, though, that web forums, representing older forms of online social platforms, differ from social networking sites usually discussed with reference to context collapse. Unlike social networks such as Facebook, which are “purpose-built to facilitate social interaction” (Sergeant & Tagg 2014: 2) among people who have already known each other in the offline world, forums “tend to bring together users who do not share a previous offline connection” (Androutsopoulos 2014: 63). Also, the communities hosted and represented by forums have been considered as a somewhat special space in the vast virtual realm because of their high

As Tagg et al. (2017: 25) point out, context not only shapes and can be indexed by a text, but is construed and manipulated as people, aware of the contexts within they interact, use language to serve particular social functions. Indeed, in line with Lemke’s view quoted at the beginning of this chapter, according to which “the meaning of text is made through time” (Lemke 2000: online), they argue that “it is not necessarily always possible or desirable to distinguish the text (language and its co-text) from its context” (ibid.: 27). Consequently, their theory of context design provides an analytical framework to account for how speakers engaging in online conversations reflexively stylise their utterances and, thus, discursively construe their identities, in a complex process of “active construction and negotiation of context as part of the communicative exchange” (Tagg et al. 2017: 32).

The linguistic strategies employed to manage the anticipated response of what is thought to potentially represent the audience of content shared online have been referred to as “addressivity strategies” by Seargeant et al. (2012). This concept is relevant for the study of negative self-identification because speakers’ use of the structure might reflect their considerations about the potential effects of their utterances on other forum participants (or even wider audiences on the web). In other words, negative self-identification serves not only to make a negative assertion about one’s identity in order to eschew alignment with particular categories, and thus project a particular self-identity into an already existing communicative situation, but also to construct a context within which speakers’ linguistic performance is expected to be most effective (Androutsopoulos 2014: 64).

In table 3.1 below, I have summarised the aspects of the original framework (Tagg et al. 2017: 37–38)¹⁸ to become operationalised in the study of negative self-identifiers used in web forums. The contextual feature “identification” apparently has a particularly important status in the present study of negative self-identifiers as linguistic micro-realisation of negating identification. By explicitly contrasting speakers with “particular ideologies, discourses and individuals [...] as well as ascribed social roles and particular concepts” (ibid.), their use can be seen as being shaped by and simultaneously construing the interactional context in which particular identity ascriptions are linguistically made relevant. They can index, for example, how forum users perceive the relationships with other members of the site and the common ground they share (or do not share). The use of negative self-identifiers can reflect “people’s awareness of the competing norms and sources of authority” (Tagg et al. 2017: 41) that matter in interactional situations on and across forums and point to conceptualisations about belonging and not belonging to particular social groups which “cut across traditionally perceived offline (and online) contexts” (ibid.: 35). These ‘cross-cutting’ conceptualisations, in turn, can be discussed in relation to the wider sociopolitical context. Making non-identity with particular social groups relevant in forum discussions may also reflect speakers’ awareness of the specificities of the medium on which they are interacting. For example, using negative self-identifiers can reflect a heightened need for explicit disalignment with particular social groups due to speakers’ awareness that their postings could become entextualised, i.e. come to be read by different, unpredictable audiences (Tagg et al. 2017: 40).

potential for enabling more permanent and intimate online communities to build (Ahuja & Galvin 2003, Andresen 2009, Bateman, Gray & Butler 2011).

¹⁸ The bold initial letters of the aspects this framework considers jointly form the mnemonic *POSTING*, which alludes to Hymes (1974) *SPEAKING* model on which it is based and from which it departs by studying written texts – i.e. mainly postings – in online contexts.

Participants	Forum users' knowledge of their audience, i.e. their familiarity and communicative history (Tagg et al. 2014: 40) with other people interacting on the same forum and their contributions in the immediate communicative situation
Online media ideologies	Forum users' conceptions about the purpose of the forum
Site affordances	Forum users' conceptions about how forum interaction works in terms of technological affordances
Text type (or mode) of the communication	Web forums as quasi-asynchronous, typed interaction between physically distant interlocutors
Identification process	Using language to manage self-representation through indexing alignment and disalignment with particular social categories, ideologies, people and roles Using negative self-identifiers as explicit disalignment with particular concepts
Norms of communication	Various global norms of communication as well as more local or even site-specific conceptualisations about what constitutes appropriate communicative behaviour on (particular) forums
Goals or immediate purposes or ends of posting	The function(s) of the particular posting, possibly indexed through contextualisation cues

Table 3.1: Aspects of online contexts that can be considered when studying negative self-identifiers (adapted from Tagg et al. 2017: 37–38)

Because of the quantitative orientation of the present study, the level of the situational contexts in which the structure is used by particular speakers in particular online contexts is not addressed in depth in this study – it primarily focuses on investigating the (potentially patterned) micro-pragmatic functions of instances of negative self-identifiers in their immediate co-texts across interactional situations on online forums. In this way, the study seeks to employ “empirical, micro-level methods to shed light on macro-level phenomena”, as called for by Herring (2004: 1). However, to illustrate how negative self-identifiers can be analysed as interacting with online contexts, a qualitative analysis of two instances of the structure in use is provided in Chapter 9 to bring together the micro-pragmatic level of analysis and the macro-level of the wider sociopolitical context within which situated linguistic choices are embedded.

3.3. Negative self-identifiers and (corpus-based) Critical Discourse Analysis

So far, I have presented approaches that allow addressing negative self-identifiers as linguistic forms fulfilling functions in online forum discussions as particular kinds of informal conversations, i.e., as pragmatic phenomena appearing in certain discourse contexts. This means that my starting point has been the structure as well as the question of how its interaction with elements of the textual and non-co-text can be theorised. In this section, I will change the perspective from bottom-up to top-down, showing how my project can be framed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a superordinate approach, even though, as will be argued, this thesis does not represent a prototypical CDA project.

CDA is interested in the language/knowledge side of social phenomena and therefore pursues the primary objective of “find[ing] beliefs and attitudes constructed in and through texts” (Marko 2015a: 69). The basic assumption in CDA is that discourse, in the sense of language in use, mediates meanings, i.e. certain conceptualisations of the world, which influence our beliefs, values and attitudes and, consequently, the way we act in the world. Thus, these conceptualisations are instrumental in “establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation”

(Fairclough 2003: 9). As for its disciplinary status, CDA would probably be considered most closely associated with linguistics by most scholars (Marko 2015a: 119):¹⁹ heavily drawing on SFL as an exotropic, i.e. socially oriented, theory of language (Bartlett 2017), it views language as fulfilling functions in social contexts and links language use to the conditions of those who use it. However, CDA it is not seen as a theory of language by most of its representatives, but rather as an interdisciplinary project defined by its critical and emancipatory potential and “therefore not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se but in studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (Wodak & Meyer 2016: 2). In brief, as Cameron (2001: 123) explains, in CDA, “the purpose of analysing discourse in its first sense (language in use) also functions as discourse in its second sense (a form of social practice that ‘constructs the objects of which it purports to speak’)”.

This thesis draws on Marko’s (2015a: 157) theorisation of discourse as conceivable on three levels of abstraction: as socially conditioned and constitutive language in use as opposed to language as an abstract system, as concrete texts (also referred to as textual events, which are part of discourse), and as types of language use with concomitant bodies of knowledge and attitudes (or *discourses* as a count noun), representing what Reisigl and Wodak (2016: 27) call “a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action”. These componential levels of discourse correspond to three analytical levels: firstly, linguistic analysis of particular linguistic forms, secondly, the interpretation of the meanings they realise in particular discourses, and, thirdly, the social effects of these meanings and their sociopolitical significance. It should be mentioned, though, that these levels are not entirely separate analytical steps in a linear research process. On the contrary, CDA is a hermeneutic research process, the first step of which is normally the identification of issues on the level of the sociopolitical context, which are translated into researchable questions determining the paradigms to be analysed and the methods chosen to do so. The results of this analysis are, then, interpreted and critically evaluated in terms of their implications for the sociopolitical context. The conceptualisation of discourse in terms of ascending levels of abstraction and, correspondingly, analysis, is based on a key theoretical assumption of CDA adopted from SFL (discussed in section 3.2.3.4), namely the multi-modular approach to meaning. As has been discussed, according to this approach, the linguistic choices speakers make in particular social situations both serve and depend on the three metafunctions, which means that formal choice is inherently functional, and function is inherently contextual, as it depends on social situations. The process through which language users arrive at the full meaning of a text that “coheres within itself and with the context of situation” (Halliday 2003: 17) involves two levels, namely meanings encoded by the linguistic forms used, and enhanced meanings, which language users arrive at by drawing on co- and contextual cues and their background knowledge (Marko 2015a: 168). According to this conceptualisation of discourse, negative self-identifiers are seen as structures encoding particular meanings depending on their formal appearance and the meaning of the identifying NP. To arrive at their full meaning, speakers draw on the surrounding text, their situationally relevant pragmatic knowledge (see section 3.2.1) and their background knowledge, i.e., the meaning of the negative identifier is enhanced when interpreting it in relation to the meanings of its textual and non-textual contexts of usage.

¹⁹ If we follow Finke’s (2017) vision of a big scientific transformation towards a transdisciplinary university which, he argues, is necessary to tackle the major problems of our times, disciplinary affiliation is losing its importance anyway. In this view, CDA can be considered a research programme that meets the demands of a post-disciplinary age in academia. Fairclough, too, stresses the importance of transdisciplinary dialogue between disciplines with different perspectives on language (2003: 6).

It is generally possible to distinguish between a more syntagmatic and a more paradigmatic perspective on language in use (Marko 2015a: 194), which also has methodological implications: a syntagmatic perspective on language in use is marked by a pre-established interest in particular texts and a focus on their idiosyncratic properties, i.e. meanings established by syntagmatic relations between particular forms and structures, as well as their conditions of production, distribution and reception. In contrast, paradigmatically oriented analyses centre on meaning relations established by recurrence of particular meanings and meaning relations across texts. The language system and the social system in which language is used are related (Halliday 1991); in fact, system and actualisations of the system in communicative processes can be considered to interact. According to de Beaugrande (2008: 43), “a ‘language’ is a *potential* system; a ‘text’ is an *actual* system” of possible and actual choices and combinations, and corpora, as samples of actualizations in communicative processes (‘discourses’), can reveal actualizations dynamically, exerting pressure on the system. Thus, for example, grammaticality is the result of grammaticalisation and stems from, and can only be observed in, language use. While the corpus examined for this study is, of course, way too small to be representative of how negative self-identifiers are used generally and systematically, my study is interested in actualisations of the potential meanings of variants of the structure in focus across UK web forum discussions. Consequently, the present study shares theoretical and methodological principles with corpus-based CDA (Mautner & Koller 2004; Baker 2006, 2013, 2014; Mautner 2009; Marko 2015a).

Corpus-based CDA is interested in the linguistic elements and structures realising general and specific linguistic paradigms (defined by grammatical, pragmatic, textual and contextual features) in a corpus, as a materially observable representation of a discourse (Bubenhofner 2008: 1). Regarding the paradigms chosen for analysis, most studies in corpus-based CDA identify a struggle on the level of the wider sociopolitical context, which is assumed to crystallise around particular linguistic items whose collocational profile can reveal higher-level patterns of meaning-making involved in the discourse under scrutiny (Hardt-Mautner 1995). Accordingly, these studies examine linguistic elements that figure especially prominently in the discourse of interest. Alternatively, they focus on linguistic elements assumed to play a key role in potentially discriminatory representations. Mautner (2007), for example, examines large corpora to establish a collocational profile of the word *elderly*, thereby providing “lexico-grammatical evidence of stereotypical constructions of age and aging”. Another possible reason for selecting particular lexemes for linguistic analysis is that they denote a concept whose representation is of interest in light of a particular social research question (e.g. Nardone 2018, seeking to shed light on contemporary German and Italian representations of working women, analyses lexical collocates of concordances featuring the words whose use is assumed to manifest semantic struggle, viz. *women*, *work*, *men* etc., in large general corpora). The paradigm my study investigates is formally and contextually defined as instances of “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” used on UK web forums.

Instances of negative self-identifiers cannot, per se, be argued to be ideologically laden, as this depends on the meaning of the noun or noun phrase speakers contrast themselves with, and even more so on the context of usage. Nevertheless, the structure was chosen based on the assumption that there is ideological struggle around notions of belonging and not belonging, potentially manifesting itself in how speakers use the structure in focus. This means that an interest in the sociopolitical context of potentially changing conceptualisations of the self and self-identification plays a role for the research presented here from the start: it represents the impetus for researching negative self-identification in the first place, and the social context of language use is taken into

consideration at all levels of the research – from contextualisation of the research and data selection to methods chosen and interpretation of results in light of their potential implications for the broader sociopolitical context. In other words, the project presented here is critical in that it does not adopt a decontextualised, ahistorical perspective in studying the meanings of negative self-identifiers, but assumes that linguistic choices are inherently informed by the social context of language use (which means that from a functional perspective, ‘non-critical’ discourse analysis is impossible). In this sense, my study not only describes, but also denaturalises language use by critically questioning the dominance of particular communicative functions of negative self-identifiers, referring to theoretical concepts from a variety of disciplines. Sharing with Fairclough (2003: 4) an interest in the language of late modern capitalist society, my study interprets results with a view to potential relations between what people contrast themselves with and the wider sociocultural context, considering, to a certain extent, how the “re-structuring and re-scaling of social relations in accordance with the demands of an unrestrained global capitalism” (ibid., referring to Bourdieu 1998) and the “dominant character types of contemporary societies” (Fairclough 2003: 7) might be reflected in speakers’ self-concepts expressed by their language use. While these connections are made, though, critique in my study does not emerge from an *ex-ante* interest in a particular social ‘wrong’, an interest to side with a particular social group deemed disadvantaged, or an intention to provide suggestions for how language use in a particular social setting could, or should, be changed or improved. In line with CDA, my study is not only critical, but also self-critical in recognising that, given the data examined and the analyses performed, these connections can only remain tentative. For example, while patterns of usage identified for negative self-identifiers could resonate with social theoretical observations about particular social phenomena or conceptualisations featuring prominently in contemporary self-representations, this study only considers a miniature aspect of speakers’ identity management in online discourse and can thus only reveal traces of discourses manifesting themselves in speakers’ use of the structure examined.

Negative self-identifiers, the object of interest in the study presented here, can be approached from two perspectives: bottom-up and pragmatically, to find what discourse functions are served by occurrences of the formally defined structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP”, and top-down, with an interest in how people talk about themselves in the negative and how dominant functions of the structure relate to broader societal issues. The corpus – as a sample of discourse situations in which the structure was used – is defined formally, by the occurrence of the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP”, and by the type of text within which this structure appears, namely UK web forums. By identifying the meanings of variants of the structure and their linguistic contexts across texts, frequently realised pragmatic functions of negative self-identifiers can be determined and critically discussed as patterns of talking about self-identity in the negative with particular communicative goals.

3.4. Summary

The aim of this chapter was to theoretically position this study in relation to approaches interested in the functions of language in use, which are all, in different ways and to a lesser or greater extent, relevant to account for negative self-identifiers. Because studying the function(s) of a particular form in its context requires an explanation of what is meant by context and how it affects, and is affected by, language use, context was chosen as the focal concept structuring this chapter.

I began my discussion with an account of the notion of context in speech act theory, where it plays a theoretical rather than a practical role, constituting the conditions for the appropriateness of utterances. I moved on to sociolinguistic approaches, whose very starting point of analysis is an

interest in the impact on social context on linguistic variation, and approaches that are interested in the pragmatics of interaction and thus account in more detail for aspects of the situational context of language use. I then went on to consider Conversation Analysis and corpus pragmatics, which are both relevant especially from a methodological viewpoint, since the present study analyses a corpus of written conversations and as such is interested in the sequential co-text of negative self-identifiers as well as in relations between the structure in use across texts. As a theory that is inherently functional in orientation and thus sees formal choice as necessarily contextual, Systemic Functional Linguistics also plays an important role for the present project – both theoretically, because it considers forms as having evolved from function and thus allows linking situated linguistic choice to the sociocultural context of language use, and practically, because (to anticipate the analyses presented in chapter 8) its transitivity framework allows systematic analysis of meanings in the context of negative self-identifiers. I also reviewed how online contexts and their impact on language use have been theorised. Finally, I argued that this project is framed by CDA as the superordinate approach for studying the relationship between linguistic choice and conceptualisations about self-identity and the social world. CDA identifies sites of social struggle on the conceptually widest level of context, which it researches by focusing on the local and transtextual meanings created by linguistic forms assumed to play a role in social processes of interest, represented by particular types of texts. To position my study in relation to this approach, I discussed key concepts in CDA, explaining how they are understood in my study.

In Chapter 4, I will explain precisely what issues about self-identity and the social world are of interest in this project, reviewing literature on identity and the self in a late modern sociopolitical context and raising issues that appear to be at stake in contemporary struggles of belonging to, and being different from, particular social groups. I will also explain why web forums, allowing new forms of interaction transgressing spatial and temporal limits, were chosen as sites for studying negative self-identification.

4. Identity, (negative) self-identification and the social world

“[S]ocial-structural processes of modernization cannot occur without some correspondence in the construction of subjective senses of self, in other words [...], social-structural transformation through modernization must necessarily go hand in hand with a transformation of identity” (Rosa 2013: 5)

While this study is primarily a linguistic project, analysing authentic language use in particular contexts to learn about the meanings served by a structure with a meaning potential, the impetus for analysing negative self-identification in the first place is the assumption that, in accordance with Rosa (2013) cited above, notions of belonging and not belonging are experiencing a transformation in the contemporary social world.

To lay the groundwork for positioning this within the wider sociocultural context about which it ultimately seeks to provide insights, section 4.1 of this chapter first presents different conceptualisations of identity and the self as found in different disciplines, with a focus on questions of identity that appear most relevant in the current sociopolitical climate. It also explains how different linguistic approaches view the relation between language, mind, social world and identity. Section 4.2 then discusses issues around identity that appear most relevant to answer the research questions addressed in this thesis. Section 4.3 moves from the general and broader social context of this study to the concrete context of linguistic interaction examined here, namely web forums. It sketches the field of research on online communication generally and explains what makes web forums an interesting site for studying questions of identity and negative self-identification.

4.1. Conceptualising identity

It is possible to roughly distinguish between four conceptualisations of the self. Firstly, there are essentialist cognitive conceptualisations based on the notion of rational social actors reflexively creating their identities. These assume a pre-discursive, ‘true’ (sense of) self. Secondly, there are the psychoanalytic theories of the self, for which Freud (e.g. 1923) laid the cornerstone by being the first to challenge the essentialist notion of a single ‘entity’ constituting the self (Watson 2014: 2). This perspective conceptualises the self as primarily a psychological, but also a social phenomenon. Thirdly, social/collective identity models mainly define identity by social group membership (Tajfel & Turner 1986). And then there are discursive approaches, which are interested in (collective, rather than individual) identities as discursively constructed and negotiated socio-cognitive representations (Koller 2012). In the following, I will briefly sketch these conceptualisations, focusing on ideas that are of relevance for the present study.

4.1.1. Identity as an individual project

Contemporary popular representations of identity are largely dominated by the notion of authenticity, which can be understood in two (related) senses. Firstly, authenticity can refer to a ‘unique’ self in the Romantic sense, which one should seek to express (Boas 1964: 1). Historically, this idea of a self-created, authentic identity goes back to Enlightenment scholars, such as Locke and Descartes, whose famous “*cogito ergo sum*” sums up the view of the self as cognitively constituted (Descartes 1996: 55). In the contemporary context of late modernity, the individual, less and less constrained by traditional social norms and regulations based on collectivity, is becoming the central unit of social life, a phenomenon which has been discussed as individualisation. Individualisation involves the reflexive ‘design’ of the self with an emphasis on individual agency, and represents one of the key global transformations of social life, along with risk, pluralising choices and perpetual change (Giddens 1991,

Beck 1992, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Today, two features of the very contemporary social world are exerting a particularly important influence on how people constitute a sense of an authentic self and manage their identities in social interaction, namely the Internet and the notion of choice between (mostly consumption-related) lifestyles. Owing to the internet, meanings are no longer anchored in place, but de-localised and negotiated paradigmatically on a global scale by “users who do not share a previous offline connection” (Androutsopoulos 2014: 63), a phenomenon which Giddens calls “disembedding mechanisms” (1991). According to Dawson (2013: 87), choice represents “the first theme of late modernity”: online communication provides us with increasingly complex repertoires to choose from when reflexively managing our identities in superdiverse settings (Vertovec 2007, 2015; see Blackledge, Creese et al. 2018). In these online settings, “[the] seamlessly carried out identification process in face-to-face interactions is challenged” (Bahri, Carminati & Ferrari 2018: 1).

As a result, authenticity in the second sense – namely when seen as a relation between online and offline persona perceived as coherent – is becoming more and more important, as it serves as an indicator of trustworthiness (Seargeant & Tagg 2014: 7). At the same time, late modern self-representations can be considered as marked by a foregrounding of paradigmatic affiliation, whereby the paradigms of belonging often represent highly semiotised consumption choices. Some have even argued that products have become “consumers’ extended selves” (Mittal 2006: 550). In terms of marketing, for example, “the idea that consumers use brands to express their identities has led many companies to reposition their products from focusing on functional attributes to focusing on how they fit into a consumer’s lifestyle” (Chernev, Hamilton & Gal 2011: 66). There has also been a growing tendency for companies to rebrand themselves as ‘authentic’ employers. Numerous studies (e.g. Kaneko 2005, Mautner 2005, Askehave 2007, Mautner 2010; Teixeira & Dill 2011) have addressed the general economic climate of marketisation of public institutions, including higher education facilities, which has made differentiation from competitors through corporate identity measures increasingly important. This means that belonging to a global ‘lifestyle’-based community can be tied up with social difference and, furthermore, issues of inequality. In Giddens’ words: “Modernity fragments; it also unites” (1991: 189).

4.1.2. Identity as a product of the social

The foregrounding of differentiation and ‘authentication’ through lifestyle choices, rather than affiliation by means of more traditional social categories such as class, gender or race, has been critically discussed by theorists who take a more social/collective perspective on identity. For example, Dubrofsky and Wood (2014: 282) criticise “the privileging of self-reflexivity and seemingly authentic displays in a context marked by postracism (i.e. racism no longer exists; we can ignore race altogether) and postfeminism (i.e. gender equality has been reached; there is no need for feminist activism)”. Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 19–20), in a similar vein, write that “contemporary, late modern and populist notions of the ‘true’, ‘authentic’ self, enshrined in a thousand self-help books and magazines,” corroborate “the ideal of self-fulfilment at the expense of political engagement often deemed to be a feature, or even crisis, of late modern society”. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, which have moved “from a social media post to a global phenomenon” (Maqbool 2020: online), show that these ‘traditional markers’ of identity have, by no means, become obsolete. The idea that identity is mainly a product of the social is, among others, represented by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986), which assumes that affiliation with an in-group and differentiation from out-groups is central for one’s sense of self and, thus, one’s actions and behaviour. In linguistics, the assumption of social group identities as variables to be related to particular other variables underlies variationist sociolinguistic approaches to studying language. For example, in variational pragmatics, language in use has mainly

been studied in terms of its relation to social communities viewed as relatively homogenous (Schneider & Barron 2008).

This perspective on identity is not without its critics, either. For example, Cameron (1990: 85) considers these assumed communities to be “descriptive generalizations”, claiming that correlating them with particular linguistic variables “in fact do[es] not explain anything”. Sealey and Carter (2001: 3), too, think that “social categories cannot be regarded as given, independent variables to be deployed in the way that correlative models imply”. In the context of today’s globalised, highly mobile society marked by large-scale migration, we are faced with “an exceptional demographic situation characterized by the multiplication of social categories within specific localities” (Wessendorf 2014: 2). This situation has been studied through the lens of the concept of superdiversity (e.g. Blommaert & Rampton 2011, Arnaut 2012, Androutsopoulos & Juffermanns 2014). The Internet is a key driver of superdiversity, “both by enabling migrants to maintain links with their home countries and by bringing people together into groups shaped by common interest or purpose, regardless of geographical distance or of ethnic, cultural and linguistic difference” (Tagg & Lyons 2018: 312). Superdiversity challenges “groupism” (Brubaker 2004) insofar as it seeks to explore and critically question the centrality of “certain bases of social differentiation which cross-cut national origin or ethnic group affiliation (especially class and race) [...] in super-diverse settings” (Foner et al. 2017: online). This means that it is becoming more difficult to even unproblematically establish social groups as variables to be related to particular varieties of language in use. To close this perceived explanatory gap between abstract social categories and concrete language in use, linguistic approaches such as interactional sociolinguistics focus on studying linguistic interaction as part of concrete social interactions, assuming that shared common ground is not a pre-discursive given, but construed in speech events in particular social situations embedded in, and conditioned by, the broader social context (Auer, Heller, Roberts 2014) (see section 9.3).

4.1.3. Identity as a discursive construction

Just like the (critical, social constructionist) concept of discourse, the view of identity as discursively constituted is mainly associated with the work of Foucault (1972) and reflects the more general trend of a linguistic or discursive turn across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences at the end of the 20th century, during which “the importance of language in human meaning-making” was increasingly acknowledged (Oxford Reference 2020). An important prerequisite for the adoption of a discourse-based conceptualisation of identity was the theorisation of identity not as innately ‘given’, and modifiable by rational subjects, but as a socio-cognitive concept. In other words, an individual subject with conscious and unconscious mental processes is socialised and, thus, becomes part of a society and a participant in social and discursive practices²⁰. Foucault’s concept of the self is inextricably linked to his theory of discourse and based on the assumption that what one can be, at a

²⁰ Key works regarding the view of the self as being based on the inner workings of the human psyche and societal factors are Freud’s psychoanalysis and Lacan’s social psychology. Freud (1923) sees the ego as sees the self as constituted through interaction between three layers of the self: the id, the ego and the superego. The ego is “that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world” and serves to identify realistic ways of satisfying the needs of the id, which stands for the primitive, innate part of the psyche. For Lacan (1977), the individual becomes socialised as it enters and recognises itself through the so-called symbolic order, that is, the social world constituting its relations, knowledge and norms in and through discourse. Foucault’s account of the subject as a product of discourse, and thus ideology, was also influenced by Marxist theories of interpellation as proposed by Althusser (1971). These posit that identification inherently involves subjectification – in the sense of partaking, as subject, in social interaction and in the sense of subjecting to ideologies, since social interactions and the discourse they involve are produced by dominant social forces.

particular point in time, corresponds to what can be said and, thus, known, which means that subjects are “unfinished product[s] of discourse” (Benwell & Stokoe 2006: 30). This view is, in principle, shared by Critical Discourse Analytical theories. According to Fairclough (2003), styles – defined as ways of being – can be considered inculcations of discourses as particular representations of the world, serving as frameworks for identification, constitutive of and reflected in people’s identity representations and enactments. Similarly, socio-cognitive approaches theorise identity as representations of ‘ways of being’, which are socially constructed and shared in and through historically and culturally situated discourse (cf., e.g. van Dijk 2003, Koller 2005). As Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 31) explain, referring to Hall (2000), radically constructionist views of identity that see subjects as mere products of discourse fail to recognise that a subject “must have some kind of psychic coherence and existence prior to discourse” in order to actively perform an identity.

4.1.4. From linguistic (non-) identification to the material social world

In linguistics and approaches based on it (as discussed in Chapter 3), the relation between language in use, conceptualisations, power and the material world is far from being unanimously agreed upon. Different approaches to studying language in use have different positions on the significance of local (negative) self-identification with respect to questions of identity beyond the immediate communicative situation or even the wider social context: SFL (Halliday 1978, Halliday & Matthiessen 2014) and critical approaches to studying language in use (e.g. van Dijk 2009) adopt a social constructivist perspective on language use, viewing identity as socially, and thus as linguistically constituted and considering any linguistic choice as conditioned by and serving a function in the situational context embedded into and shaped by the larger sociohistorical context. Based on the view that language features in action and interaction, social relations and the material world as ways of acting, representing and being (Fairclough 2003: 25) and taking an interest in inequalities between social groups, CDA a priori considers the sociopolitical context of discursively enacted and negotiated identities. In contrast, linguistic approaches rooted in ethnomethodology, such as Conversation Analysis and Membership Category Analysis (Sacks 1972, Schegloff 1988), have traditionally rejected the consideration of questions of identity beyond what is actually articulated in the conversations studied. While contextual variables such as gender or class²¹ are acknowledged to potentially influence talk, it is a requirement in CA to prove that these features are actually made relevant by participants as they interact in their own – not the researcher’s – terms (Schegloff 1992)²².

The question of whether or not it is possible (and fruitful) for a linguistic study of talk to take a strictly empirical and apolitical stance, instead of ‘imposing’ categories on the data, that might only figure in the researcher’s understanding of the conversation, has been debated among CA and CDA practitioners (cf., e.g. Billig 1999, who argues that it is questionable whether there can be an entirely neutral perspective on studying language in use that does not make any reference to speakers’ identities and orientation towards particular social orders beyond what is evident in the talk). Seeking to reconcile the importance of empirically grounding references to categories such as identity in CA

²¹ Categories which, as has been pointed out before, are not unproblematic because they imply homogeneity of the persons they subsume.

²² The question of whether or not it is possible and desirable for a linguistic study of talk to take a strictly empirical stance rather than ‘imposing’ categories on the data that might only figure in the researcher’s understanding of the conversation, has been controversially discussed among CA and CDA practitioners (cf., e.g., Billig 1999, who argues that it is questionable whether there can be an entirely neutral perspective on studying language in use that does not make any reference to speakers’ identities and orientation towards particular social orders beyond what is observable in the talk).

and the view that concrete textual events are informed by underlying conceptualisations about the social world (or, to turn the metaphor around, by issues ‘above’ the level of the individual text), the genealogical approach recognises discourse as interpretative frameworks and point of orientation in particular interactions (Wetherell 1998, cit. in Benwell & Stokoe 2006: 41). In a similar vein, in narrative theory, interactionally enacted identities are considered as meaningful in relation to narratives, which are embedded in the broader context of cultural narratives (Page & Thomas 2011). Beyond knowledge and views informing how speakers manage their linguistic self-representation in particular situations, critical realist practitioners of CDA such as Sealey (2012) stress the relevance of non-textual aspects of speakers’ identity, such as concrete, material obstacles shaping their experience of the world. Also, to a certain extent, it is necessary to recognise the existence of non-textual features of identity for CDA to be able to study language used by particular social groups (e.g., examining how marginalised groups discursively constructing their identities requires assuming commonalities between texts produced by people sharing a particular subject position, cf. Koller 2013: 573).

4.1.5. Conceptualisation of identity in this study

My study views identity work as primarily accomplished in discourse (Benwell & Stokoe 2006) and shares the assumption held by interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982, Coupland 2014) that meaning-making in interaction can be studied to explore “speakers’ perceptions of the relationships between linguistic forms and social realities” (Tagg et al. 2017: 30). Against this background, it considers the micro-functions of negative self-identifiers across texts to learn how speakers use negative identifiers to position themselves in relation to their utterances and thus socially frame their interpretation in potentially patterned ways (Goffman 1981). These are considered to point to assumptions structuring how speakers reflexively use language to enact and explicitly contrast themselves with particular identities in forum discussions, which are embedded into the wider context of contemporary social life (Blitvich & Bou-Franch 2019: 4). Being interested in the categories speakers make relevant when linguistically managing their self-representation in online interaction, the analyses presented in this thesis do not consider speakers’ real-life identities in the sense of “bundles of demographic characteristics” (Eckert 2012: 88). Consequently, it does not matter whether a negative self-identifier was uttered by a 60-year-old male person from China on a diabetes forum or by a 10 year-old Austrian girl on a gaming forum. Like variationist studies of pragmatic markers (Aijmer 2013), my study takes a quantitative approach to studying what functions negative self-identifiers, as meaning potentials, are routinely used to fulfil. This means that the main focus of this thesis is not to present a “situated, ethnographic investigation of unfolding interactions” (Tagg et al. 2017), but to micro-pragmatically study a corpus of instances of the focal structure. To close the gap between microlinguistic, corpus-based analysis of a sample of negative self-identifiers in their proximate contexts and questions about identity in relation to wider, macro-social concerns, section 9.3 discusses two instances of negative self-identifiers in more detail, taking into account participants’ online identities as represented on two particular forums. Online forums are discussed in more detail in section 4.3, as contexts in which linguistic strategies of (non-)identification become a particularly interesting phenomenon to investigate.

4.2. Conceptual struggles around negative self-identification

Given the context outlined above, the question remains as to what makes it interesting in social research terms, to study negative self-identification rather than self-identification in the affirmative? Moreover, what conceptualisations characterising the representation of identity in contemporary discourse might be considered as worthwhile studying, or even critically questioned? As already stated in the introduction, the grounds for studying negatives linguistically are mainly pragmatic ones:

negatives imply presuppositions about the textual and non-co-text of usage. However, the prominence of the notion of authenticity and, thus, differentiation in late modern discourses of identity also suggests that not belonging – rather than belonging – might figure among the conceptualisations underlying people’s (online) self-representations.

I have already explained that one large-scale social trend that appears relevant is that the individual, increasingly less constrained by traditional social norms and regulations based on collectivity, is becoming the central unit of social life, a phenomenon which has been referred to as individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Individualisation can, according to Vandenberghe (2015: 117), be seen as inextricably linked to globalisation in that the two form a “dual process” in late modern society. Individualisation represents one of four main trajectories of social change in contemporary social life, which is also marked by consumerism (as a consequence of capitalism as the dominant sociopolitical paradigm since modernity), scientisation (a development based on rationalisation), and subpolitisation (emerging from modernity’s democratisation) (Kelly & Charlton 1995, Wagner 2012, Marko 2015a).

Two trends along the trajectories of scientisation and subpolitisation appear especially noteworthy with regard to the issue of identity and identification, and will therefore be discussed in more detail in sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2: firstly, the role and status of (different kinds of) experts against the background of increasing fragmentation and democratisation of authority and knowledge; second, and relatedly, the tendencies towards anti-elitism and populism.

4.2.1. Contemporary notions and representations of expertise

This section defines the concept of expertise and discusses its role in late modern society. Firstly, the role of expert systems in the context of a society marked by a heightened sensitivity towards what is perceived as risks is sketched. Then, I explain how experts can be distinguished from non-experts, a differentiation that is necessary to be able to discuss issues such as power differentials between the two groups as well as phenomena like the increasingly important role of lay expertise in online contexts. My review also makes reference to constructionist views of expertise, which are a necessary prerequisite for explicating the role of language in establishing expert identities and, thus, trustworthiness, in interaction.

4.2.1.1. Experts and expert systems in risk society

Risks, which are “socially manufactured and predicated on the awareness of a potential threat” (Vandenberghe 2015: 144), have come to feature prominently not only on a global scale (e.g. in discourses of terrorism or global warming) but also in the lifeworlds of individuals. They represent key factors even in very private situations of decision-making, ranging from major life decisions such as whether or not to marry, to very mundane everyday choices relating, e.g. to the purchase of certain brands of cereal (Lash & Wynne 1992: 3).

In this context of decisions being seen as determining factors in individuals’ ‘self-designed’ biographies, the role of expert systems (Giddens 1993: 29) has gained momentum. These are systems of technological, professional and scientific knowledge that are simultaneously *insourced* and *outsourced*, according to Lash (2001: 11, in his foreword to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001): specific knowledge is more and more centred within the individual, who may be an expert in one very specific area and who, owing to flatter hierarchies regarding the availability of knowledge and greater freedom of choice, can access and use knowledge more easily to reflexively make life choices (insourcing). At the same time, knowledge is lifted out of its original context, circulating globally as abstract (or expert) systems (outsourcing), which means that while the individual might be very knowledgeable in one

particular area of life, they are likely to have little expertise in most other fields and thus may need to consult external sources of knowledge for advice. However, these external sources – i.e., individual experts or institutions bearing and disseminating knowledge – are themselves subject to the dynamics of economic, cultural and technological change, and therefore competing with each other, which also makes it more difficult to assess the status of various expert systems available. Having and using (the right kind of constantly changing) knowledge is therefore a constant struggle between different groups of people believed to hold particular kinds of or share more or less knowledge:

On the one hand, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1992: 57) argue that there is a contrast between, simplistically put, experts (the “technical people”, who define what the risks are) and non-experts (“the public”, who are informed about risks and thus in the passive role). Experts, in the sense of the technical people, have often been conceived of as those capable of rational, evidence-based reasoning and, thus, essentially been equated with the natural sciences. Williams (2014: 1), too, refers to the notion of “professional experts armed with science, technology, and unquestionable authority”. The relationship between experts and non-experts has been discussed in terms of aspects such as power asymmetry, face management and mutual (mis-)understanding between experts and non-experts (Bromme & Jucks 2018), especially in the context of health (e.g. Roter & Hall 2006, Wirtz et al. 2006), but also in legal counselling (Godden & Walton 2006). Also, these discussions have been part of a larger trend towards increased client-centeredness (Bigi 2011: 67).

On the other hand, risk society has amplified “a struggle among rationality claims, some competing and some overlapping” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1992: 59), i.e. there is increased competition among and growing scepticism towards ‘accredited’ experts. In the words of Bigi (2011: 69, referring to Van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2003) “the expertise of the expert must be agreed upon” and may be critically questioned not only by peers, but also by non-experts (Dear 2004: 206, Stehr & Grundmann 2017). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1992: 61) in this context highlight the role of the social perception of rationality, which means that what is perceived as rational is not only for the sciences to assess – especially given that science, in their view, is involved in the creation of present-day risks in the first place. Therefore, as laypeople go about their daily lives, they “themselves become small, private alternative experts in risks of modernization” (ibid: 61) (see section 4.2.1.2 on lay expertise).

It should be mentioned that the association of expertise with scientific knowledge and non-expertise with absence of this knowledge is an over-simplification. Firstly, it is possible to conceptually differentiate between knowledge and expertise. Williams (2014: 1) states that expertise “refers to something more instrumental and pragmatic”, while knowledge can be considered as “something more ‘meaningful’ and hermeneutic”. Providing a more detailed discussion of this conceptual difference, Grundmann (2017) draws on Bauman (1987) when he defines experts as ‘interpreters’ as opposed to ‘legislators’, arguing that their most important skill is their advice-giving capacity, i.e. their ability to “mediate between the production of knowledge and its application; [...] define and interpret situations; and [...] set priorities for action”. This means that the notion of expertise is mainly based on a “pragmatist take on knowledge” and implies that knowledge without experience, or even knowledge not gained from experience (i.e. tacit knowledge), does not qualify as expertise. Secondly, expert identities, just like any other identities, can be seen as construals of discourse rather than described as a mere presence or absence of knowledge. In other words, it is necessary for participants to linguistically enact expert identities in situations where they seek to be taken seriously as providers of advice and help, especially if they do not have formal qualifications (Armstrong, Koteyko & Powell 2011, Harvey & Koteyko 2013, Rudolf von Rohr et al. 2019). As Rudolf von Rohr et al. (2019: 242) find,

however, discursive credibility management is just as important for experts as it is for laypeople, as “being perceived as a credible expert is connected to establishing trust” (ibid.: 221, cf. also Mackiewicz 2010a, b). The next section focuses on lay expertise more specifically, as this is the kind of expertise most likely to play a role on discussion forums. Section 4.2.1.3 then discusses some of the discourse strategies that have been found to serve to project expertise in online interaction.

4.2.1.2. *Lay (online) expertise*

Representing “a core pillar of the modern information society” (Johnson 2021: online), the Internet has become a vital source for retrieving, sharing and negotiating information for experts and laypeople alike. KhosraviNik and Unger (2016: 207) use the term “participatory internet” to refer to a culture on the Web 2.0 that is marked by changing relations of communicative power (KhosraviNik 2018). Indeed, as Herring (2004: 26) puts it, “it has become a truism that computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems, as compared with previous communication technologies, are cheap, fast, and democratic”. In this context of technological advance and democratisation of knowledge, there has been a growing tendency for scepticism towards experts (in the abovementioned sense of those with formally accredited, technical knowledge), and the relationship between experts and laypeople has been observed to undergo change (e.g. Kerr, Cunningham-Burley & Tutton 2007). In fact, the very notion of what constitutes expertise has been called into question, with the role of lay experts, sharing their knowledge and experience on various platforms, having become more important in the most recent decade (e.g. Williams 2014).

Lay experts have been defined as ordinary people with knowledge in a specific field of expertise that is based on their personal and thus subjective experience rather than scientific evidence (Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020: 7). The concept of lay expertise challenges the conceptualisation of laypeople as “empty vessels waiting to have their vacant heads filled” by experts (Williams 2014: 1). This can be related to developments in present-day web communication, in which “previous dichotomies such as author/audience and amateur/professional are becoming porous” (Seargeant & Tagg 2014: 3). In fact, the opposition between ‘ordinary people’ and ‘technical people’ and, respectively, between knowledge gained from experience and knowledge gained from formal education, appears to be based on a rather static, one-dimensional concept of expertise that is increasingly being challenged.

As shown by the example of expertise created by people commonly referred to as ‘nerds’ and ‘geeks’ (Tocci 2009, Coleman 2017, Postill 2018), the knowledge and skills of certain groups of people who may not be accredited professionals working for authorised institutions can nevertheless be extremely technical. In fact, this expertise, considered by scholars such as Coleman (2017: S94) to be based on collectivist beliefs and exchanged in “free spaces” (such as forums) on the web, can ‘overpower’ the systems based on expertise held by official experts and become an instrument of undermining corporate monopolies (e.g. by providing free alternatives to programmes, games and operating systems) or civil disobedience (e.g. in the case of hacker activism). Rudolf von Rohr et al. (2019: 220), too, reject the assumption that particular groups of people can be linked to particular types of expertise, pointing out that different interactional situations may require access to and bring forth different types of expertise created not only by individuals, but also by groups. As forum users try to jointly solve problems by relating their experiences with the issue of concern, for example, they act as ‘swarm intelligence’, with their individual lay accounts co-constructing expertise. This expertise, by virtue of being ‘tailored’ to a particular user’s problem, might indeed be even more useful than formal expertise available, for example, on an official website or in expert literature on the subject.

Research on lay beliefs in the field of health has shown that the beliefs of ordinary people represent complex systems of knowledge that not only reflect societal conceptualisations about health and illness but also influence how people affected by certain health conditions cope with them (Lawton 2003, Taylor & Bury 2007, Barker & Galardi 2011). Online communication about health and illness on platforms such as forums can be considered to empower laypeople because it enables them to connect across geographic boundaries to share their experiences and generate novel forms of expertise. These potentially move beyond strictly scientific, medical explanations. It has been found that the health advice given by lay experts is highly appreciated among peers, and seen as useful advice (e.g. Mattson & Hall 2011), emotional support (e.g. Bar-Lev 2008, McBride 2011), complementing information by and facilitating communication with doctors (e.g. Rupert et al. 2014), but also representing a potential challenge to formal medical expertise (e.g. Crooks 2006, Radin 2006, Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020). It has been observed that lay experts often tend to orient towards the same explanations for health conditions as medical professionals, emphasising for example the role of lifestyle choices for health and ill-health and, thus, the importance of individual decision-making (Sosnowy 2014, Williams 2014). Nevertheless, the subjective nature of lay beliefs and the potential inaccuracy of information provided by peers online can pose a challenge in consultations with medical professionals in so far as this information might not be consistent with, or even contradict, doctors' views (Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020: 2). This means that the need to epistemically frame information is likely to be higher when discussing delicate topics such as health, as there is a risk of inaccurate information causing damage to participants' real-life physical existence. Thus, by contrasting themselves with medical expertise to hedge the information they share, speakers interacting on medical forums could show awareness of this potential problem, seeking to avoid that their advice has counter-productive effects. As my discussion of an expertise disclaimer in section 9.3.2 shows, though, the construction and negotiation of lay expertise is highly relevant not only in online discussions on health issues, but also appears to play an important role in forums devoted to discussing IT issues on an advanced level. Irrespective of the topic discussed on a particular forum, another reason why speakers may generally be more careful when presenting their (lay) knowledge and views online could be fears of their postings becoming entextualised and damage their reputation on the forum (and, potentially, beyond).

The notion of lay expertise has also been extensively discussed in relation to other genres of CMC, e.g. online consumer reviews, also referred to as eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). As Vásquez (2014: 65) explains, consumer reviews are a 'digitally native' genre providing a novel form of lay expertise previously unavailable, namely user-generated content about product experiences. As a form of expertise, emanating from laypeople one does not know personally, eWOM has rendered expertise "distributed, geographically dispersed, and interpersonally removed" (ibid.: 66). Just as lay medical expertise may "lessen the information asymmetry" between patients and doctors (Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020: 5), online consumer reviews help consumers make informed, and thus less risky, purchasing decisions. Particularly at the final stage of the decision-making process, product experience reviews, shared for example on Amazon, may exert a key influence on people's decision whether to make a purchase (Vermeulen & Seegers 2008: 2, Ghose & Ipeirotis 2011). Indeed, the influence of user-generated reviews is enormous, especially in the field of travel and tourism (Yoo & Gretzel 2009, Phillips et al. 2016). While experimental studies such as Vermeulen and Seegers (2008) found that whether a review – in their case, of a hotel – is written by an expert or by a layperson may not make an important difference, it can be observed that when people write product reviews, they draw on various linguistic strategies to establish authority and, thus, make their reviews credible. Some of the linguistic strategies that have been reported to be used

by people to represent themselves as experts are discussed below. In the final section, then, I move on to talk about an issue tightly connected to trust in expertise, namely distrust towards certain forms of expertise and the wider sociopolitical context in which this can be related to trends such as populism.

4.2.1.3. Linguistically constructing expertise

Expertise is an aspect of discursively performed identities and plays an important role in forums, the key purpose of which is knowledge exchange and advice-giving. This means that how people posting to forums use language has important effects on whether or not they are perceived as credible. If forum users are implicitly aware of what works in terms of designing contexts for their postings, it can be assumed that they use language to present themselves in a way that will position them as credible and, thus, valued forum members. Indeed, studies have found that the identities linguistically constructed by online forum users have an effect on how their posting is perceived by others (Vásquez 2014: 69, referring to Forman, Ghose & Wiesenfeld 2008).

A number of studies have tried to isolate linguistic strategies that are used by people interacting online to position themselves as experts. Mackiewicz (2010a: 4) identifies various strategies of asserting credibility, among them the use of specialised terminology, the use of longer, persuasive narratives relating to the product reviewed, assertions of product experience and brand familiarity, assertions of roles associated with relevant expertise and assertions of second-hand expertise (that is, references to other people with relevant product expertise) (cf. Richardson 2003 and Rudolf von Rohr et al. 2019: 232–233 for similar lists).

My study seeks to find what people explicate, i.e. ‘tell’, about what they do not see as their identities by making a pragmatically marked linguistic choice, viz. negative self-identifiers. These may also interact in interesting ways with their co-texts. These co-texts can be considered to ‘show’ about speakers’ identities and beliefs (whether or not this is intended by speakers or not) (Vásquez 2014: 68), and to reflect speakers’ awareness of and orientation to the interactional context of the forum. This means that unlike the studies referred to above, my thesis sheds light on the question of how particular identities (e.g. that of the expert) are linguistically construed online from the opposite perspective: rather than exploring the linguistic cues strategically employed to discursively enact a particular identity, its departure point is a form that makes an explicit assertion about a speaker’s non-identity and potentially serves a range of effects in interaction with its co- and context. Credibility management could be one of these effects: negative self-identification with particular social groups or roles might serve to project particular identities expected to be perceived as cues for trustworthiness by forum peers, and negative self-identifiers may interact with co-texts that have been found to index expertise (as described above).

4.2.2. Expertise, (dis-)trust and populism

As the foregoing discussion has shown, in the contemporary sociopolitical context in which knowledge and risk constitute key paradigms, the issue of trust and the question who has privileged access and the power to validate and disseminate particular kinds of knowledge and beliefs looms large. The impact of digital transformation on “different aspects of political legitimation, societal trust, scientific evidence and public discourse” and the issue of “control and ownership of the Internet” is by some considered to be “one of the most important battles of our time” (*All European Academies* online).

Indeed, knowledge seems to be simultaneously becoming (perceived as) more democratic and as what could be called an elitist privilege. More people now have access to and may profit from knowledge

that has not necessarily been validated by traditional authorities (Jensen, Lahn & Nerland 2012: 2). ‘Ordinary’ people now not only have more information at their disposal, but may also become what Mehlenbacher (2019) has theorised as citizen scientists. Citizen scientists manifest increasingly blurred boundaries between experts and non-experts, but also highlight distrust in experts who are perceived as isolated from the ‘normal’ population. Discussing the reasons for this scepticism, Stehr (1992: 108) explains that groups of experts in financially strong and politically defining fields of knowledge, like cutting-edge science and technology, are “often narrowly located at the apex of the social hierarchy” and considered to be “in the employ of the already powerful and influential”, monopolising these fields of expertise (cf. also Reed 1996). Again, it should be highlighted that dichotomies such as the one between the dimensions of ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ do not suffice to explain social identities, as these “emerge discursively as a combination of the individual, the social, the agentive and the structural dimensions of social reality (Zappettini 2012: online, referring to Krzyżanowski 2010).

These dichotomies are, however, necessary to approach struggles around expertise and knowledge in relation to the global upsurge of populism (or, as Mudde 2004 put it, the “populist Zeitgeist”), which has become a much-researched topic across disciplines (Rooduijn 2013, Wodak 2015, KhosravNik 2017, Ekström, Patrona & Thornborrow 2018, Al-Ramahi & Rashid 2019). Populism, rather than constituting an ideology itself, can be viewed as an underlying conceptualisation about relations between what Mudde & Kaltwasser (2012: 9) define as three core concepts, viz. “the elite, the people and the general will”, with “elitism and pluralism” as their “direct opposites”. These concepts, and assumptions about their relations, are “ideologically flexible” in that the concrete meanings with which they are imbued depend on the “host ideologies” to which they attach. The (perceived) opposition between a knowledge monopoly held by a top-down elite and a process of knowledge democratisation driven by bottom-up movements (cf., e.g., van Dijk 1993) or, more recently, movements representing “motivated resistance to expert consensus” (Merkley 2020: 24).

There are anti-intellectual as well as hyper-intellectual while anti-authoritarian movements that should be mentioned in this context. On the one hand, there appears to be a tendency towards a “fundamental mistrust of intellectuals and experts” which has been referred to as “anti-intellectualism” (Merkley 2020: online, Merkley 2020a). In its extreme form, anti-intellectualism manifests itself in science denial and conspiracy theories, which are often “aimed at challenging the status quo and those in power” (Atkinson et al. 2017). For example, according to Douglas et al. (2019: 19), “extreme climate skeptics assert that climate scientists are involved in data faking and fraud so that they ensure that they keep receiving research funding”. An even more – if not the most – drastic example are so-called flat-earthers, who believe in what they refer to as a “‘round Earth conspiracy’ orchestrated by NASA and other government agencies” based on the view that the earth “*looks and feels flat*” (Wolchover 2017: online). Thus, “anti-intellectualism is directly connected to populism, a worldview that sees political conflict as primarily between ordinary citizens and a privileged social elite” (Merkley 2020a: 24). At the other end of the (intellectual) spectrum of people with distrust, there are anti-elitist movements driven by people with a high level of interest and expertise in science and technology, e.g. hackers. These movements have been dealt with through the lens of antiauthoritarianism, “which manifests itself as a profound skepticism toward institutions and other forms of entrenched power” (Coleman 2017: S93).

Against this background of digital media being the primordial site for exchanging and (re-) negotiating expertise, the next section discusses web forums, which allow people from potentially diverse social backgrounds to discuss their views and knowledge on topics of shared interest. It embeds the present

study in the research on online communication and discusses the possible relations between negative self-identifiers, the communicative context of web forums and questions of identity on a wider scale.

4.3. The discourse context: Web forums as sites for studying negative self-identification

In section 4.1, I explained that language in use can, simply speaking, be analysed on a scale between micro-linguistic choice and macro-societal questions, with the context of the communicative situation in which the speech act was uttered representing the interface. The present study investigates negative self-identifiers used on web forums, which are one of the “communicative practices that occur in the digital world” as part of “the social world at large” (Blitvitch & Bou-Franch 2018: 3). This section first reviews literature on online communication in general (4.3.1) and then discusses online forums more specifically, focusing on how they can be considered in relation to negative self-identification (4.3.2).

4.3.1. Researching online communication

In the 1990s, the beginnings of online communication marked “a radical departure from what came before” (Herring 2004: 26) in terms of influencing social practices. Ever since, online communication and online communities have been extensively studied from the perspective of language-based approaches, approaches based in sociology, anthropology and ethnography, and approaches drawing on concepts from both linguistics and other disciplines interested in exploring social processes (Sindoni 2019: 74). The enormous interest across disciplines in online communication in the last few decades has led to the emergence of a whole interdisciplinary field, namely the study of computer-mediated communication (CMC). This field “explores the social, communicative and linguistic impact of communication technologies, which have continually evolved in connection with the use of computer networks (esp. the Internet)” (Beißwenger & Storrer 2008: 292).

Among the early key publications in the field of CMC are Ferrara et al.’s (1991) publication on “interactive written discourse” and Herring’s (1996) edited volume on CMC, which discusses linguistic, social and ethical, as well as cross-cultural perspectives on online communication. It was also in the 1990s when the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* marked the beginnings of a new field of research into online social practices (back in 1995, when the journal was launched, it examined communication on media such as Icp OnLine (Hutchison 1995)). The first wave of CMDA analysis (CMDA) was text-based and mainly sought to characterise the language used online (e.g. Herring 1998) and describe its socially conditioned varieties (e.g. Baym 1996, Cherny 1999). A key study on the language of online genres such as e-mail, chatgroups and virtual worlds is, for example, Crystal (2001). To him, “what is immediately obvious when engaging in any of the Internet’s functions is its linguistic character”, and consequently, the Internet “is likely to be a linguistic revolution” (Crystal 2001: viii). In the early 2000s, Herring (2001: 625) anticipated that studies focusing on the “discursive negotiation and expression of social relations in cyberspace” would be the future of CMDA. Mautner (2005b: 810), too, highlighted the role of the Internet as “a key space for enacting social practice, and for reflecting and shaping social processes and problems”.

Indeed, studies in the second wave of CMDA were marked by an increased focus on online discourse and social practice (e.g. Herring 2004, Androutsopoulos 2006, Danet & Herring 2007, Bloor 2016) and, to keep pace with the fast technological progress of online communication possibilities, a stronger emphasis on multimodal practices in the digital realm (e.g. Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001, O’Halloran 2013, Georgakopoulou & Spiliotti 2016). More recently, there has also been a growing body of research devoted to the critical analysis of online social practices and the ideologies they reflect and reproduce.

For example, feminist research has examined the role of social media in the objectification of women by exploring how women represent their sexual identities in online interaction (Dobson 2015, García-Gómez 2017). Studies have also critically examined the relations between social media communication and politics in general (KhosraviNik 2018), or more specifically investigated questions such as the relations between content creators on social media and corporations (Kopf 2020), NATO's social media communication strategies (Conoscenti 2018) or digital discourses about immigration (Boyd 2018).

To account for the increasing possibilities for interacting online and the implications of this for the social world at large, the field of CMC constantly requires “new and up-to-the minute research” (Herring 2001: 626). Recently, for instance, social media such as Facebook (Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017) and the ephemerality of messages exchanged on platforms such as Snapchat and their role for self-representation have become a focus of scholarly interest (Aljouhi 2017) in CMC. The “inescapable fact that the landscape of communication has changed” “raises new possibilities for constructing and performing social identity” (Merchant 2006: 236), and consequently, research on online identity performance and online communities is another major strand of research within CMDA (Leppänen, Westinen & Kytola 2016). Since identity is constructed in social interaction, the notion of community is tightly linked to the notion of identity (Seargeant & Tagg 2014: 5). Both notions will be discussed in more detail with reference to the online context examined here, viz. web forums, in the next section.

Research in CMC can, according to Herring (2014), broadly be classified into

- (1) research seeking to classify and describe the features of particular genres of CMC (e.g. Crystal 2006 for a general characterisation of “netspeak”, Tagg 2012 for a study of text messaging, Dürscheid & Frehner (2013) for a study on email communication) and on narratives as “archetypal genre” used in online conversations across media of CMC (Georgakopoulou 2013: 695)
- (2) research on structural features of CMC such as non-verbal cues like emoji and stickers (Riordan & Kreuz 2010, Danesi 2016, Herring & Dainas 2017, Schneebeli 2017) or, more recently, hashtags (Zappavigna 2018), as well as phenomena like memes (Zappavigna 2012)
- (3) studies on questions of linguistic diversity on the Internet and features of CMC in specific languages (Danet & Herring 2007)
- (4) research into pragmatic phenomena, focusing e.g. on phenomena like relevance (Herring 2013), performatives (Virtanen 2013), address (de Oliveira 2013), and interactional structure (Benson 2015), and
- (5) research into Computer-Mediated Discourse (CMD), representing a field within discourse analysis in its own right, viz. Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) (Herring 2001, 2004, 2018; Demata, Heaney & Herring 2018).

CMDA is interested in the relations between online discourse – conceived of as language and other forms of semiosis as used on the web – and the social world (Fairclough 1992: 28). Employing methods from a range of linguistic disciplines²³, it seeks to explore potentially patterned speaker choices in

²³ In fact, because of the important role of “nontextual communication and the trend toward convergence of multiple modes of CMC in a single platform”, CMDA, which has in the past mainly explored textual discourse, has recently come to move “beyond linguistics, in order to analyze emergent and unprecedented discourse phenomena in all their manifestations” (Herring 2019: 26). At the same time, there has been recognition of the

computer-mediated discourse settings with their technological specificities (Herring 2004: 4). Studying the pragmatic functions of negative self-identifiers in UK online forums in English, my thesis shares interests with studies in the fourth category (e.g. Skovholt et al.'s 2014 study on the pragmatics of emoticons), but in contrast to these studies, my project examines a structure whose use is not confined to CMC. Being interested in the relation of micro-linguistic assertions of non-identity and questions about identity on the level of the larger societal context, my study also shares interests with research in the fifth category (e.g. Zappavigna (2012), who has applied corpus linguistic methods in an SFL-based discourse analytical study).

4.3.2. Studying identity and (non-)identification in online forums

The influence of web communication on people's social lives and, thus, their identities, has been enormous (boyd 2011, Tagg & Seargeant 2014); in 2020, about 4.14 billion people, i.e. about 53% of the world's population, were active on social media. According to Seargeant and Tagg (2014: 2–3), social media – broadly defined as “online environments which enable social interaction” (Lepänen et al. 2014: 113) – have turned the web into a place where a large proportion of people's social lives is taking place and have profoundly affected the ways in which people interact using language and other semiotic practices. As Parsell (2008: 41) puts it, “the Internet [...] is a powerful [...] force in the manufacture of identity”, allowing for “new kinds of participation, new kinds of fragmentation, and new ways of co-constructing meaning that transcend traditional notions of conversation, narrative, exposition, and so forth” (Herring, Stein & Virtanen 2013: 9). According to Merchant (2006: 235), digital media not only “enable us to interact in different ways within more diverse and dispersed networks than previously imaginable”, but are inextricably linked to changes of the broader social context, creating new forms of social identities. As Hodgkinson puts it, the Internet constitutes “a significant factor in the development of fragmented, fluid patterns of individual identity” (Hodgkinson 2007: 625) (cf. section 4.2).

As stated in section 4.1.5, identity, from the perspective of C(M)DA, is viewed as discursively constructed in interaction (von Rohr, Thurnherr & Locher 2018: 219); in the words of Vásquez (2014: 67), it is an “interactional achievement”, and as such inseparable from the notion of belonging to or being different from a group (Benwell & Stokoe 2006: 35). According to Lepänen et al. (2014: 112), identities are discursively created “in active processes of identification and self-understanding, seeking or eschewing commonality, connectedness and groupness”. Online forums allow the emergence of virtual communities, broadly defined here as “a group of people who interact in a virtual environment” (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar & Abras 2003: 1023). In these communities, “individuals can portray themselves in potentially more varied ways than they can in their offline realities” (Vásquez 2014: 67, cf. also Sims 2016) while orienting to codes of practice jointly established and negotiated by the community. Therefore, online communities represented by forums and other social media are interesting sites for studying discursive (non-) identification.

To provide some examples of studies that have concerned themselves with these questions about identity and digital communication, Gee (2004) provides a theory of identities emerging as people engage in online games, seeking to account for the relation between offline and online identities. Page (2012) has explored the role of short narratives told on social media for the identities of the people

fact that, especially when studying identity representation on social media such as Facebook, the texts written by users (e.g. status updates, contributions to discussions, etc.) represent important resources for studying how they perform identity, and not just the tools offered by the medium for this purpose specifically (e.g. user profiles) (Vásquez 2014: 67).

telling them, Marwick (2014) and Vásquez and China (2019) have studied the performance of and orientation to gender identities on social media; studies such as Yates (2003), Guzzetti (2008) and Marwick (2014) have discussed CMC in light of debates around gender inequality in cyber culture. The role of humour and playfulness has also been issues of interest in studies of identity in CMC; for example, Deumert (2014) and de Lange et al. (2015) have explored how people represent themselves as playful when interacting with others online. Because of their special status for both identity representation and community building, social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook or LinkedIn have been the focus of much research in CMC in recent years (Seargeant & Tagg 2014, Tagg et al. 2017, Garzone 2018).

Although online forums (in traditional message board format) represent older forms of CMC and have been “eclipsed in the past decade by social networking sites such as Facebook” as well as by forum-based social media like Reddit (430 million users according to Lin 2020: online) and Quora (more than 300 million active users according to *Foundation*: online), they have by no means lost their relevance. They “represent one of the few remaining spaces online that afford the user the potential for anonymous interaction” and are considered to contribute to individual as well as social well-being by fostering a sense of belonging among their users (Pendry & Salvatore 2015: 211). Forums, indeed, are particularly interesting sites for studying negative self-identifiers: On the one hand, they join people from diverse backgrounds so that they can exchange knowledge and (lay) expertise on topics of common interest. As I have argued, authenticity, in the sense of personal ‘uniqueness’ and coherence between online and offline persona, plays a pivotal role for constructing expertise online. This can be linguistically indexed, among other things, by eschewing commonalities with particular social groups. So, on the other hand, online forums represent communities with their own interactional norms and sense of ‘groupness’, which means that it might simultaneously be important for users to orient themselves towards, highlight commonalities with and manage their face with a view to their peers. In the following, I will discuss both the question of individual authenticity (as an index of individual credibility) and group affiliation (as an index of belonging) – conceptualisations which, I assume, can both be micro-linguistically articulated through the use of negative self-identifiers used in web forums.

As for the first notion, forums represent online contexts where expertise on particular subjects can be complemented, critically questioned and even come to substitute expertise in the more traditional sense. For their expertise to be taken seriously, it is particularly important for users “to provide information about their identities, especially with respect to establishing credibility, and to give readers reasons for trusting the information offered” (Vásquez 2014: 68). Credibility, I argued, may be built on different bases and linguistically indexed by drawing on various resources (see sections 4.2.1.2 and 4.2.1.3). Interaction in online contexts such as forums (see section 3.2.6) is mainly text-based, more anonymous and simultaneously less private than real-life communication, tends to be more informal and allows people to show aspects of their identity they might not emphasise in the offline world; at the same time, it bears a heightened “potential for misunderstanding” (Delahunty 2012: 407). In this context, the use of negative self-identifiers might reflect a greater need by speakers to linguistically explicate their non-membership with particular social groups, i.e. tell who they are (not), in order to linguistically create authenticity and, thus, trust (Page 2014: 46, Seargeant & Tagg 2014: 7). Against the wider social background of struggles around trust in contemporary knowledge society, highlighting non-membership with particular groups may serve to construe forum participants as trustworthy – and this may point to their underlying assumptions about what constitutes a ‘credible’ identity and allow embedding the research on negative self-identifiers into a more general sociopolitical climate marked by distrust and a heightened role of risks: As Page argues, “[t]he

ambiguity associated with online representation of the self sits within a wider complex of debates about the nature of authenticity, trust and reputation” (2014: 47) (see section 4.2.2).

As for the second notion, ‘groupness’, as a shared sense of having something in common, is crucial for ‘achieving’ identity, which, according to Lepänen et al. (2014: 112), is a “contractual achievement”. It affects how speakers, in “collapsed contexts” (Marwick & boyd 2011: 10), strategically manage their discursive self-representation by stylising their utterances with a view to their effects on their audience, i.e. the online community they are interacting with as well as – in the case of public forums, at least – the potentially unlimited anonymous audience of people reading their postings without being forum members or participating in the discussion themselves (the ‘contractual party’, so to speak). Thus, speakers may use negative self-identifiers to explicitly disalign with particular groups and implicitly align with others, thereby managing their face in front of their peers by fending off particular interpretations of their utterances. If speakers, across online forum communities, stylise their utterances to position themselves in relation to and perform particular identities to serve particular interactional functions and, thus, achieve a sense of belonging to and being accepted by a group, this could indicate that they have particular assumptions about what is appropriate linguistic behaviour in the online context within they are interacting. This means that the use of negative self-identifiers can be interpreted with a view to underlying conceptualisations structuring meaning-making in discourse (cf. van Dijk’s (1997) account of cognitive context models as expectations about social situations organising meaning making in discourse (cf. section 3.2.1) or Keane’s (2018) concept of semiotic ideologies as assumptions about the potential pragmatic effects of employing particular semiotic resources in particular ways).

4.4. Summary

In this chapter, I have contextualised the present study of negative self-identifiers by defining and discussing issues around the notion of identity and explaining how negative self-identifiers, as assertions about speakers’ ‘non-identity’, can be examined across texts to learn about conceptual strategies underlying forum users’ self-representation and discourse management. I also provided a sketch of conceptualisations of the self that have been discussed by theories about the contemporary social world. I particularly highlighted conceptual tensions between individualist ‘differentiation’ from others and a sense of belonging to disembedded, potentially superdiverse communities created in the digital realm and discussed struggles around the issue of trust, marked by potentially conflicting notions of valid bases for credibility. Reviewing literature on online communication, I explained why forums are interesting sites for studying how people perform particular aspects of their identity, orienting to (their perceptions of and expectations about) their (potential) audience on the forum and the collapsed context of the web. The next chapter explains how I compiled, annotated and analysed a corpus of negative self-identifiers in English used on UK web forums.

5. The empirical study: data and method

This chapter presents the data for this study and the theoretical and methodological principles underlying data selection and sampling, annotation and analysis. After introducing these principles in section 5.1, I explain according to which initial considerations variants of negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP” were selected as the structure targeted in this analysis, on what grounds I decided to compile a derived corpus of instances of this structure taken from UK web forums, and how I went about the task of creating this dataset (section 5.2). I then introduce the formal-functional framework providing the conceptual basis for studying negative self-identifiers in their co-texts. This framework puts into practice the theoretical considerations about interaction between linguistic form and its co-text of usage as the observable part of the communicative situation that can be empirically studied by corpus linguistic methods (section 5.3). Finally, in section 5.4, this formal-functional framework is translated into an annotation scheme that allows for qualitative and quantitative study of the relations between forms and meaning across texts.

5.1. Theoretical and methodological principles

My study is concerned with the meanings created by language users’ lexicogrammatical choices in authentic discourse contexts and therefore relies on principled analysis of authentic data. I compiled a corpus of 936 negative self-identifiers, conceived of as samples of observable material products (traces) of past social and cognitive communicative events (processes). Based on the assumption that functional patterns point to patterns of conceptualising the world underlying language in use in a particular links between (semantically and formally defined classes of) negative self-identifiers and co-texts. This means that my study has an interest in “what is usual and typical” rather than in the unique, assuming that “frequency in the corpus is observable evidence of probability in the system” (Stubbs 2007: 130). The “system” here is to be understood as the socio-pragmatic system of using negative self-identifiers rather than the language system in general.

The approach to quantification taken in this study is descriptive, which means that frequencies and relations between frequencies of particular linguistic elements occurring in the corpus are counted, providing percentages and rankings. Inferential quantitative methods are not used in this study, although they have proven relevant for (critical) corpus-based discourse analysis.²⁴ Quantification proceeds in stages of qualitative differentiation among linguistic elements pertaining to a particular formally defined paradigm and quantification, i.e. counting the frequencies of items assigned to particular categories and comparing those categories. Of course, there is constant alternation between these stages of analysis, as quantification leads to the identification of salient categories of linguistic elements, which can then be further qualitatively differentiated (Marko 2015a: 205).

Like all linguistic research with an interest in social research questions, the research conducted here is staged, involving the stage of contextualisation, i.e. a discussion of the social or societal relevance of a particular discourse phenomenon to be researched, and the stage of operationalisation, where the social research interests are translated into linguistically researchable questions and the analysis is carried out. As already mentioned when discussing CDA in section 3.3, this project is conceptualised

²⁴ Inferential quantitative methods explicate causal and linear relationships between two or more variables and calculate the probability that these relationships can be extrapolated from the examined sample (i.e. the corpus) to the whole population. They can, for example, be useful to analyse collocations by determining “the above-chance frequent co-occurrence of two words within a pre-determined span” (Baker et al. 2008: 278).

as an iterative, hermeneutic process in which meanings are both understood and produced: “[T]he meaning of one part can only be understood in the context of the whole, but this in turn is only accessible from its component parts” (Titscher et al. 2000: 240). Therefore, in the tradition of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), “data collection is not a phase that must be finished before the analysis starts but might be a permanently ongoing procedure” (Meyer 2001: 18).

Regarding the question of quality control, with a phenomenon as fuzzy as the relation between linguistic forms and meanings it is not possible to apply the exact same criteria that would be used in other disciplines. Studying the role of language in social processes to some extent relies on the researcher’s interpretations – e.g., creating a conceptual profile of a particular discourse involves categorisation of linguistic elements by the researcher, whose ways of meaning-making necessarily influence the categorisation process. Thus, as Meyer (2001: 29) explains, “the classical concepts of validity and reliability cannot be applied without modification”. According to Seale (2007: 377), “many qualitative researchers have wanted to dismiss these as merely ‘positivist’ concerns”, which is why they cite other concepts better suited to ensure sound qualitative research, viz. the completeness of descriptions, the saturation of categories, the authenticity of the researcher, the consistency of categorisation, the credibility of the study’s findings in the sense that the researcher’s interpretations can reasonably be related to reality, and plausibility of the study’s findings in the light of scientifically accepted theories.

To ensure credibility and plausibility of the findings of the analysis, the categorisation of the data was principled, i.e. not merely relying on interpretation of meanings, but on formal and semantic aspects theorised before data analysis. Based on the principle of hermeneutic research, items of data were not just assigned to a set of categories established before analysis, but the quality of categories was iteratively tested in the process of analysing more data, potentially leading to modification of the criteria for category inclusion. What is more, the formally defined linguistic paradigms selected for analysis were exhaustively examined and vertical categorisation with the goal of quantification was always supplemented by qualitative, horizontal analysis of representatives of the identified categories.

In terms of triangulation, i.e. approaching the same research question by using multiple datasets, different investigators, theories or methods (Denzin 1970/2017), no comparative triangulation of the findings of this study was conducted. An exception is represented by the findings of the conceptual profiling presented in Chapter 7, which were compared with data from the Spoken BNC2014. To limit the bias of one researcher investigating a phenomenon from only one perspective or with just one method or dataset (Baker & Levon 2015: 223), this study examines several linguistic paradigms (from identifying noun phrases to entire sentences and larger stretches of text preceding negative self-identifiers) both qualitatively and quantitatively, drawing on a variety of theoretical concepts (outlined in chapter 3). This means that the findings of this study are not based on only one single perspective, since the various parts of the study produce a more complete picture. Another measure I took to triangulate some of my findings was to employ the semantic tagger Wmatrix 4.0 (Rayson 2008) to automatically perform semantic analyses of my data, thus supplementing my interpretation as a single human researcher by that of an algorithm. The online survey conducted prior to corpus collection described in section 2.4.1 also served to look at negative self-identification from more than just one perspective in the initial stages of the project.

5.2. Data selection and collection

5.2.1. Creating a corpus from online forums

This section sets out how I selected a source of data with which to analyse the use of my focus structure. I have already discussed in Chapter 2 on the basis of which theoretical linguistic considerations it was decided to focus on variants of the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP” in this study and presented the pilot survey which, by providing insights into how speakers use language for (negative) self-identification, supported this decision. As argued in section 4.3, web forums represent ideal data sites to study how people use negative self-identifiers when informally discussing topics of shared interest for theoretical and practical reasons. In the following, I first explain why I decided to create a corpus rather than use an existing one. Then, I describe according to which principles and precisely how I compiled this corpus, comprising instances of variants of the formally defined linguistic structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP” in their proximate linguistic context as used in web forum discussions.

The decision to compile a corpus myself was taken after scrutinising existing corpora of CMC regarding their suitability for the research goals pursued here. The advantages of using an existing corpus are that the collection of texts has already been done, that ethical questions have already been addressed and that larger corpora, habitually designed as part of bigger projects within linguistics, are usually controlled for contextual features (e.g. year and place of publication of text samples, gender of speakers etc.) and often annotated grammatically and/or semantically. The corpora considered as candidates for this project in the initial stages of this research were the ukWac corpus (a 2-billion-word corpus constructed from the Web, limited to the .uk domain and using medium-frequency words from the BNC as seeds), the WaCkypedia corpus (an 800-million-token corpus of Wikipedia text), the Westbury Lab Usenet Corpus (a 7-billion-word corpus taken of English Usenet postings), the Westbury Lab Wikipedia Corpus (containing just under 1 billion words from Wikipedia) and the Reddit Comments Corpus (made up of 1.1 billion comments on Reddit collected between 2007 and 2011).

However, none of these corpora proved preferable to a self-compiled corpus of negative self-identifiers in their context: the ukWac corpus, while being POS-tagged and lemmatised, is made up of general web language and thus just as unspecific regarding the type of web discourse as the Internet as a whole. While POS-tagging and lemmatisation are generally useful for conducting corpus-based research with concordancing software, they are of no particular relevance for the present research. To answer my research questions, I mainly focused on units above word level (e.g. sentences and phrases preceding negative self-identifiers) or even above sentence-level and thus needed to segment the corpus myself in specific ways. Also, due to the informality of the data examined here, the probability of faulty categorisation by a tagger was considered too high. The WaCkypedia corpus was ruled out because Wikipedia entries are not normally interactive and spontaneous discourse, but monologic, planned text with the purpose of providing factual information – the same applies to the Westbury Lab Wikipedia corpus. While the Westbury Lab Usenet Corpus would have been potentially suitable because it consists of postings, I found that searching 7 billion words of Usenet postings for occurrences of the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” constitutes no advantage in comparison to using customised Google searches to detect the structure in web forums, especially given the fact that the importance of Usenet has diminished with respect to Internet forums today. Finally, the Reddit Comments corpus, while consisting of comments and thus theoretically constituting the text type of interest because of its interactive character, is extremely large, which means that once again, searching it for instances of negative identification would not have brought any advantages in comparison to

searching the web as a whole. To conclude on this question, a large representative corpus turned out to have no comparative advantage to the web as a primary data pool. On the contrary, using the Internet as a primary data source proved preferable for my study, since it allowed searches specifically for instances of the target structure which are unlikely to occur sufficiently often even in large existing corpora. Furthermore, customised web searches make it possible to specify the text type without the analytical noise (e.g. superfluous markup) that can occur with large, annotated corpora.

Creating a secondary corpus from the Internet as a primary data source has the disadvantage of not being controlled for a specific time frame. This does not mean that it is not controllable for this feature – it would, of course, theoretically be possible to include only postings from within a specific time frame, but this would be extremely time-consuming and bear the risk of not finding enough instances for particular variants. At the same time, it has the advantage that the chance of finding ‘fresh’ data (as opposed to the comparatively dated existing CMC corpora) is higher, and arguably, to address social research questions about negative self-identification in a contemporary social context, it is important to have recent data. The opportunity to include texts from a wide range of different forums in a self-compiled, web-derived corpus (as opposed to just one site of CMC usually included in extant corpora) is also considered an advantage, because it allows identifying functional patterns irrespective of topic, which means that the data is more suitable to examine what the study sets out to examine: the structure across thematically specified contexts rather than the structure within one particular thematically specified context.

In terms of accessing the textual resources, there is a choice between using conventional search engines such as Google and those such as WebCorp, that are designed specifically for linguistic research. For this study, customised Google searches were used, because, as Lew (2009: 297) argues, and as exploratory searches with WebCorp have confirmed, it seems that currently, linguistic search engines “do not offer dramatic improvements over the basic search engine functionality, but they do have one significant disadvantage: inferior speed”. What is more, it is possible to limit Google searches to websites with certain abbreviations in their URLs, which allowed me to automatically control the results of my search for two contextual features, namely the kind of website (forums, marked as such by having the word *forum* or *thread* in their web address) and the website’s geographical location (UK websites, indicated as *.uk* in the URL).

5.2.2. Principles and methods of data collection

This section explains the criteria according to which the corpus used for this study was compiled, adhering to qualitative and ethical standards. It also describes how I went about collecting formal variants of negative self-identifiers as used on web forums.

As King (2009: 299) explains, “the usefulness of any given corpus, whether ‘general-use’ or ‘project-based’, ‘raw’ or ‘annotated’ (Beißwenger & Storrer 2008: online), hinges upon sound corpus construction”. Lew (2009: 290) discusses the “soundness” of corpora with regard to the following aspects: size of the resources (i.e., how big is the corpus in terms of word tokens), linguistic representativeness (i.e. of a specified population), balancing (i.e. avoiding over- or under-representation of particular text types in the corpus) and noisiness (i.e. the potential problem of authentic language use containing grammar and spelling mistakes etc.), functionality and access mechanism (i.e., how can the data be accessed and searched).

But before even starting to collect a corpus of authentic language data, a key question that needs to be addressed is that of ethics (Coffin, Lillis & O’Halloran 2010, Page et al. 2014). To ensure the ethical soundness of my study, I sought ethical approval by Lancaster University’s FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee before embarking on corpus collection and continuously adhered to the University’s Code of Ethics (Lancaster University 2009). In accordance with the guidelines set out in this code, for this study only text available on publicly accessible forums – as opposed to forums which require users to sign up to read others’ postings – was retrieved. An advantage of forum data in terms of anonymity is that most users employ web aliases, i.e. usernames not corresponding to their real names, which means that it is not possible to trace their offline identities even when not anonymising the data. Of course, it should be added, people may have stable online identities across several platforms. Thus, to ensure full anonymity of the persons whose language is analysed in this study, I additionally eliminated usernames, using tags to mark different speakers in the corpus. The quantitative orientation of this study, marked by an interest in the typical and common rather than foregrounding the individual and unique, is another advantage in terms of research ethics, as this focus implies that individual persons’ stories and personal details are not regarded as relevant in this study in the first place.

Corpora are “generally assembled with particular purposes in mind and are often assembled to be (informally speaking) *representative* of some language or text type” (Leech 1992: 116). The structure my study seeks to explore, and thus needs to represent, is defined grammatically (the starting point of my analysis being formally defined as “I + copula + not + indefinite NP” and its variants) and contextually (what is examined are instances of the structure used in online forum discussions). As I have already explained, this means that inclusion in my corpus depends on the occurrence of the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP”: what the corpus should represent is an adequate sample of instances of usage of the structure of interest rather than a sample of discourse on a particular topic or by a particular social group. Consequently, data collection for this study was carried out bottom-up and inclusively, meaning that there were no initial constraints regarding the topics of the forums and the demographic characteristics of the language users whose discourse I am investigating.

To avoid skewing the corpus towards a particular type of forum, sampling was systematically randomised: depending on the overall number of hits for the respective formally defined Google searches, I collected the same number of instances per page. For instance, if a search yielded 50 pages of results, I selected two negative self-identifiers per page to arrive at the target sample of 100 occurrences. In cases where the searched variant occurred fewer than 100 times in total, all instances were included in the corpus. The type of forum from which each negative self-identifier was taken was documented and included in the corpus markup to make the composition as transparent as possible (see table 5.1 below for an overview).

The following provides an overview of the criteria according to which particular formal variants of negative self-identifiers, occurring in particular co-texts on particular websites, were included in the corpus created for this study.

- Negative self-identifiers occurring in forums or threads in forums

As mentioned, I limited Google search results to include just language used in forums and threads in forums or message boards by adding the respective specifications “inurl: thread” and “inurl: forum” to any search query. Not included, however, were negative self-identifiers in thread titles/headlines. The reason for this is that while, of course, cases such *I’m not an avocado fan* as thread title are also

instances of negative identification, headlines are separate textual segments and thus less embedded in the actual verbal interaction I am interested in.

- Negative self-identifiers in UK forums

As I explained earlier, to control the results of my search at least for one more contextual feature, the search was limited to forums that have .uk in their web address.

- Negative self-identifiers with certain formal characteristics

Based on the formal theorisation of negatives and the results of the written DCT presented in Chapter 2, it was decided to collect the following formal variants of negative self-identifiers. As briefly discussed in section 3.1, I decided to include present simple tense and present perfect tense negative self-identifiers, and no variants in other tenses, because negative self-identifiers can only be used to serve the functions I am interested in – i.e. negating identification with a particular category at or up to the moment of speaking, either assertively or as discourse marker – in these two tenses (e.g., *I wasn't a feminist in 2001* apparently does not count as a negative self-identifier, just like *I declared the session closed* does not function as declarative speech act). Of course, it would also be interesting to study variants with auxiliary verbs, e.g. constructions with 'will' used by speakers to refer to their future selves (e.g. *I will never be a quitter*). This, however, would mean a change in focus, and is therefore not considered within the scope of this study. Instances of the structure "I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP" included in the corpus vary regarding the following formal aspects:

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

Not included in the corpus were negative self-identifiers in object/subject clauses with modality- or polarity-affecting matrix clauses with a different subject. Obviously, quoting directly or indirectly what someone else has said about you is not the same as performing negative identification yourself. Therefore, cases where a negative self-identifier is contained in a subject or object clause whose polarity and modality are affected by a matrix clause with a different subject, i.e. direct quotations (e.g. in *He said "I'm no liar"*) and indirect quotations (*She can't argue that I am not an expert*), are not included in the corpus.

Regarding the question of how many instances per variant were included in the corpus, I decided on an upper limit of 100 instances per variant, including either a maximum of 100 instances with very frequent variants or all occurrences with comparatively rare variants.²⁵ This, I am aware, means that my corpus does not reflect actual proportions of the respective variants' frequencies, as relatively infrequent variants are overrepresented. However, given that some variants – like negative self-

²⁵ In the course of my research, a few instances were deleted as they turned out to be false positives, and a few extra negative self-identifiers were identified in the data, which is why the size of the respective data groups slightly changed and the upper limit of 100 is exceeded in some cases.

identifiers modified by adverbs, e.g. *I'm not actually a professional guitarist* – occur considerably less often than the prototypical, unmodified variants with the structure *I'm not a maniac* (fewer than 50 of the former, compared to tens of thousands of the latter), sampling proportionately would amount to excluding the rare variants, which would defeat the purpose of considering different formal variants in the first place. As I have argued before, my study does not intend to extrapolate generalisations about functions from the examined discourse sample to the whole population in the strict statistical sense. Instead, it seeks to identify patterns of co-occurrence between variants of a (pre-defined) structure and particular co-texts to draw conclusions about the functions particular variants of negative self-identifiers are used to serve across discourse contexts.

Table 5.1 below presents an overview of the variants included in my corpus, the search specifications employed to find them, as well as the numbers of instances included for each variant. As can be seen, I grouped the negative self-identifiers according to the variables contraction, *no*-negation, tense and indefinite article. Regarding present perfect tense negative self-identifiers, the variant with *never* occurs significantly more often than the unmodified variant (which probably relates to the tense-related meaning difference between the two forms – the unmodified variant *I haven't been a basketball player* almost exclusively occurs together with a prepositional phrase specifying a period of time, e.g. *for two years*). This is why variants with and without *never* were considered as different data groups, with the latter being smaller than the first (and actually containing all instances the search yielded). Similarly, there were very few adverbially modified variants, which is why group 3 is also smaller than the others. Altogether, the corpus consists of 936 negative self-identifiers plus their co-text (see below).

Data group	Variant	URL: forum Site: .uk	URL: thread Site: .uk	Total
1	<i>I'm not a/n</i>	101	100	201
2	<i>I am not a/n</i>	101	101	202
3	Modified variants of 1,2: <i>I'm/am not '...' a/n</i> <i>I'm/am '...' not a/n</i>	35	14	49
4	<i>I'm/I am no</i>	101	99	200
5	Modified variants of 4: <i>I'm '...'</i> <i>no;</i> <i>I am '...' no;</i> <i>I '...' am no</i>	7	4	11
6	<i>I've/ have never been a/n</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>	6	5	11
8	<i>I've/I have not/haven't been a/n</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>	2	0	2
TOTAL				936

Table 5.1: Variants of negative self-identifiers included in the corpus and their frequencies

As mentioned before, sampling in this study was randomised to avoid skewing the corpus, for instance, by favouring a particular type of forum. The result is a corpus that is very varied in terms of discussion topics. Particular types of forums are overrepresented in that they feature as prominent sources of all data groups (see section 6.2 for a thematic profile of forums from which the data was retrieved). The lack of thematic balance of the corpus does not play much of a role in the analysis conducted here, however, as the topics discussed in these forums are by no means limited to the general themes the forums are devoted to. On the contrary, many discussions featured in my corpus have nothing to do with the forum theme at all: thus, car lovers also discuss relationship issues, cancer patients talk about all areas of life from profession to family and food, people posting in nature forums discuss personal issues and drug addicts talk business. Because the language used on forums is very informal, sharing features with spoken dialogue, the corpus contains plenty of spelling mistakes, unfinished sentences and the like. These, however, do not impede analysis²⁶ and are therefore left uncorrected to preserve the authenticity of the examined material. I have, however, corrected in-text references to corpus examples in this thesis, adding the correct spelling in square brackets. Thus, referring to the initially stipulated criterion of representativeness, the corpus not only represents a sample of negative self-identifiers considered sufficiently large and formally varied to identify functional patterns of negative self-identifiers, but also captures the diversity and liveliness of the world of online forums.

Beyond instances of negative self-identifiers *per se*, what else needs to be represented in the corpus to make it fit for analysis? When creating a corpus of web forum discussions based on the occurrence of one formally defined phrase it is necessary to decide on how much co-text and information about the non-co-text to include. How much context is needed, in turn, depends on what is needed to explicate the phenomenon under scrutiny and on how the data to be examined is theorised.

Forum discussions are viewed in this study as an orderly, informal, asynchronous written conversation with forum participants taking turns at posting in a thread on a particular topic. Thus, they share features of spoken language (Androutsopoulos 2006: 425) but also of (short) written narratives (Georgakopoulou 2007, 2013). For this reason, and as I have mentioned before, I am referring to the persons participating in these discussions as speakers, rather than writers. Web discussion forums have a characteristic tree-like structure. The content of a forum – usually devoted to a particular superordinate topic, e.g. headaches – is normally structured into threads with particular titles (defining what Auinger & Fischer 2008 refer to as the “global context” of a discussion), containing posts on various subtopics. Conversations in web forums start with a thread-initiating turn – mostly a question, a request, a statement or an expressive speech act stating the overall communicative intention of the discussion. The communicative goals of thread-initiating turns are mostly interrogative/advice-seeking or expressive/reaction-seeking; in any case, thread-initial postings are interactive, seeking response. Often, the initial goal of a posting is negotiated by the community, i.e., members provide responses they consider appropriate in relation to the initial contribution, thereby to a certain extent co-defining what the initial goal of the posting was. This means that forum discussions set a topic-defined situational frame within which the discussion participants interact, with negative self-identifiers indexing and modifying aspects of the textual and situational contexts in which they are used.

²⁶ Except in a very few cases, where faulty spelling or the use of markedly ‘non-standard’ expressions make it difficult to understand what the speaker meant, which can pose a problem for categorisation (an example is *economist~game theory expert~doctorate*, occurring as compound noun in an indefinite NP in a negative self-identifier).

Depending on where in the conversation the negative self-identifier occurs, different components of the discussion may be relevant for its interpretation. Negative self-identifiers can be used thread-initially, in which case they may refer to the topic of the forum or the thread as the situational discourse context or to the same speaker's post they introduce, or both, as is usually the case. They can also occur turn-medially, interacting with text by the same speaker, or be 'triggered' by and respond to identity claims implied by or explicitly referred to by other discussion participants' contributions. This leaves the following components of the forum discussion relevant for reconstructing the communicative process in which negative self-identifiers play a role and therefore included in the corpus:

- **Thread-initial turn**

In most cases, the first turn of the thread containing the negative self-identifier is included in my corpus because:

- It contains the negative self-identifier.
- It represents the posting which the turn containing the negative self-identifier responds to.
- It is relevant for the discussion during which a negative self-identifier is used by setting the topic.

- **Turns by the speaker using the negative self-identifier, i.e.:**

- **The turn by the same speaker preceding the posting containing the negative self-identifier**

Preceding turns are often relevant for the interpretation of negative self-identifiers, as they can be used to modify, and may themselves be modified, by something previously said by the same speaker. However, not all preceding utterances are relevant – for example, the same speaker might have participated in a longer discussion with different topics being talked about.

- **The posting containing the negative self-identifier**

Negative self-identifiers interact with textual material by the same speaker immediately preceding and following them, so the adjacent co-text must, of course, be included.

- **Turns by other speakers preceding the posting containing a negative self-identifier**

Some negative self-identifiers occur in complex conversations with several participants taking turns, in which case reconstructing the relations between the negative self-identifier and its co-text may require access to a longer exchange.

5.3. Summary

In the first part of this chapter I presented the theoretical and methodological principles underlying this study. I explained that my study is interested in how variants of a predefined linguistic structure are typically used across texts and therefore adopts a descriptive quantitative approach to analysis, which means counting the frequency of occurrence of particular, analytically determined conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers in co-texts with particular meanings. I argued that the research conducted here proceeds in stages and in an iterative fashion, following the principle of hermeneutic research. In terms of quality control, I explained that this research exhaustively investigates different linguistic paradigms both qualitatively and quantitatively based on explicitly defined principles, that

the suitability of the data was assessed prior to corpus compilation and that results were partly complemented by automatically performed data analyses. The second part of this chapter then set out why I worked with a self-compiled rather than with an existing corpus of CMC and presented the principles and qualitative and ethical standards according to which the data for this study was collected and processed. I explained that I compiled the corpus to include a sample of particular formal variants of the target structure from UK web forums or threads in forums, balancing the corpus by including a maximum of 100 instances per formal variant, but not thematically constraining the type of forum serving as data sources and thus allowing a great variety of forums on different topics. I described according to which principles I included particular sequences of the written dialogues on forums deemed necessary for functional interpretation of the structure in focus. The result is a corpus of 936 instances of negative self-identifiers in their co-texts. The next chapter introduces a formal-functional framework for studying the formal and meaning relations of the instances of the structure in the corpus with their contexts of usage. It also explains how, based on this analytical model, the data was annotated.

6. The empirical study: analytical approach and annotation

6.1. A formal-functional framework of negative self-identifiers in use

This chapter presents a formal-functional framework of negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP” in use. This framework provides the conceptual basis for the annotation of the data, to be presented in the next section, and is operationalised by means of qualitative and quantitative analysis of the corpus of negative self-identifiers, to be presented in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

In the following, negative self-identifiers of the type “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” will be considered in terms of their relations with their clause-internal co-text and in terms of their relations with different elements and units of clause-external co-text to provide a conceptual grid for analysing them. The chapter concludes with a model according to which the structure can be systematically approached. While the methods used to analyse the data are schematically explained in this section, more detailed information on the principles according to which the data was analysed are discussed in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, presenting the results of the respective analyses.

6.1.1. Relations with the co-text

As explained in Chapter 3, negative self-identifiers are linguistic structures which obtain their discourse meaning in interaction with their co-text, serving to index various aspects of the ongoing discourse situation (and beyond). As was explained in section 2.4, the meaning of the identifying NP with which speakers contrast themselves is decisive for the function of the structure in use. In addition, analysing negative self-identifiers pragmatically requires accounting for the functional relation between the negative self-identifier and co-textual elements. First of all, though, a definition is necessary of what co-textual elements are considered. Since my study not only seeks to qualitatively describe, but also to quantify relations between negative self-identifiers and their co-texts to identify functional patterns, the co-texts in which the structure appears need to be categorised. The criteria for categorising these co-texts can be based on linguistic forms representing particular grammatical categories (e.g., *it's easy for me to say this* in example 6.1 below is a clause coordinated with the negative self-identifier *I'm not a parent* by the coordinating conjunction *so*). These grammatically defined categories of co-text can be analysed in terms of their textual, ideational and interpersonal functions after being identified in the corpus. For example, I could examine all independent sentences following negative self-identifiers to find how they functionally relate to these instances of the structure. Or, these co-texts could be categorised according to their pragmatic functions (e.g. a sentence or a couple of sentences may serve as advice). In that case, the categorisation criterion is the overall function as interpreted by the researcher, ‘top-down’. This approach contrasts with a ‘bottom-up’ process of analysis, where individual forms are studied to arrive at the functions they potentially jointly fulfil. Both approaches are applied in this study, because negative self-identifiers may interact with (a) their immediately adjacent co-texts, (b) with textual elements in the relatively more distal discourse context serving particular pragmatic functions, or (c) with both of these. Example 6.1 from my corpus illustrates this:

- 6.1. A: *Hi all I am looking to research all options including the self funding of treatment. In my head the perfect treatment for my 5 year old newly diagnosed daughter would be to have a CGM and and a tubeless pump. Has anyone done the research to look into annual costs of either if self funding. If the answer to the above is yes do you have the broken down amounts for both? I'm also looking at the option of part funding as we have the potential option of the animas vibe and dexcom CGM fully funded. I would hope if they stump up*

this amount we could find the rest between the family as a whole. Any help with this would be hugely appreciated

- B: *I would consider a pump the best tool for good control, but I'd consider the Dexcom CGM more of a safety device. **I'm not a parent** so it's easy for me to say this (and I'm on MDI) but if I ever have a kid with diabetes, I'd have them on a CGM as soon as possible.*

In this exchange, B uses the negative self-identifier *I'm not a parent* to react to A's query in which they implicitly identify as a parent by referring to their *newly diagnosed daughter*. The negative self-identifier also post-modifies B's advice, which is formally marked as such by the use of the modal *would*. Thus, together with the metadiscursive statement expressed by the coordinated clause introduced by *so* (*it's easy for me to say this*), it serves to mitigate the potential face threat of advice-giving (by linguistically enacting authority), performed by the coordinated clause introduced by *but* (*if I ever have a kid with diabetes, I'd have them on a CGM as soon as possible*). To account for the functions of this negative self-identifier in this example, both elements pertaining to B's own turn (in different sequential positions and with different syntactic relations with the negative self-identifier) and elements pertaining to the previous turn by A need to be considered. In addition, negative self-identifiers might themselves be modified by, e.g., an adverbial phrase: imagine, for instance, if speaker B above had written *Unfortunately, I'm not a parent*, expressing their stance towards the identity claim negated by the structure of interest. In that case, the function of the negative self-identifier would be slightly different, as it would not merely serve as a sort of hedge. By commenting on the propositional content expressed by *I'm not a parent*, the speaker would index their stance towards this proposition and, thus, an aspect of the situational context – their attitude towards being a parent – which might have significance beyond the interaction considered here. This shows that to fully account for the discourse function of the negative self-identifier in this (made up) example, it would be necessary to consider both the pre-modifying adverb and its impact on the negative self-identifier as well as the impact of the negative self-identifier on the rest of the text.

This is because of certain characteristics negative self-identifiers share with discourse markers: they can serve various textual and non-textual functions, from discourse coherence to interpersonal functions, which might be differently fore- or backgrounded, depending on “topic, social situation and sequentiality” (Aijmer 2013: 31). As multi-indexical structures, they may interact with more than one contextual category at a time, whereby they may be functionally related not only to textual elements in their proximate, but also in their more distal linguistic context, and not only to individual words and phrases, but also with larger units, i.e. sentences or functional moves. For instance, the closest co-textual element in the (invented) example just cited would be *unfortunately*, evaluatively modifying the negative self-identifier so that it works as an actual comment on the speaker's identity. The most distal element considered here would be a component of interactional structure, namely speaker A's turn, containing an implicit identity claim to which the negative self-identifier responds. At the same time, the negative self-identifier also serves politeness functions with respect to the rest of the speaker's advice-giving posting.

This has two methodological implications for corpus-based analysis of negative self-identifiers as a linguistic structure obtaining its discourse function in relation with its co-text: firstly, it means that sufficient horizontal context of negative self-identifiers (Collins 2019: 19, see section 7.1) needs to be considered in the analysis. Secondly, however, since it is not possible to anticipate and search for all possible functions realised by negative self-identifiers as meaning potentials, a selection must be made

as to which formally defined categories of co-text are to be examined for their functional impact, and in what order. Importantly, too, it is not possible – at least with the method used here, viz. a tagged corpus searched with concordancing software – to examine the functional interaction among the structure and more than one formally defined category of co-text. This might not even be necessary, though: according to Pichler (2010: 599), formal-functional “models with fewer domains might be preferable” for “quantitative purposes”.

To identify syntagmatically established functions by vertical methods, i.e. to be able to count them, my study differentiates between formally and functionally defined categories of co-text. These categories are distinguished according to, firstly, their vicinity to and relation with the negative self-identifier (e.g. a clause formally related to the negative self-identifier versus a separate sentence preceding it), and secondly, their status as structural units (i.e. from single phrase through sentence to textual unit). Starting with examining the relations of negative self-identifiers with their most proximate linguistic elements, my analysis gradually ‘zooms out’ to the interaction of the structure with bigger textual units and, thus, to its more global discourse functions. This approach, which starts by analysing micro-lexicogrammatical choices in the co-text of the focal structure drawing on the transitivity framework (Chapter 8), has the advantage of allowing for very systematic and fine-grained analysis of the data. However, at least at this step of the analytical process, differentiating in great detail between linguistic choices means not focusing on the overall communicative effect of utterances interacting with negative self-identifiers. To compensate for this disadvantage, my analyses are complemented by discussions of individual corpus examples in terms of the more global functions of negative self-identifiers in relation to particular co-texts.

Table 6.1 below schematically presents formal-functional categories of co-text which were considered in the analysis, starting with phrases modifying instances of the structure clause-internally and ending with textual units above sentence level that can be considered to interact with negative self-identifiers. The latter cannot be formally pre-defined, but only identified as textual units by means of qualitative analysis, as their functional coherence is established by sequential meaning relations. This is why the highest structural unit of co-text annotated in the corpus is the sentence. The table provides concrete examples from my corpus to show which functional relations these analytical units can have with negative self-identifiers. However, some categories feature in this table for the sake of completion, but do not occur in the examined corpus and thus do not come with examples.

The form of some categories of co-text determines their functional relation with negative self-identifiers (e.g., a negative self-identifier occurring in a coordinated clause introduced by *but* can be assumed to present a contrast to the superordinate clause). However, function in most cases does not relate to a particular form, and functional relations therefore depend on the actual linguistic elements used. For example, *to be fair*, *to be frank* and *(just) to repeat* are (almost) the same in terms of structure but modify the negative self-identifier differently according to their different meanings. Or, a negative self-identifier may modify the interpretation of an act of advice-giving, which may be expressed by a single word or several sentences. Therefore, rather than predetermining the functions of textual units in the context of negative self-identifiers, my analysis only defines (and annotates) structural paradigms, the functions of which are then determined by qualitative analysis. This is why most functions of the elements of co-text listed in the table below are true only for the respective examples and not for the formal contextual category in general.

As can be seen in table 6.1²⁷, depending on whether clause-internal or clause-external elements are considered, the functional relationship can be described by reference to the co-text of the structure (modifying the negative self-identifier) or vice versa, by reference to the negative self-identifier (modifying its clause-external co-text). This has to do with the fact that negative self-identifiers are context-dependent structures – only in the absence of any co-text they can modify, can they be interpreted as propositions in their own right, being modified by their pre- or post-modifiers.

Formal-functional framework of negative self-identifiers in relation to their co-text				
Co-textual category	Category members	Attested corpus example		(Possible) functional relation of contextual category with NI
Phrases pre-or post-modifying NIs	Infinitive clause	<i>To be honest, I've never really been a big eater</i>		E.g. stance towards proposition expressed by NI
	Present participle clause	<i>I'm not a fan of fixed track, having last used sectional track when a teenager.</i>		E.g. causal relation to NI
	Adverbial phrases of range (<i>when it comes to, in terms of, as for...</i>)	<i>With regard to the retinography, I'm no expert</i>		Restriction of truth value of NI to a particular domain
	Sentence adverbials (<i>luckily, obviously...</i>)	<i>Unfortunately, I'm not a Mac guy.</i>		Expressing epistemic or affective stance towards NI
	Adverbial phrases of comparison	<i>Contrary to how it may seem, I'm not a big fan of supplements</i>		Using NI to draw parallels/highlight differences felt to be present in the discourse or the social situation
	Adverbial phrases of time	<i>Throughout my career, I have not been a teacher</i>		Specifying temporal duration of validity of NI
	Adverbs of sequence/discourse management	<i>Finally, I'm no doctor</i> <i>As I said before, I'm no engineer</i>		Explicitly positioning NI in discourse context
	Metadiscursive phrases	<i>Warning: I am not a Windows programmer.</i> <i>I confess that I am no expert on such matters</i>		Providing metadiscursive information about NI
Clauses super- or subordinated to NIs	Concessional clauses	<i>Although I haven't been a good boy I deserve one of those frames</i>	<i>I have not been a big user of this although I have "played" with it a few times</i>	Main or subordinate clause presents a contrast to NI
	Clauses of reason and result	<i>I'm not entirely sure why I refer to cash machines as 'cashpoints', as I've never been an LTSB customer</i>	<i>I've never been a fan of Panaracer tyres because of their ultra thin sidewalls</i>	Main or subordinate clause causally related to NI

²⁷ In this table and subsequent tables and figures, “negative self-identifier” is abbreviated as “NI”.

	Relative clauses	<i>My cousin did a poem on the invite, which I'm not a huge fan of</i>		NI positions speaker towards someone/something in main clause
Independent sentences preceding or following NIs (coordinated or not)	Causal connection, optionally formally marked by <i>because, as</i>	<i>And I really need to lose the Saxo mirrors, [because] I'm not a fan</i>		NI provides reason
	Additive connection	<i>I'm not so sure early blood tests is a good thing as I live a good 2 hours away and I'm not a morning person</i>		NI intensifies rest of utterance
	Contrastive relation, formally marked by <i>however, but, though</i>	<i>i am new to the forum, however I am not a newly diagnosed diabetic</i>		NI presents contrast
	Utterance by different speaker (statement, question, exclamation) containing an explicit, presupposed or implicit identity claim	A. <i>And the sheep can now sleep peacefully knowing the Aberdonian has returned home</i>	B. <i>I'm actually not an Aberdonian</i>	Rejection of explicit or implicit identity claim contained in statement
		A. <i>Any of the legal experts know if he's likely to be facing a custodial sentence?</i>	B. <i>I'm not a legal expert</i>	Assertive use to answer question (adhering to or flouting Gricean Maxims)
		A. <i>Good photo that! You'd almost think it was another species!</i>	B. <i>I'm not a good photographer</i>	Rejection of explicit or implicit identity claim contained in expressive
Textual units at or above sentence level preceding or following NIs	E.g. seeking help with decision-making	<i>Firstly, let me apologise if this sort of question is a forum faux pas, but I'd like some advice and opinions over a couple of bike choices. Any help would be appreciated. I'm looking to get back in to cycling, for commuting (10 miles round trip 4 days a week) and fitness. I'll be mainly on tarmac, but would also like the option to go on light trails, as I live by the lovely Formby Pine Woods.</i> <i>I've never been a fan of drop bars and was therefore looking for a hybrid bike, with straight bars</i>		Preference specification

Table 6.1: A formal-functional framework of NIs in relation to their co-text

Negative self-identifiers, as mentioned earlier, usually interact with more than one element of the co-text, fulfilling several discourse functions in the situational context. Like discourse markers, they can “signal feedback to a preceding utterance and point forwards to the following turn” (Aijmer 2013: 30). In this study, because of its quantitative orientation, only those categories of formally and functionally defined co-text are selected for qualitative functional analysis that turn out to occur frequently in the data. For example, the study might reveal that the category “Negative self-identifier provides reason” from the table above features particularly often in the corpus. According to the methodological approach I adopt, this would result in members of that category – i.e. sentences formally marked as

consequences of negative self-identifiers – being examined by means of qualitative, functional analysis. The aim of this approach is to find high-frequency relations of form and function. Therefore, the focus of the analysis is on a relatively small set of particular, frequently occurring categories of negative self-identifiers and types of co-texts, and not all instances of the structure in the corpus are examined in detail (this, of course, might still be undertaken in future projects with different research objectives).

As indicated earlier, because discourse components above sentence level have no fixed form, content or function, it is impossible to create a formal-functional framework for their analysis. It is, however, possible to stipulate a set of characteristics prior to analysis based on which a group of individual sentences can be claimed to constitute a functional whole, i.e. a (short) text fulfilling a particular communicative purpose which a negative self-identifier can be used to modify. As argued in section 3.2.4, the notion of move as a macrostructural component of a text type (or genre) is useful to differentiate between such functional – rather than only grammatical – categories of co-text. Accordingly, in my study textual passages are considered functional discourse units if they have an identifiable macro theme or topic, a discernible communicative purpose and textual cohesion. Example 6.2 from my corpus below serves as an example. In this exchange, speaker B uses the negative self-identifier turn-finally to modify the entire piece of advice presented by the preceding text:

6.2. A: *I have a budgie that started to pant/squeak. It sits crumpled up with it's back feathers puffed up and squeaks. It seems to be getting louder. It's been doing this for the last 1½ days. The squeaking is very quick. It still eats and drinks.*

The bird is in a cage with two others, who are not showing any signs of the same.

I've read that a pure seed diet will give lack of iodine and this can lead to respiratory problems. They are in our kitchen (large kitchen), maybe that's the cause too. Does anyone have any suggestions. I will try and take it to the vet tomorrow.

I live in the south of sweden and there seems to be a definat lack of avian vets.

B: *hello, Bart my budgie had the exact same problem over a week ago. She is on the mend now but I gave her iodine in her water, treated her with ivermectin to rule out mites and also when I cover her up at night I put a cup of hot camomile tea outside of her cage under her blanket so that she could breathe in the vapours. It appears that camomile relaxes the airways a bit as it is a natural anti inflammatory and reduces swelling. I did the camomile tea for 2 nights and she greatly improved after this. I would move your bird away from any open windows/draughts and any smelly things at all like deodrants etc. I have started making my husband spray all his smellies in the bathroom away from Bart!*

Hope this helps a bit - I'm not an expert but there are many people on here who have been very helpful to me and I'd like to share my experiences after Bart has been unwell..

Speaker B's posting is a response to A's request for advice on a health problem of their budgie. The advice B provides is framed as a story reporting on a similar problem with their budgie Bart and relating how the speaker successfully treated it. After having told Bart's story, the speaker concludes their posting with an expressive, metadiscursively commenting on their text (*Hope this helps a bit*), which is immediately followed by a negative self-identifier disclaiming expertise. The negative self-identifier thus epistemically mitigates the entire piece of advice presented in the form of a story. Referring to the features mentioned above, this 'advice story' can be analysed as follows:

- **LEVEL OF IDEATIONAL METAFUNCTION: An identifiable macro theme/topic** (e.g. the budgie’s illness and its treatment)
 - Semantic relations between lexemes allowing identification of a unifying topic
E.g. in the example above: conceptual domains “problem” (*problem, on the mend, improve*), “body” (*breathe, airways, swelling*), “treatment” (*iodine, ivermectin, chamomile tea, anti-inflammatory*)
- **LEVEL OF INTERPERSONAL METAFUNCTION: A discernible communicative purpose**, or “pragmatic aboutness” (Pipalovà 2008) reflected in the relationship between writer/reader constructed in the text (e.g. sharing experience with budgie treatment)
 - Sentence types: mainly declarative, no directives or interrogatives
→ Providing information
 - Personalisation: focus on writer or reader
E.g.: *I gave, I did, it appears, I have started, I would* → focus on writer
 - Standing: representation of author as possessing authority/expertise on the subject
 - Reference to external sources: *other people who have been helpful to me*
 - Social distance: low (informal expressions used, e.g. *smellies*)
→ Low demonstration of authority in the example
 - Stance: epistemic and deontic modality
 - Epistemic modality: *it appears that*; otherwise strong
 - Deontic modality: low (*I would*, otherwise no obligation expressed)
- **LEVEL OF TEXTUAL METAFUNCTION: Textual cohesion**
 - Organisation into macro-, hyper- and clause themes; logical thematic progression
E.g.: Introduction of budgie with same problem (*Bart my budgie...*), which is now solved (*She is on the mend...*), description of what was done to solve problem (*I gave her, I did...*), final recommendation (*I would...*)
 - Lexical cohesion: repetition, meaning relations between lexemes used
E.g.: *my budgie – she – her cage; gave her, treated her, covered her*
 - Grammatical cohesion: linking adverbials, tense consistency
E.g.: consistent use of past tense marking the passage as “story”

To sum up, a functional discourse unit is conceived of here as a thematic, cohesive whole with a clear communicative function (e.g. relating a story, to give advice). Another characteristic of such discourse units is that they can normally be metadiscursively labelled as such. For example, in the expressive *Hope this helps a bit* in example 6.2 above, *this* refers to the entire discourse unit. Another example from the corpus which illustrates this point are phrases like *Just to give you some background info*, followed by a longer textual passage, which is then commented on using a negative self-identifier. The extent to which reference of negative self-identifiers to discourse segments above the sentence level plays a role for their function (and also what kinds of functional units interacting with negative self-identifiers can be found in the corpus used for this study (as introduced in detail in section 5.2)) will be determined in the analysis (Chapters 6 and 7).

6.1.2. Analytical model

To conclude, in this section I have discussed how the relationship between negative self-identifiers and their clause-internal and clause-external co-texts can be conceptualised. I have defined categories of the co-text of the structure that are relevant for studying its functions across texts, distinguishing co-texts based on formal/structural and functional aspects. The following model schematically represents the approach to studying negative self-identifiers and reiterates Research Questions 1 and 2 guiding the analysis. Research Question 3, about the socio-political significance of the results, plays a role at

all stages of the analysis and is therefore not represented below as being related to one particular analysis.

Linguistic paradigms analysed	Research Questions	Methods
Nouns and their pre- and post-modifiers in identifying NPs	1 A. What are the nouns and noun phrases with which people posting to web forums negatively identify?	Conceptual profiling
	1 B. To which conceptual categories can these nouns and noun phrases be assigned, and how prominently – in terms of frequency and lexical variation – are the identified categories represented in the corpus?	
Words and phrases pre- and postmodifying NIs Forms linking NIs to their clause-external co-text	2 A. What are the formal-functional relations of negative self-identifiers in my corpus and their clause-internal and clause-external co-texts?	Qualitative and quantitative functional analyses of formally defined categories (viz. parts of speech clause-internally modifying NIs and formally and functionally relating NIs to their clause-external co-text)
Clauses and sentences formally related to negative self-identifiers Sentences not formally related to NIs (potentially part of higher-order functional units)	2 B. What are the meanings and functions of co-texts with certain formal links to the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP”, and how frequently are they represented in the corpus?	Qualitative (transitivity) analysis of particular co-texts → quantification Qualitative functional analysis of sentences constituting particular process-participant configurations → quantification
	2 C. Do co-texts with particular meanings and functions occur together with particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers in patterned ways?	Cross-categorisation of functional categories of co-text with conceptual categories of NIs

Table 6.2: Linguistic paradigms analysed and methods applied to answer RQs 1 and 2

6.2. Corpus annotation

To quantitatively analyse relations between (particular conceptual categories of) negative self-identifiers and (particular types of) co-text, it is helpful to annotate the corpus for particular textual and contextual aspects, so that they can be searched for with concordancing software. In this section, I describe how, based on the formal-functional framework just presented, I defined categories that can be marked in the text and thus allow me to qualitatively describe and quantify relations between form and function.

6.2.1. Metatextual annotation

To learn about the thematic orientation of the forums from which negative self-identifiers in their co-texts were retrieved, I grouped the forum discussions into thematic categories and annotated them for overall topic. Thematically annotating instances of negative self-identifiers included in the corpus makes it possible to create a profile of discourse themes featured in my data. Categorisation was done by means of a bottom-up process, based, in principle, on the methodological characteristics of Grounded Theory (Hallberg 2006: 143), according to which “every category must earn its way into the analysis”. I went through the data iteratively, adding information about the topics of the various forums, until I had identified a set of 16 categories which I considered specific enough to account for relevant differences between the forums and broad enough to allow for quantification. These categories should, however, be taken with a grain of salt. While internally, some categories are

relatively or even entirely homogenous, including only negative self-identifiers taken from one particular forum or type of forum, others are more heterogeneous, subsuming a variety of forums sharing a particular thematic focus under one umbrella category. The reason for this is that forums – more than lexical items pertaining to a particular discourse – are often difficult to reduce to one particular ‘meaning component’ that could be considered a criterion for category-formation or -inclusion. This is because there are at least three perspectives which could be foregrounded when categorising forms, viz. the subject they deal with (their aboutness), the function they fulfil (their genre), and the audience they are intended for (whereby recipients can share various characteristics, e.g. a health condition or profession, things they possess, games they play etc.). To provide some examples of the large variety of forums for different audiences, with different purposes, and on different topics, *www.theiet.org* is website for the engineering and technology community and the forum can thus be considered a professional one, *bmwenthusiasts.co.uk* labels itself as a forum for people enthusiastic about a car brand, the forum *www.thestalkingdirectory.co.uk* is an online community for people interested in deer stalking and the purpose of *ancestry.co.uk* is to help users find their ancestors.

While topic, audience and genre may be used as classification criteria, there are many forums for which it is difficult to single out one overarching topic addressed or ones that, despite being officially devoted to one particular topic, feature a wide variety of threads on different subjects. Whereas some forum categories are easily definable and thus serve as prototypical orientation points in the thematic framework (e.g. health forums or professional forums), others appear to fall somewhere in between, thus constituting categories in their own right: for example, there are several instances of negative self-identifiers taken from music forums, which could probably be simultaneously considered to pertain to the categories of entertainment (if the listening aspect is foregrounded), professional (if musicians as main audience and their technical skill are foregrounded) or as product-related (if the focus of the forum is on music equipment) – and exploring forums such as the one provided by *www.gramophone.co.uk* reveals that it is often a mixture of all three aspects.

It might be interesting to analyse the forums from which the data was taken to such an extent that it is possible to detect possible relations between the appearance of the structure and various, pre-defined and measurable (in the sense of clearly present or clearly absent) characteristics of the forums and their participants. However, this would exceed the scope – and indeed miss the point – of this study, since it would shift the focus away from a linguistic structure used in forums towards a study of forums per se. The categories of forum types I devised represent, as Glaser (2002) puts it, “transcending abstraction, NOT accurate description”, serving to “put the focus on concepts that are fit and relevant” for my research questions. The focus on the functions of negative self-identifiers, rather than one particular, thematically defined discourse context, is one reason why the thematic annotation and categorisation of forums did eventually not play a very important role in the analyses presented here. Another reason is the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to verify whether there is an actual relation between particular forum types and the usage of negative self-identifiers with particular functions: the thematic profile presented below (the full profile with all web addresses is provided in Appendix 1) is interesting as a first impression of the contextual landscape in which negative self-identifiers are used, indicating from which kinds of forums most negative self-identifiers were taken. However, it is questionable whether this means that negative self-identifiers are used particularly often in particular discourse contexts, as it could simply be due to a general overrepresentation of these forum types among UK forums.

Thematic category	Most frequently represented websites	Overall frequency of NIs ²⁸
Health & Illness	http://www.diabetes.co.uk (52), https://drugs-forum.com (38), https://www.parkinsons.org.uk (30), http://www.ocdaction.org.uk (13), https://forum.alzheimers.org.uk (10), https://www.stroke.org.uk (10)	201
Product	http://community.evo.co.uk (11), https://www.blackstaramps.com (8), https://www.amazon.co.uk (8), https://www.avforums.com (8), http://forums.linn.co.uk (6)	124
Gaming	https://retropie.org.uk (32), https://forums.frontier.co.uk (29)	91
Sports	https://forums.runnersworld.co.uk (37), https://forum.cyclinguk.org (19), http://www.horseandhound.co.uk (4)	88
Professional & Technical	https://community.tes.com (21), http://www.mig-welding.co.uk (4)	83
Nature/Animals/Pets	http://www.nhm.ac.uk (31), http://www.rspb.org.uk (22)	67
Football and other sports clubs (Fans)	http://www.fm-base.co.uk (16), http://www.twtd.co.uk (12),	66
Amazon Sellers	https://sellercentral.amazon.co.uk (46)	46
Relationships & Family	http://www.hitched.co.uk (18), http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk (9), http://www.genesreunited.co.uk (3)	42
IT	https://forums.overclockers.co.uk (6), https://forums.theregister.co.uk (6)	30
Informative/Debate	http://forum.iosh.co.uk (6), http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk (2)	25
Entertainment, Art & Travel	http://theatreboard.co.uk (4), http://www.reddwarf.co.uk (3), https://www.comedy.co.uk (3)	24
Community	http://www.lse.co.uk (4), http://forum.thefishy.co.uk (2)	21
Music	http://bcb-board.co.uk (7), https://www.gramophone.co.uk (3)	19
TOTAL		928

Table 6.3: Thematic profile of forums from which the data was retrieved

As can be seen, the forum category “health” (201 discussions), consisting of various self-help forums, is the most prominent source from which exchanges containing negative self-identifiers were retrieved, with negative self-identifiers from a forum on diabetes being most often represented. Another forum assigned to the domain of health is one on drugs, which might not be considered as strictly health-related by everyone. The reason for including this forum, as well as other forums on potentially problematic behaviours rather than health conditions in the category of health – such as *gamblersanonymous.uk* – is that the discussions on these forums tend to problematise, rather than promote these behaviours, thus casting them as conditions rather than mere practices. The second most frequent category of forums is “products” (124 discussions), including some devoted to discussing features of particular products such as (particular brands of) cars, music, knives and food. 91 discussions containing negative self-identifiers come from forums where people talk about particular computer games or their technical aspects (configurations, installation, software and hardware). Thus, this category of forums – at least regarding the level of technicality of the language used – is similar to the forum category “IT”, to which forums intended for exchanges on particular software or hardware were assigned (30 discussions). Forums from the category “sports”, in particular one on running, are also very prominent sources of negative self-identifiers (88). Overall 83 discussions featuring negative self-identifiers were taken from forums classified as “professional & technical”. This label includes sites intended for particular professional groups (e.g. teachers ([²⁸ The reason why the number of forum discussions given here is lower than the number of negative self-identifiers is that some discussions contain more than one instance of the structure.](http://www.comm-</p>
</div>
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unity.tes.com), welders (www.mig-welding.co.uk) or pharmacists (www.pharmacy-forum.co.uk)), but also general job forums (e.g. www.wikijob.co.uk) and forums dedicated to discussing skilled activities which could, but do not necessarily, constitute professions (e.g. photography, painting, writing) as well as forums dedicated to discussing technicalities of a particular area of expertise usually defined by an object of common interest, e.g. 3D scanning (<https://laserscanningforum.com>) or roads (<http://www.sabre-roads.org.uk>).

The search for negative self-identifiers yielded 67 instances of forum discussions on websites with plants, animals and pets as their subjects, from reptiles and amphibians (<http://www.herpetofauna.co.uk>) over barbel (<https://barbel.co.uk>), a species of fish, to turtles (<http://www.hermann-tortoise.co.uk>), with the Natural History Museum's website (www.nhm.ac.uk) and the website of the Royal Society Protection of birds (www.rspb.org.uk) featuring particularly prominently. 66 negative self-identifiers are taken from forums for fans of a wide variety of local football (and other sports teams) clubs, referring to themselves e.g. as "Bolton nuts" or "Pride of Nottingham". A separate category is constituted by forums provided for sellers working with the Internet retailer Amazon (46 discussions). The category "relationships & family" includes forums on various subjects around human relationships and with different purposes, e.g. an advice-giving forum on what could be called manhood or masculinity (<http://aaronleazy.blogspot.co.uk>), a website aiming to help people find their lost family members (www.genesreunited.co.uk) or forums to discuss marriage issues (thehappymarriedcouple.blogspot.co.uk). 25 discussions containing negative self-identifiers come from forums from the category "informative/debate", subsuming those intended to provide information about various subjects such as taxation or bankruptcy (<http://bankruptcyhelp.org.uk>). 24 discussions were taken from forums on particular films, books and personalities, leisure activities and travel ("entertainment, art & travel"), 21 from forums for locals of particular communities ("community", e.g. www.eastdulwichforum.co.uk). Finally, 19 negative self-identifiers were retrieved from forums for discussing music (e.g. <http://bcb-board.co.uk/>).

In light of the societal trends that appear relevant for a critical discussion of identity and identification discussed in Chapter 4, the fact that it is often relatively hard to conceptually differentiate between professions and sometimes highly skilled leisure activities when considering the ensemble of forums represented here can be seen as potentially reflecting a more general development, namely the increasing fragmentation of knowledge and skill into ever-more-specific fields of expertise. This phenomenon has been referred to as "hyperspecialization" by Millgram (2015: 2), who claims that "specialization is far more highly articulated than at any time in previous human history". The tendency for "knowledge workers" to constantly create and disseminate knowledge, using technology devices such as mobile phones, is blurring the boundaries between professional life and free time, formally and autodidactically acquired skills and so on (McCloskey 2018: 25). This, if we believe contemporary observers, could have important implications for notions of self-identity. According to the German *Zeitmagazin*, "the more specialised work became in society, the more it turned into an identity. One is not a person who bakes, one is a baker" (Prüfer 2019, trans. from German).²⁹

6.2.2. Textual annotation

To be able to analyse the corpus quantitatively using concordancing software, I systematically annotated it for particular parts of speech, conceptual categories of nouns and noun phrases as well

²⁹ "Je mehr sich die Arbeit in der Gesellschaft spezialisierte, desto stärker wurde sie zur Identität. Man ist kein Mensch, der Kuchen backt, man ist ein Bäcker" (Prüfer 2019).

as for certain discourse-pragmatic functions. These features were selected based on the formal-functional framework of negative self-identifiers presented in section 6.1.1.

Corpus annotation is “the practice of adding interpretative linguistic information to a corpus” (Leech 2004: online). Principally, it is possible to distinguish between the following forms of annotation: part of speech annotation, parsing, lexical annotation or lemmatisation, phonetic annotation, semantic annotation, pragmatic annotation, where certain types of speech acts are marked in the data, and discourse annotation, where data is annotated for functional aspects such as whether certain utterances serve politeness or hedging functions (ibid.). The main advantage of annotating a corpus is that it allows computerised data analysis – once a corpus is, for instance, annotated for discourse markers, it is possible to examine all discourse markers in their co-texts simply by searching for the tag used. Annotating data and being explicit about what tags were used to mark which categories also means being transparent about how the data was processed and categorised and should theoretically allow replicating an analysis. As Leech (2014: online) explains, however, researcher agreement on data categorisation and annotation is rare: “linguistics, like most academic disciplines, is sadly lacking in agreement about the categories to be used in such description[s]”. Indeed, corpus annotation – notably if not done automatically but relying on human categorisation – involves data interpretation and decisions about how to categorise data based on qualitative differentiation as well as quantification. According to Leech, “even the use of a single term, such as *verb phrase*, is notoriously a prey to competing theories”. The risk of potential disagreement on data annotation, he argues, is particularly challenging when embarking on projects that differ from previous research in the field. As for the status of corpus annotation in pragmatic research, it has not been very popular so far. According to Archer and Culpeper (2018: 468), for example, “the corpus-based method does not seem to promise much reward for pragmatics research, given its typical focus on form”. Looking back at the past ten years of corpus pragmatic research, they argue that, despite the potential of pragmatic annotation, it has not received much attention even in seminal publications in the field (e.g. Rühlemann & Aijmer 2014). Indeed, there are some problematic aspects about corpus annotation in pragmatics, which are also of relevance in this study and on which I will briefly comment, explaining how I tackled them when annotating this corpus.

First of all, there is the question of how data should be segmented and what information about these segments should be provided. Generally, the more information is included in the annotation, the more analysis has already been done, which means that results can be achieved faster, but also that post-annotation analysis is less flexible. The less form-based and the more context- and interpretation-dependent categorisation and thus annotation, the greater is the potential of annotation constituting a source of dispute (Archer 2012). As Sinclair (2004: 191) puts it, the problem of categorising data into functional units is that it bears the danger of observing corpus data “through the tags”, ignoring aspects not captured by the annotation. Indeed, once the annotation joins together larger discourse units based on functional rather than formal criteria, the joined elements can no longer be viewed in isolation, and other elements perhaps equally or more important for a functional analysis are not considered in the quantitative analysis, which necessarily relies largely on searchable tags. This, incidentally, is also a reason why discourse annotation, which involves much more context-dependent categories and is thus mainly done manually, is relatively rare as opposed to POS-tagging, which can be automatically done with almost full accuracy (but see Culpeper & Archer 2008 for an example of a corpus tagged for discursive features such as particular adjacency pairs). As will be explained in the following, in the present study a problem-oriented annotation scheme is applied. This means that the linguistic context of negative self-identifiers was not annotated exhaustively, but for aspects that

would facilitate analysing the corpus to answer the research questions of this study. The stages of mark-up and analysis were not completely distinct; instead, data analysis and annotation were carried out iteratively, with functional categories and tags being refined and modified as the analysis progressed.

Regarding the structure of interest for this study per se, the only tag I assigned to variants of the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” was one serving as a wildcard that would allow me to find all instances in my corpus at once. Things get more complicated when it comes to the meanings of the indefinite NPs in negative self-identifiers: to be able to search for particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers, which represent the starting point for interpreting them functionally, semantically annotating negative self-identifiers is indispensable – but, of course, this means that an interpretation, albeit a principled one, was imposed on instances of the structure from the beginning.

As for the functional relations between the structure in focus and its co-text, in the initial stages of this project the option of using tags to annotate functional relations, rather than relatively independent ‘segments’, was considered. A tag was devised that indicated functional interaction between the negative self-identifier and its co-text, so that I distinguished between negative self-identifiers according to whether they were used to modify text preceding or following them. This meant bracketing and labelling linguistic elements in the vicinity of negative self-identifiers as being functionally impacted by the structure of interest. It turned out, however, that annotating the data this way was, firstly, not sufficiently transparent, as the question of whether a linguistic element can be considered as ‘functionally modified by a negative self-identifier’ depends on various aspects. Secondly, annotating the data for functional relationships would have meant ignoring that negative self-identifiers, as multi-indexical meaning potentials, cannot (expect for some rare cases) be categorised according to the objects of their indexicality. Or, as Archer and Culpeper (2018: 499) put it, “[p]ragmatic phenomena cannot be reduced to binary choices”. That is why, eventually, tags were only assigned to categories which fulfil a certain discourse function per se – leaving open whether these categories would play a role for characterising the functions of negative self-identifiers or not, and partly using relatively broad annotation categories to be examined in greater detail in the analysis. In this sense, I followed Pichler’s (2010: 600) approach to discourse variation analysis, according to which it is advisable to “categorise tokens in ways that allow maximum flexibility in data quantification”.

To find a middle way between detailed annotation and the possibility of flexible analysis of form–function relationships, I annotated the immediate, turn-initial co-text of negative self-identifiers for syntactic form and formal relations with the structure of interest, marking up sentences preceding and following negative self-identifiers as independent or dependent sentences, differentiating between sentence types (e.g. declarative, directive) and functional relations between the negative self-identifier and its formally related co-text (e.g., does the coordinated sentence stand in a causal or contrastive relationship with the negative self-identifier?). I also qualitatively analysed and formally and functionally annotated clause-internal elements, i.e. phrases and words pre- or postmodifying negative self-identifiers; examples are discourse markers such as *anyway*, *to be honest*, metadiscursive elements (e.g. *note that*) or labels (e.g. *disclaimer*), temporal adjuncts like *recently*, *since December* or *in the last few months*. Certain clause-external segments were also annotated pragmatically, e.g. greetings. The annotation scheme applied here furthermore takes larger functional units (as described in section 6.1.1) into account: considering the dialogic nature of the forum discussions, the data is segmented into turns by different speakers as well as functional units at or above sentence level, such

as advice-giving, experience-relating etc. Table 6.4 below presents an overview of the categories the corpus was annotated for, namely categories of negative self-identifiers based on the conceptual category of the noun or noun phrase in the identifying NP.

Semantic categories of negative self-identifiers				
CHARACTERISTICS <NI C....> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General: G • Temporary/ Mood: EX • Evaluative: EV • Psychological: M • Physiological/ Physical: P • Social (general): s • Metaphorical: ME • Ideological/ Religious: ID • Health/illness: PAT • Geographic origin: GEO 	ROLES <NI R....> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social (current interaction): SI • Membership: MEM • Trade: TR • Virtual identity: VIR • Forum-internal: FOR 	HABITS <NI HA....> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine: R • Food/ Drink: F • Substance: s • Product-related: P • Activities: A 	EXPERTISE [+ expert] <NI EX....> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General: - • Specific: s 	PREFERENCE [+ fan] <NI FAN....> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General: - • Activity: A • Activity-involved: AI • Nature/Animals: AN • Business-related: B • Entertainment: E • Events: EV • Body-related practice: H • Ideological/ Religious: ID • IT-related: IT • Product: P • Person: PE • Visual element/part: v
			EXPERTISE [-expert] <NI PRO....> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General: - • Specific: s • Professions: F • Activities: A 	PREFERENCE [-fan] <NI PR....> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity: A • Product: PR • Food: F • Health-related: H • Particular persons/clubs: PE • Stylistic: ST • Sexual: SEX
			USAGE: <NI USE>	

Table 6.4: Categories of NIs and tags

As can be seen, negative self-identifiers were assigned to different categories according to semantic features. The categories in two cases are differentiated by the presence or absence of a particular lexeme (namely the nouns *expert* and *fan*, which appeared in so many identifying phrases they can be considered to constitute categories in their own right) and in all other cases by shared semantic features. For every superordinate semantic category, there is a shortcut (e.g. *PRO* for items in the category EXPERTISE that do not feature the noun *expert*) to which suffixes representing the various subcategories are attached (e.g. *F* for nouns and noun phrases designating particular professions such as *chemist*).

Table 6.5 below shows how dialogic aspects of the forum discussions and the linguistic and non-linguistic context of negative self-identifiers were categorised and annotated. (Note that the examples are taken from different sections of the corpus in order to provide clear illustrations of the process.) As can be seen from the table, meta-textual information about the communicative situation annotated in my corpus are the data group to which the negative self-identifier belongs, the general subject of the forum, the topic of the thread within which the utterance containing the negative self-identifier

occurs and the speakers whose turns were included in the corpus for analysis. Regarding aspects of the co-text of negative self-identifiers, my corpus was annotated according to the following categories (as specified by the formal-functional framework presented in the previous section):

- **Functional components of the interactional structure**
 - Turns by various speakers
 - Particular speech acts (e.g. greetings) and functional moves (e.g. advice)
- **Grammatical units (with particular functions)**
 - Clauses annotated for
 - pragmatic functions (e.g. directive) and
 - functional relations with other clauses, established by particular forms (e.g. relations of contrast established by the coordinating conjunction *but*)
 - Phrases annotated
 - structurally (e.g. NPs)
 - in terms of their discourse functions (e.g. stance markers)
- **Non-linguistic aspects** (e.g. pictures)
- **Non-authorial text** (e.g. quotes)

Overview of categories annotated in the corpus				
Category type	Tag	Examples		
Meta-information about the communicative situation (document header)				
	<teiHeader> g= Data group t= Forum topic n= Name of forum th= Name of thread url= web address </teiHeader>	<teiHeader> G=2f g= 4t t= parkinsons n= www.parkinsons.org.uk th= Bells Palsy URL: https://www.parkinsons.org.uk/forum/thread/50165 </teiHeader>		
Functional components of the interactional structure				
Turns by other speakers	<S ⁿ >: turn by previous speaker (e.g. S2: second turn by speaker other than the one using NI)	<S2> <i>Diabetes is diabetes. If we are not careful, we will start differentiating on this board. I have already noticed it on a couple of posts. Very sad</i>		
Turns by speaker using NI	<NIS ⁿ >: turn by speaker using NI (e.g. NIS2: second turn by speaker using NI)	<NIS2> <i>I have been trying to find the NHS site that tells you how long it takes to recover from smoking. Whilst <cj:conc> <ni HA> I have never been a <ic HA> smoker </ic HA> <xsup> I can see how hard it is to quit. There is some good stuff on here, or what I as a non-smoker thinks is good</i>		
Functional moves	<smove>: move preceding NI <xsmove>: move following NI	<smove> <i>In short, although the docs may 'think' Gleevec is not contributing to the pains/arthritis my opinion is it's important to either confirm or eliminate specific TKIs as a cause/agitator of your symptoms. If the docs won't prove cause through elimination then it's guesswork IMHO.</smove></i>		
Particular speech acts	<hello>: greeting opening a thread/discussion	<NIS> <i>Hi to all! <hello> <ni GEO> I am not a <ic GEO> EU resident </ic GEO></i>		
	<hella>: greeting responding to posting by other speaker	<NIS> <i>Hello Vron <hella> <ni EXS> I am not an <ic EXS> expert on oil, </ic EXS></i>		
Sentences and clauses (annotated for functions and functional relations with their co-texts)				
Independent sentences preceding or following NIs	<is: preceding NI/<xis: following NI - statement: s - question: qu - expressive: ex - directive: dir	expressive: ex	question: qu	directive: dir
		<i>But thank you anyhow. <is:ex> <ni PROS> I'm not a <ic PROS> programmer.</i>	<i><ni PROS> I am not a <ic PROS> native English speaker. </ic PROS> <xis:qu> Would I be okay to study CIPD <ic PROS> intermediate level?</i>	<i>DOn't worry about holding people up, <is:dir> <ni PROS> I've never been a <ic PROS> fast</i>

				runner </ic PROS>	
Coordinated, super- or subordinate clauses	<p><cj: NI introduced by conjunction</p> <p><xcj: clause following NI introduced by conjunction</p> <p><sub/<sup>: subordinate/ superordinate clause preceding NI</p> <p><u>Suffixes according to meaning relation:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consequence: cq - Concession: conc - Relative: rel - Addition: + - Contrast: con - Cause: cau - Conditional: cond 	<p><xcj: Addition</p> <p>I'm not so sure early blood tests is a good thing as I live a good 2 hours away and <xcj:+> <ni HAR> I'm not a <ic HAR> morning person!</p>	<p><cj: Concession</p> <p>Whilst <cj:conc><ni PRAI> I'm not a <ic PRAI> single traveller </ic PRAI> <xsup> I have cruised 4 times on Voyager with my wife in the last two years.</p>	<p><sub: Concession</p> <p>Although I know my way round them mechanically <sub:conc> <ni PROS> I'm no <ic PROS> authority on paint work and features in relation to age </ic PROS></p>	
		<p><xcj: Cause</p> <p><ni FANP> I am not a <ic FANP> fan of crimps </ic FANP> <xcj:cau> because I think they are usually rubbish and you can only put them to the test by pulling them apart and then you have to re make them and all that malarkey.</p>	<p><cj: Relative</p> <p>It also looks like they stained that ken, which <cj:rel> <ni FANP> I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of </ic FANP></p>	<p><xcj: Consequence</p> <p><ni EXS> I'm not a <ic EXS> programming expert </ic EXS> <xcj:cq> so is there anyway to fix this?</p>	
		Phrases pre- or postmodifying NIs			
		Formal/ structural annotation	- Participial phrase: par/xpar	Agreed re John Fahey; <par> <ni FANP> I'm not a <ic FANP> great fan	
- Noun phrase: <np>	Descent, 2nd Edition - <np> <ni FANP> I have never been a <ic FANP> great fan of the first edition of Descent. </ic FANP>				
- Particles (Discourse markers) ³⁰ : pt/xpt	Now, <pt> <ni HAF> I haven't been a <ic HAF> carb nazi since diagnosis 6 weeks ago, </ic HAF>				
Discourse-functional annotation	- Discourse marker: sequence/discourse-structuring: sq/xsq	First <sq> <ni PROS> I am not a <ic PROS> fire door specialist			
	- Evaluative adverbs: ev/xev	Unfortunately, <ev> <ni USE> I'm not a <ic USE> Mac guy. </ic USE>			
	- Discourse marker: epistemic: ep/xep	No of course <ep> <ni RVIRT> I'm not a <ic RVIRT> pirate. </ic RVIRT>			
	- Discourse marker: stance: st/xst	I'll be honest, <st> <ni FANP> I am not a <ic FANP> massive fan of woody cabs, </ic FANP>			
	- Range specifiers: r/xr	And for my Center console <r> <ni FANV> I've never been a <ic FANV> fan of if being silver... </ic FANV>			
	- Discourse label/ metadiscourse: dl/xdl	DISCLAIMER - <dl> <ni PROS> I am not a <ic PROS> solicitor </ic PROS>			
	- Temporal specifiers: temp/xtemp	since dec <temp> <ni cev> I haven't been a <ic cev> proper mum </ic cev>			

³⁰ This category includes pragmatic/discourse markers (see Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2011 for a discussion of the terms) such as *well*, *see*, and *now*, occurring in clause-initial position, i.e. in the L1 slot in relation to the NI. While these elements may potentially serve a range of pragmatic/discourse functions, they were initially annotated based on formal grounds. This is why they are referred to by using the grammatical term “particles” (ibid.: 227) in this overview.

	- Adverbs of perspective/focus: per/xper	<i>Personally</i> <per> <ni FANP> <i>I've never been a</i> <ic FANP> <i>big fan of cab sims.</i> </ic FANP>
	- Discourse marker: information status: inf	<i>As some of you may know</i> <inf> <ni FANP> <i>I have not always been a</i> <ic FANP> <i>big fan of Phase scanners</i> </ic FANP>
	- Discourse marker: highlighting: hl/xhl	<i>I repeat,</i> <hl> <ni EX> <i>I'm no</i> <ic EX> <i>expert</i> </ic EX> <xcj:+> <i>and usually wrong, just a thought....</i>
	- Comparative adverbials: comp/xcomp	<ni PROS> <i>I am not a</i> <ic PROS> <i>native English speaker</i> </ic PROS> <xcomp> <i>like you</i>
	- Accuracy modulators: acc/xacc	<ni FANV> <i>I'm not a</i> <ic FANV> <i>particular fan of narrow gauge modelling</i> </ic FANV> <xacc> <i>as such</i>
Other categories		
Non-authorial text	<q>/</q>: quoted text	<i>So I just received an email from seller-notification@amazon.com saying: <q> Dear Seller, We have charged your credit card (Visa) for 30.00 in an attempt to settle your balance in Amazon Selling on Amazon payment account. [...] </q></i>
	<a>/: quotation of or link to forum-external text (e.g. newspaper article)	
Non-verbal aspects	<pic>: picture	<pic> <NIS> <i>Hi Max - a lovely shark tooth, you must be very excited.</i>

Table 6.5: Tags for situational and linguistic as well as non-linguistic context of NIs

As with the tags for the conceptual categories of identifying NPs, superordinate grammatical categories are represented by a shortcut (e.g. *p* for phrases) to which suffixes for differentiation of members of the category are attached: In the example *I'm not a legal expert, <cj:con> but from that I would suggest that the answer to your question is 'yes'*, the prefix *cj* indicates that the negative self-identifier is followed by a clause introduced by a conjunction indicating a contrast to the NI, which is indexed by the abbreviation *con*. To differentiate between linguistic elements preceding or following negative self-identifiers, an *x* is used as a prefix to index text occurring after the negative self-identifier. For example, if a negative self-identifier is introduced by a subordinating conjunction of concession, this is marked by the tag <cj:conc>, as in *Although <cj:conc> <ni EXS> I am not a <ic EXS> DICOM expert*, whereas a subordinate concessional clause following a negative self-identifier is marked by <xcj:conc> as in *I'm not a <ic FANPE> big Harry Potter fan </ic FANPE>, <xcj:conc> although I've seen most of the films*. As these examples show, the direction of the tag, i.e., the text it provides information about, is to the left for tags referring to preceding text and to the right for tags referring to subsequent text.

The advantage of annotating the data this way is that this makes it possible to specifically search for both categories of negative self-identifiers as well as for categories of textual and situational context. For instance, using WordSmith (as done in this study), it is possible to search for all statements preceding a negative self-identifier. It might be objected that annotating formal aspects such as this is superfluous, as statements preceding negative self-identifiers could also be found by searching either just for negative self-identifiers, classifying all the material preceding them according to formal and pragmatic criteria, or by searching e.g. for punctuation marks, which are likely to mark the end of a preceding sentence. However, exploratory analyses showed that annotation is, indeed, vital for keeping track of how fuzzy material was categorised: especially in informal web forum discussions, statements, for example, might not always be formally marked as such by a punctuation mark at the end, but for instance by a comma, an emoji or a hyphen. Or, what appears to be a statement because it ends with a punctuation mark might, in fact, be a question. Classification and quantification without annotation therefore bears the risk of having to manually go through all the material several times, each time with different results.

Another advantage of annotating data this way is that it makes the data easily reusable for other research interests: for instance, one quick search for discourse markers used to highlight particular aspects of what is said, such as *note that, I should say*, etc. reveals that these almost exclusively occur together with disclaimers of expertise (see table 6.6 below) – which might suggest that such discourse markers tend to be used when critical information is presented. Of course, their relatively frequent occurrence with negative self-identifiers of expertise could also be a consequence of the general salience of this type of negative self-identifier, but see more in the subsequent chapters). Finally, devising an annotation system such as this, in itself, appears a worthwhile endeavour – after all, despite the simplicity of the system at hand, it served to exhaustively tag 936 instances of language in use and might thus be useful for processing other informal written language data. Precisely what methods were used to examine the annotated corpus of negative self-identifiers will be discussed at the beginning of each of the following chapters presenting the analyses, arranged according to the three research questions addressed in this study.

Concordances of discourse highlighters
<i>Like I said I'm no programmer</i>
<i>As I said, I am no physician</i>
<i>I repeat, I'm no expert</i>
<i>Like i say I'm no expert</i>
<i>again, I am no expert on these type of creatures</i>
<i>Again, I must stress here I'm no expert</i>
<i>But as I say I'm no expert</i>
<i>I should say I am no expert</i>
<i>BUT, like I said, I am no expert on this</i>
<i>again I'm no expert</i>
<i>I said before, I'm no engineer</i>
<i>as I say, I'm no electronics expert</i>
<i>As I was telling someone in another thread, I'm not an expert</i>
<i>I repeat that I am not an expert</i>
<i>Have to say I'm not a fan of variegated palms</i>
<i>I should add that I am not a big fan of head phones</i>
<i>(this to show I am not a hypochondriac)</i>

Table 6.6: Concordances of discourse highlighters (shaded in grey)

6.3. Data analysis

As for analysing the annotated corpus, the data was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively (qualitative analysis was also involved in the process of tagging the corpus, see Chapter 7). For most quantitative analyses carried out for this study, the corpus analysis software used was WordSmith Tools 5.0 (Scott 2008). The function employed for this study is Concord, which serves to search for linguistic forms and tags and view the search term – referred to as node – in key word in context (KWIC) format (Hunston 2002, Collins 2019: 9). This function was used, for example, to automatically retrieve concordance lists of tags marking particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers, the co-texts of which were then analysed in greater detail. (This, strictly speaking, means that my analysis relied on lists of key *tags* – rather than key words – in context.) Table 6.7 shows a list of identifying NPs from the semantic domain of product preferences. In this list, the tag used to mark instances of nouns and noun phrases from this conceptual category in the corpus (as presented in table 6.4) is highlighted in blue; the words in the first slot to the right of the search tag (R1), marked in red, are sorted alphabetically.

linn.co.uk/bb/archive/index.php?thread-30627-5.html Even though I've never been a <ic FANP> B&O fan, I must admit this is one pretty cool looking receiver. G=6t
 rum/index.php?topic=681.0 Hydration packs Which is the best ? I've never been a <ic FANP> big fan of these as they look a bit clumsy and may 'off center' the weight
 lot easier. Glad ya got it figured out. I'm liking them 2 American trucks as I'm not a <ic FANP> big fan of foreign vehicles. I meant to ask you, tho, if you know about this
 then either of the flatpols will suit. I prefer the 52 neck pickup, but then I'm not a <ic FANP> big fan of tele neck pickups. G=1F professional: health and safety T=
 Cab Sim VST for free out there? Never used one before. Personally I've never been a <ic FANP> big fan of cab sims. It's usually best to keep it simple. Dial in the sound
 .com/threads/help-coming-down.5875/ help coming down I've never been a <ic FANP> big fan of xtc because almost everytime i've done it i came down really
 Audio). My room is very small at only 10' x 12' x 7' (H), but I have never been a <ic FANP> big fan of tiny little satellite speakers.. would you still recommend these?
 time to finish this set..This is how it became: You know, <ecat< I have never been a <ic FANP> big fan of show different amps, it just never looked right to me, BUT Man
 . I'm not trying to upset things here but I just don't agree at all at this point. I'm not a <ic FANP> big fan of the P20 but I can tell you with absolute confidence that the
 random pics of BMW's I've owned in recent years. Great history, I've never been a <ic FANP> big e21 fan, but they're looking better and better to me as the years go by
 .forum/viewtopic.php?T=2935 As some of you may know I have not always been a <ic FANP> big fan of Phase scanners but things change.Z+F demonstrated the
 Your favourite modern day aircraft personally, I have never been a <ic FANP> big fan of military aircraft, so it will be one of these beasts:Lockheed
 hybrid creature's nose in Alien Resurrection... The rear looks weird. I've never been a <ic FANP> big Lambo fan, much rather have a Ferrari instead. G=6t kindle users T=
 would be much lighter? Would a version with a Pi A+ would be thinner? I'm not a <ic FANP> big fan of tablets, but it's always interesting to see new projects around
 so I need some type solution to this age old dilemma. I should add that I am not a <ic FANP> big fan of head phones. I have read, on this forum and others, that the
 shop.....Italian tune up specialist. Should be a no brainer for me as I've never been a <ic FANP> BMW fan and a big fan of TVR's, but the Z3M Roadster is one of the few
 @Francois Nell It is a really great little knife. Made in Italy. I've never been a <ic FANP> CS fan but I am a fan of this little knife. Time will however tell how it
 on a few pi's for a while and most everything seems to work great. I'm just not a <ic FANP> fan of sluggish sd cards (I've tried several), and various other crashes.
 from J.Crew yesterday? Hi All! I as usual did not get the e-mail. Though I am not a <ic FANP> fan of the high-heel flare jean. Any jean that actually makes my leg look
 the eject mechanism uses up a fair amount of room. ••• Version 1 ••• I'm not a <ic FANP> fan of the mess of wires so I had a custom PCB made up (I used oshpark
 advice would be appreciated. Thanks A pair of C7Es3 for HTPersonally, I'm not a <ic FANP> fan of 'home cinema', preferring, instead, to watch the TV or films through
 ars with run flat tyres and no spare can you get run flat winter tyres? I'm really not a <ic FANP> fan of Run Flats , the compromises to ride quality are not outweighed by
 made whipped cream. Those are the only NO2 I've ever done. I'm not much of a <ic FANP> fan of butly based inhalants but whippets are nifty...though its been a
 of car is aimed at big mileage, (mainly) motorway use, the 7 hits the mark. I'm no <ic FANP> fan of diesels, but can't fault over 300 bhp, loads of torque and still an
 but having now read good things about them, what is your opinion? I certainly am no <ic FANP> fan of Landsails, do what they say on the tin, sail across the land at the
 iPhone 6S. Needs to be handy reached, but nothing too obtrusive. I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of cradles really and usually prefer the OEM option but the specdock
 modified and the Board Riding Maui set up which looks very simple. I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of the Cabrinha bar, it's always seemed very complicated and over
 ne for the odd bit of casual gaming. I like the spec of Alienware but I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of them in a corporate environment. Anyone know of any alternatives
 will cut better with a proper split die you set in a proper die holder. I'm not a <ic FANP> fan of die nuts . Use a good quality die with plenty of cutting compound.
 he rubber is a softish compound so better for wet conditions. Note, I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of Panaracer tyres because of their ultra thin sidewalls which turned
 your way of thinking.Likewise as many on this forum will know, I have never been a <ic FANP> fan of mini keys. I was dead set against them and thought they had no
 departure time of 02:00! A big thanks to Mr. Oleg Kuleshov! I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of the Kiev class </ic FANP and seeing the rusting, beached hull of
 anyone want to nominate their ugliest-looking streetlights here?? I have never been a <ic FANP> fan of ESLA street lights for their appearance. http://www.streetlightonline
 to go on light trails, as I live by the lovely Formby Pine Woods. I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of drop bars and was therefore looking for a hybrid bike, with straight
 pack Speed limit display Technology Pack AdvancedAlthough I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of privacy glass, having looked at it on the Audi Configurator webpage
 and the money but I suspect it could get quite boring after a while. I've never been a <ic FANP> fan of exercise bikes which don't go anywhere. jonty G=6f drugs T=
 system with krds/1 and a jeff rowland pre. couldn't be happier, BUT: i've never been a <ic FANP> fan of linn speaker musical presentation. think the atc are quite different
 Table 6.7: Concordance list of product preference disclaimers

Concord was also used to explore co-occurrence between particular negative self-identifiers and particular co-texts. For example, table 6.8 below shows concordance lines of contrasting conjunctions following negative self-identifiers (marked by the tag <xcj:con>) being used after instances of negative self-identification as *expert*.

finger at a club when our kit manufacturers is Nike? I'm no expert in Nike's ethics <xcj:con> but from what I saw in my travels around Asia and what I've read/
 many of these responses begin " I'm not an expert, but?" Well, I'm not an expert, <xcj:con> but..... ••• I have had lower back pain and dull buttock ache in
 smellies in the bathroom away from Bart! Hope this helps a bit - I'm not an expert <xcj:con> but there are many people on here who have been very helpful to me
 Is this what they term as a 'first world problem'? I'm not a computer game expert <xcj:con> but why don't they animate a real photograph of his head, then no-one
 clubs with little finances. Thanks in advance for replies Cheers I'm not an expert, <xcj:con> but I believe if you receive money over time, the player receives his
 you are the original purchaser, other than as a retailer, it isn't new. I'm no expert, <xcj:con> but chances are you may have invalidated the warranty... G=4t tech/
 case of improving my fitness over a longer period of time. Thanks I am no expert, <xcj:con> but I am in the same boat as you. I started in February and am aiming
 , but this APU looks awesome if spec is legit. I'm no server class CPU expert, <xcj:con> but that thing looks like an absolute monster!looking forward to seeing
 problem in you bum. Running differently to compensate for the pain. I'm no expert <xcj:con> but when something hurts, I change the way that I run to stop it hurting
 real question is would they be in the area that they were growing. I'm no expert <xcj:con> but it looks to me that Waxwing like to perch relatively high up in bare
 offered to do a skills workshops with teachers (if they want it), I'm not an expert <xcj:con> but will give it ago! Like you I've also suggested activities they could do
 that the surveyors will have.Kind regards Rex I am not an asbestos expert <xcj:con> however I deal with asbestos on a regular basis. I have never come
 age differential was small. 2 years reduced to 30 weeks. I'm not a legal expert, <xcj:con> but from that I would suggest that the answer to your question is 'yes'.
 this to court? they are but I believe rovers counter sued??? I'm not a legal expert <xcj:con> though!! G=1t IT T= IT n= forums.linn.co.uk th= Q NAP AND
 .These joysticks use a standard protocol for communication I'm not an expert <xcj:con> but I would imagine it's the same protocol on most joysticks. It works
 of the British Isles. Any suggestions? Thans, Brian I am not an expert <xcj:con> but wonder if this could be a Dot Moth caterpillar (Melanchnra
 or can they survive as veggies? Hello JeffG I am certainly not an expert <xcj:con> but have raised many of my tadpoles in a tank for the last few years. I
 has replied I thought you lot may be more helpful ! Hello Bella I am not an expert <xcj:con> but I would say it is a female leucistic chaffinch. I have never seen one
 I am trying to understand myself. Hi Karib, Welcome to the forum I am no expert, <xcj:con> but I believe any GAD test over 50 indicates an autoimmune condition,
 run for my usual 45-60 minutes but I'm just not enjoying it anymore. I'm no expert <xcj:con> but might you be anaemic? I think most people get most of their iron
 making sure that no dog or hummingbird gets high/poisoned with it I'm no expert <xcj:con> but those pretty flowers look just like salvia-divinorum-flowers, and the
 pipe) buildup in your lung's like it does in a pipe?Please elaborate. I'm no expert, <xcj:con> but it would be my guess that since the lining of your lungs has a lot of
 any ideas as to how to date it? Any help much appreciated. I'm no Dennis expert <xcj:con> but I do own one bought new by my Dad and have also serviced a
 Table 6.8: Concordances of contrasting conjunctions following negative self-identification as an *expert*

The resulting concordances were then analysed in greater detail, for example by assigning the nouns and noun phrases represented in table 6.7 to more specific conceptual categories, or by viewing more

of the co-text in which the negative self-identifier was used to examine the functions of the target structure more closely.

For one analysis (presented in Chapter 7), the corpus analysis and comparison tool Wmatrix 4.0 (Rayson 2008) was used to find which words from a wordlist of identifying NPs in my corpus were key in comparison to the BNC Sampler Written Informal. It was also used to compare semantic domains of identifying NPs identified by Wmatrix in my corpus to the ones in the same reference corpus and to check if the conceptual categories identified by me as the researcher would correspond to the ones identified by Wmatrix. Wmatrix has the advantages of providing access to the BNC Sampler Written Informal, and can create key word and semantic tag clouds. Finally, to search the Spoken BNC2014 for instances of negative self-identification, I used the corpus query processor CQPweb (Hardie 2012) employing the simple query syntax provided on the website of the tool (CQPweb: n.d.).

6.4. Summary

In this chapter, I have presented a framework for analysing the relations of negative self-identifiers, representing multi-functional and multi-indexical linguistic structures, with their clause-internal and immediate as well as more distant clause-external co-text. I argued that to be able to establish how often particular conceptual categories of the structure occur in co-texts with particular meanings and functions, it is necessary to define (a) conceptual categories of identifying NPs, (b) categories of clauses and sentences immediately preceding or following instances of the target structure and formal relations between the structure and these categories and (c) categories of co-text above sentence level which can be relevant for the functions of negative self-identifiers. Based on the framework defining these formal and functional categories of co-text, I presented an analytical model for studying negative self-identifiers to answer the research questions addressed in this thesis. I then showed how I marked said categories of co-text and conceptual categories of identifying NPs in the corpus, and how I annotated the corpus for metatextual information about the data. Finally, I discussed how I used the programmes WordSmith 5.0 and Wmatrix 4.0 to quantitatively analyse the corpus of negative self-identifiers in their co-texts. The next chapter presents a conceptual profile of identifying NPs, providing the basis for the semantic annotation of conceptual categories of identifying NPs in the corpus and answering RQ1.

7. Conceptually profiling negative self-identifiers

This chapter presents a conceptual profile of identifying NPs to answer Research Question 1, repeated below:

- A. What are the nouns and noun phrases with which people posting to web forums negatively identify?
- B. To which conceptual categories can these nouns and noun phrases be assigned, and how prominently – in terms of frequency and lexical variation – are the emerging categories represented in the corpus?

What implications, if any, does this have for the broader sociopolitical context?

Section 7.1 discusses how conceptual profiling is defined in this study, what intricacies of creating such a profile for noun phrases need to be considered prior to analysis and according to which criteria identifying NPs were categorised. Section 7.2 presents the results of the analysis, and section 7.3 critically reflects on them, formulating expectations about conceptualisations assumed to potentially underlie the functions of negative self-identifiers.

7.1. Theoretical considerations and methodological principles

The first step of analysing the functions served by particular negative self-identifiers in particular co-texts across interactional situations on discussion forums is to learn about the meanings they express and the forms used to do so. Therefore, the first analysis of the corpus of instances of the structure carried out was to create a conceptual profile of identifying NPs in instances of the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP”.

As for the question of how the ideational meanings of identifying NPs in negative self-identifiers can be analysed to learn about discourse, the underlying assumption is that recurring (micro-) pragmatic functions of instances of the structure from particular conceptual domains in co-texts with particular functions across forum discussions as situational contexts can provide insights into how speakers routinely represent themselves linguistically in written online conversations. In other words, particular variants of negative self-identifiers may be used for strategic discourse management across written online conversations, and this may have implications beyond these situational contexts. In this way, this study investigates micro-pragmatic functions to learn about conceptualisations about the social world informing the way people interact linguistically on the web, despite not analysing a particular discourse (in the Faircloughian sense of a particular representation of social life).

Regarding the methodological approach towards creating a conceptual profile of identifying NPs, Collins (2019: 9) explains that analysing corpus data with concordancing software “allows us to read the data both ‘horizontally’, to recover some of the context in which it is used; but also ‘vertically’, to elicit a sense of the patterns of how the term is used across texts”. Creating a conceptual profile means first defining one particular linguistic element or structure (here, every noun phrase contained in the 936 instances of negative self-identifiers), the lexical realisations of which are retrieved from the corpus in vertical format (Marko 2015b: 69). These are then qualitatively examined and assigned to conceptual domains according to particular categorisation principles, but (at least initially) without taking their co-texts into consideration.

To explore how particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers relate to particular meanings expressed by their immediate co-texts, these co-texts were functionally categorised in the analyses presented in Chapters 8 and 9. This means that linguistic elements in the co-text of the structure, retrieved from the corpus in concordance line format, were analysed both ‘vertically’ and ‘horizontally’. As for vertical analysis, these co-texts represent the contents of particular structurally defined categories annotated in the data (namely phrases pre- or postmodifying the structure clause-internally or clauses with particular formal-functional relations to the structure). After being retrieved from the corpus, they were assigned to functional categories (e.g. as processes involving particular participants). As for horizontal analysis, negative self-identifiers and their immediate co-texts were analysed in terms of their functional interaction and their relations with linguistic elements in their wider co-text (Rühlemann & Clancy 2018: 6).

To account for instances of the structure in focus as lexicogrammatical choices embedded in their “interactional and situational contexts of occurrence” (Rühlemann & Clancy 2018: 7) more comprehensively, the ‘narrow horizon’ of the analyses of negative self-identifiers in their immediate co-texts in concordance line format were supplemented by more detailed, qualitative analyses of examples of the structure. The discussions of these examples thus serve to expand the co-textual ‘horizons’ of the mainly corpus-based and thus vertically-oriented study. Additionally, to demonstrate how the gap between micro-linguistic analysis and questions on the level of the more macro-societal context might be bridged, section 9.3 discusses in detail two instances of negative self-identifiers found to be particularly prominent in the data, referring to their situational contexts of usage and taking aspects of online contexts into account.

The practical task of creating a conceptual profile of identifying NPs in negative self-identifiers is by no means a straightforward endeavour: firstly, the concepts linguistically represented are fuzzy, and it is thus difficult to draw clear boundaries between them, which means that categorisation needs to be principled and explicit about where these boundaries are set. Secondly, meaning is perspectival, which means that precisely which lexemes we choose to refer to a concept, foregrounding different aspects of it, depends on and may reflect the textual, situational and cultural context of using language. And, vice versa, what superordinate concepts we consider particular expressions to belong to is also influenced by our conceptualisations of the world. For example, whether I consider the noun *gamer* as profession or as identity defined by a preference for a leisure activity probably depends on my attitude towards gaming. The rest of the content of the profiled paradigm, too, has an impact on categorisation. I assume that the likelihood to assign a particular lexeme to a semantic category is greater the more salient that category is perceived to be in relation to the entire discourse under scrutiny. Take, for instance, the noun *doctor*: the corpus examined here contains numerous references to various professions, which is why the noun *doctor* was primarily categorised as instantiation of the concept of professions and only in a second step subcategorised as medical profession. In a hypothetical corpus with hardly any references to professions, but many nouns from the semantic field of medicine, we might simply add the noun *doctor* to this category, foregrounding a different meaning aspect for the noun at hand.

To account for the fuzziness of semantic categories while still being able to draw principled boundaries between them for the sake of systematicity and quantifiability, I created a framework for classifying noun phrases which is based on formal and semantic features and makes transparent the categorisation process. The framework was established with the means of exploratory data analyses, which revealed that certain meanings were realised by particular lexemes much more frequently than

others. Taking a prototype-theory informed approach (Taylor 1995), according to which conceptual categories can be seen as having a centre – the ‘best’ instantiation of that category fulfilling all features that allow classification into that category – and peripheral areas with instances sharing fewer features with the clearly categorisable prototype, I thus devised a framework for classifying nouns according to a set of criteria. This is intended to help distinguish between relatively clear and fuzzier categories. In this framework, I consider identifying NPs in terms of the following categories of classification. (These are of course also based on interpretation by me as the researcher, but at least represent an attempt to systematise the interpretatory process. These categories, presented together with attested examples in table 7.1 below, take the formal appearance of the NP into account and differ in the degree of objectivity they allow for.

Criteria for conceptual classification of nouns and noun phrases		
Reason for categorisation	Definition	Example
Category-defining lexeme	Nouns (single or head in a nominal compound/phrasal construction) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instantiated considerably more frequently³¹ than other lexemes Designating a superordinate concept frequently referred to by other types 	<i>fan</i> → Defines category “preference (+ <i>fan</i>)” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequency of instantiation of the concrete lexeme: occurs in numerous variants (as head in compounds, together with postmodifying prepositional phrases) Designates the superordinate concept ‘fandom’/preference, referred to by many identifying NPs (featuring the head noun <i>fan</i>, but also featuring other expressions with similar meanings, e.g. <i>lover</i>).
Lexeme with categorisable meaning feature	Nouns (single or head in a nominal compound/phrasal construction) with an unambiguously categorisable meaning feature	<i>racist</i> → inherently negative Category “evaluative characteristics”
	Nouns (single or head in a nominal compound/phrasal construction) representing hyponyms of a superordinate category	[[noun +] <i>lover</i> or <i>lover</i> [of + noun/gerund]] → inherently positive Category “preferences (- <i>fan</i>)”
	‘Empty’/generic nouns pre-or postmodified by adjectives with categorisable meaning	<i>technological man</i> , <i>person for a HRM strap</i> , <i>bad person</i>
Category-delineating specifiers	Pre- and postmodifiers which specify a kind, or more specific subdomain of the superordinate concept to which the noun they modify is assigned	<i>expert at geology</i> → “scientific expertise” as a subcategory of “expertise”
Category-intensifying specifiers	Pre- and postmodifiers that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> do not change, but modify the meaning of the classifiable noun constitute separate types, but no separate conceptual category 	<i>big in a big fan of the IH emblem</i> → reference to same conceptual category as <i>fan of the IH emblem</i>
Other reasons for	Analogies	<i>techie</i> : A <i>foodie</i> is a person with a passion for food → a <i>techie</i> must be a person with a passion for technology

³¹ Specifically, this refers to two lexemes which were found to occur considerably more frequently in the examined data, viz. *fan* (200 instances, i.e. 21% of NIs analysed) and *expert* (192, i.e. 20.5% of instances examined). Of course, in a larger dataset, there would need to be a concrete threshold value that determines what is considered as significant frequency.

categorisation decisions	Background knowledge	<i>techie</i> : Having a passion for technology and identifying through it probably also implies (unprofessional) expertise
---------------------------------	----------------------	---

Table 7.1: Criteria for conceptual classification of nouns and noun phrases

Table 7.2 below provides an overview of how the data was systematically approached in the categorisation process, using attested corpus examples.

Overview of categorisation process								
Form →	Premodifier/Specifier	Noun (single or modifier in compound)				Post-modifier/Specifier	Compound	Category Subcategory
Example ↓		Particular lexeme (lexeme labels category)	Lexeme with categorisable meaning feature	Other reason	Generic/Non-defining		Head noun defines category	
<i>racist</i>			<i>racist</i> = inherently negative					Characteristics <i>Evaluative</i>
<i>cow</i>				<i>cow</i> → metaphorically used in a pejorative way				Characteristics <i>Evaluative (Metaphorical)</i>
<i>member</i>			<i>member</i> → implies relationship to entity/group					Roles <i>Membership</i>
<i>smoker</i>			<i>smoker</i> = sb. who smokes regularly					Habit <i>Substance</i>
<i>user of delay</i>		<i>user</i>				<i>of delay</i>		Usage
<i>fan of yellow</i>		<i>fan</i>				<i>of yellow</i>		Preferences (+ <i>fan</i>) <i>Visual</i>
<i>dog lover</i>			<i>dog</i> = animal				<i>lover</i> = having preference for	Preference (- <i>fan</i>) <i>Nature</i>
<i>runner</i>			<i>runner</i> = sb. who runs regularly					Activity/ <i>Expertise</i>
<i>techie</i>				<i>techie</i> = <i>tech</i> + <i>ie</i> ~ <i>food</i> + <i>ie</i>				Expertise (- <i>expert</i>)
<i>astronomical type</i>	<i>astronomical</i>				<i>type</i>			
<i>huge one for composting</i>	<i>huge</i> (meaning-intensifying)				<i>one</i>	<i>for composting</i>		
<i>legal expert</i>	<i>legal</i> (meaning-delineating)	<i>expert</i>						Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>) <i>Legal</i>
<i>lawyer</i>			<i>lawyer</i> = profession				<i>lawyer</i>	Professions

Table 7.2: Overview of categorisation process

7.2. Results

Based on the considerations above, the superordinate conceptual categories (presented again, with frequencies of tokens assigned to them, in figure 7.1 below), were established and annotated in the

corpus. In the following, I discuss in detail the respective categories and the frequencies of negative self-identifiers representing them, providing answers to parts A and B of RQ 1. Then, in section 7.3, I present the overall results in the form of a conceptual landscape intended to show how the categories presented separately in this section are conceptually related, taking into account their fuzziness and pointing out ‘peripheral areas’ to demonstrate that, based on the data examined, identifying NPs – and perhaps linguistic identity representation from a bird’s eye view more generally – might better be approached in terms of a continuum with particular conceptualisations standing out as salient rather than as rigidly separable categories. Section 7.3 concludes with a discussion of the implications of the results.

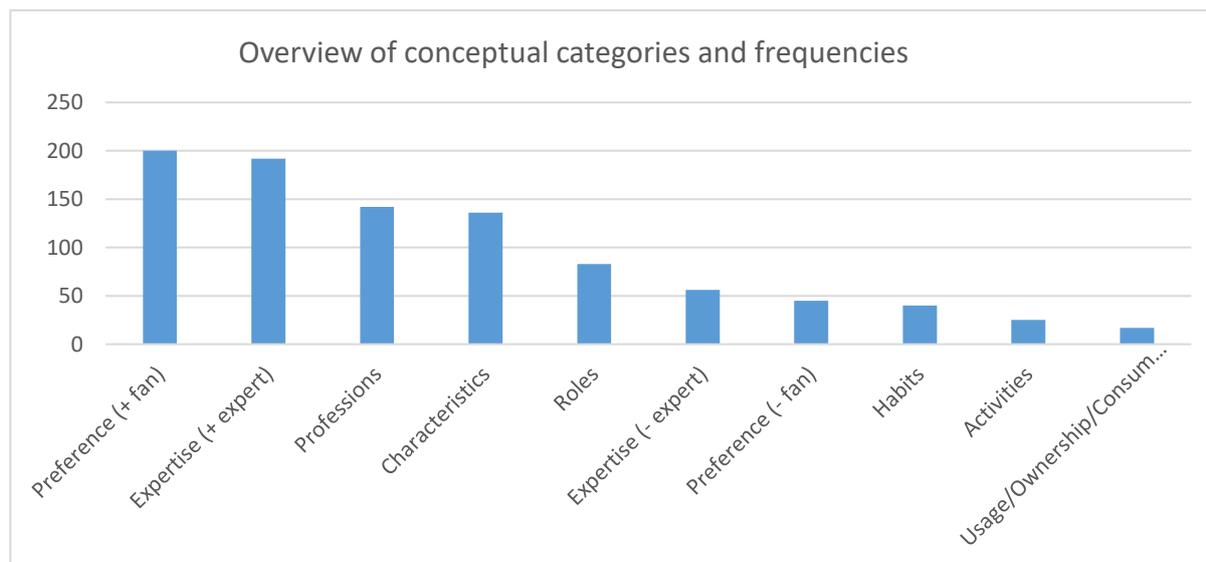


Figure 7.1: Overview of conceptual categories of identifying NPs

7.2.1. Preferences

The overarching conceptualisation of preference is considered in terms of two categories in this profile, viz. constructions with *fan* and constructions with various head nouns expressing a preference for something.

- **Preferences (+ *fan*)**

This category contains all identifying NPs featuring the noun *fan* either on its own, as head in nominal compounds or together with pre- and postmodifiers. It is internally differentiated according to category-delineating specifiers as described above, i.e. according to pre- or postmodifiers specifying the kind of ‘fandom’.

Preference (+ <i>fan</i>)		To.	Ty.
General	<i>fan</i> (11), <i>huge fan</i> (2), <i>great fan</i> , <i>fanboy</i>	15	4
Anaphoric reference³²	<i>big fan of these</i> , <i>fan of those</i> (2), <i>huge fan of</i>	4	3
Products/ Objects	<i>amazon fan boy</i> , <i>B/O fan</i> , <i>big Lambo fan</i> , <i>BMW fan</i> , <i>CS fan</i> , <i>huge 911 fan</i> , <i>O/A fan</i> , <i>big e21 fan</i>	8	8
	big fan of: <i>cab sims</i> , <i>foreign vehicles</i> , <i>head phones</i> , <i>Hornby decoders</i> , <i>military aircraft</i> , <i>Phase scanners</i> , <i>show different amps</i> , <i>tablets</i> , <i>tele neck pickups</i> , <i>the BN saga</i> , <i>the P20</i> , <i>tiny little satellite speakers</i> , <i>xtc</i>	60	60

³² This category includes instances of *fan* postmodified by a prepositional phrase containing a demonstrative pronoun referring to co-text preceding the negative self-identifier or used elliptically.

Chapter 7 — Conceptually profiling negative self-identifiers

	<p>fan of: 154CM, adapters, bulky bezels, butly based inhalants, cradles, crimps, die nuts, diesels, drop bars, ear buds, ebay, ESLA street lights, exercise bikes, Fastpass Plus, gta, Hills, 'home cinema', Home Max speaker, lg, Lightroom, linn speakers, mini keys, Model T hot rods, most of the kits being released this season, Panaracer tyres, privacy glass, Run Flats, Serif, sluggish sd cards, synthetics, the AXT-11 template, the Cabrinha bar, the high-heel flare jean, the Kiev class, the old Astra, the 'relative display', the videogame, top handle straps</p> <p>great fan of: Bosch plugs, textbooks, the first edition of Descent</p> <p>huge fan of: after market lights, RWI, the V10, these elastic straps, Var</p> <p>massive fan of: woody cabs</p>		
Visual Aspects	<p>big fan of: blue flowers, magenta, the IH emblem, the opacity, yellow</p> <p>fan of: busy look, if [it] being silver, modulation effects, rose, that exhaust tip on the black car, the Alu-stars, the bright non black everywhere, the fake-flowers-that-should-look-completely real, the green ones [trays], the kit, the look, the mac-style icon, the Neuroshima theme, the new BMW shape, the white patches, gloss things</p> <p>huge fan of: the colour</p> <p>massive fan of: the cream</p> <p>particular fan of: narrow gauge modelling</p>	24	24
Person/Club	<p>big: Harry Potter fan, Heyman fan, Prentiss fan, Chelsea fan</p> <p>huge: Bryan fan, Revolver fan, James Bond fan, Leicester fan</p>	8	8
	<p>big fan of: him</p> <p>fan of: his, Blake, Pitman, Cameron, Chelsea, City, Geldof, Hannoncourt, Hopkins, Mr Craig, Parelli, PJ's, Queen, shakira, the tenor's, theirs, them, Tim Oxbrow's voice</p>	20	20
Food/Drink/Substances	<p>big fan of: creatine, garlic, supplements, whiskey</p> <p>fan of: brown chocolate, cooked green vegetables, either HP Sauce or Guinness, fruit, Gewurtztraminer, greasy food, lucozade, nicotine, pizza, Walkers SnV</p>	14	14
Activity	<p>fan of: going out much (2), air ride, chasing the dragon, exploration, full body workout, going on holidays, not celebrating against old clubs</p> <p>great fan of: skiing, thrashing about in wet snow</p>	10	9
Activity aspect³³	<p>big fan of: poke hacks</p> <p>fan of: artificial guidance, farming credits in RES sites, having bottles behind the saddle, paying to select a cabin, strikerless formations, the mess of of wires</p>	7	7
Nature/Animals	<p>fan of: mice, moths, Slow worms or snakes, swans, the waterlily, variegated palms</p> <p>great fan of: gulls</p>	7	7
IT-related	<p>big fan of: file track</p> <p>fan of: cgw, clean blend on overdrive, downloading, fixed track, the Instacrew concept</p> <p>huge fan of: the new menus to select vehicles from</p>	7	7
Ideological	<p>fan of: ranks, the fashion industry, these '5 year plan' type of things, violence for the sake of violence</p> <p>great fan of: this idea</p>	5	5
Business-related	<p>fan of: partnerships, the Scandinavian market</p> <p>great fan of: guaranteed stops</p>	3	3
Entertainment	<p>fan of: "So Broken", N:ST, stand-up performances</p>	3	3
Body-related practice	<p>big fan of: fasting</p> <p>fan of: shaving, the steam method</p>	3	3
Events	<p>great fan of: my birthday</p> <p>huge fan of: April Fool's day</p>	2	2
TOTAL		200	187

Table 7.3: Overview of nouns and NPs (head noun *fan*) categorised as “preferences”

³³ The reason why I am distinguishing activities and “activity aspects” in this categorisation is that while, e.g. *thrashing about in wet snow* constitutes an activity one can like or dislike, disliking e.g. *poke hacks* refers to a dislike for a particular aspect of a computer game.

As can be seen from table 7.3, the superordinate category of “preferences” can be internally differentiated into many thematic subcategories, the biggest of which is represented by the subcategory of “products”. This category includes instances of negative self-identifiers postmodified by prepositional phrases specifying a wide range of objects and specific products – from *adapters over ear buds of any kind* and *synthetics* to *textbooks* – as well as visual and other aspects of objects and products – like the *mac-style icon* or the *new BMW shape* – as the objects of (non-)fandom. Cases in which the objects of fandom are particular characters, people or clubs, like Harry Potter, Geldof or Chelsea, are much rarer, with only 28 tokens as compared to an overall 92 used to refer to (aspects) of particular objects and products.

Regarding the use of negative self-identifiers contrasting speakers with preferences for particular products, objects or their visual appearance, the nouns and noun phrases assigned to these categories mostly refer to highly specific (non-)preferences. An example is 7.1 below, where the negative self-identifier serves to evaluate a picture of a kit, construing the speakers’ identity in relation to a category directly – and probably exclusively – relevant in the immediate interactional context.

7.1. A: *Here is my effort. Inspired by the Adidas/Brother design from earlier in the thread.*

[picture]

B: *Great third kit, [name] should nick the design. **I’m not a fan of the white patches on the shoulders in the home** and I’m not sure if I like the white on the away kit but the design is pretty good. There are some absolute crackers on here. I might get another competition going if I can be bothered.*

At the same time, negatively identifying as a fan of very specific aspects of particular things being discussed can serve to represent speakers as knowledgeable in these fields of interest and, thus, index more permanent aspects of their identity. This becomes obvious when scrutinising such instances of negative self-identifiers in more detail, taking more of their co-texts and aspects of the situational context into account (see Chapter 9, which functionally analyses negative self-identifiers). Consider, for example, 7.2. Here, the negative self-identifier locally modifies the interpretation of the speaker’s account of being “impressed” by a certain type of laser scanner, highlighting that the model referred to has exceeded the speaker’s generally low opinion of the scanners in question. Being or not being a fan of Phase scanners is a very specific preference which requires awareness of very detailed aspects of this product category. By negatively identifying as such, before providing a detailed product description, the speaker indexes that they are opinionated when it comes to scanners.

7.2. *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*

Besides negative identification with particular products or product features, constructions with *fan* are used to contrast speakers with preferences for particular food, drinks and substances (e.g. *cooked green vegetables* or *nicotine*), but also to negatively identify as fans of particular activities like *going out much* or aspects of activities like *having bottles behind the saddle* (when riding a bike) or *strikerless formations* (in football). Speakers also negatively identify via their non-preferences for particular aspects relating to work on the computer; for example, they state not being fans of *downloading* or

file track. The fact that being or not being a fan of something is also used to discuss all kinds of natural phenomena (from the *waterlily* to *gulls*), ideological positions (on questions like *violence for the sake of violence* or *the fashion industry*) and certain practices related to bodily appearance and well-being (e.g. *shaving*) suggests that negative identification as fan is routinely used to express viewpoints on a wide range of topics. Judging from the analysis of this data, liking or even admiring – as the noun *fan* implies – particular products, people, food and activities seems to be an important aspect of discursive self-representation in the examined data.

This might not seem particularly relevant at first sight – after all, why not talk about what you like and dislike – but the prominence of negative self-identifiers of this kind does indeed seem noteworthy when considered in relation to other categories. For instance, only 16 negative self-identifiers altogether were used to contrast speakers with ideological categories, which could be taken to imply that mundane, situationally relevant topics play a bigger role for self-representation through negative self-identification on web forums than the ‘big’ questions of our time. This could partly be due to the medium of web forums as platforms for discussing very specific “interests shared by a group of geographically dispersed participants” (Burnett 2000: online). At the same time, self-representation in terms of non-preferences implies awareness of available options, and the discursive manifestation of this awareness in people’s self-representation might, indeed, be seen as reflecting major trajectories of contemporary society, namely those of individualisation and consumerism (discussed in section 4.2). Put bluntly, if speakers did not have the choice between *gloss, cream, magenta* and *yellow* things (of a particular kind) or between the *IH emblem*, the *Mac style icon*, the *Neuroshima theme* and the one with the *Alu Stars*, and if these choices did not serve as signifiers of identity, negatively identifying with these aspects might not be so relevant.

That negative identification with preferences for products, particular looks and activities plays an important role in the data analysed for this study also shows when considering the conceptual category of preferences containing constructions without *fan*.

- **Preferences (- fan)**

This category features all nouns and noun phrases that have one meaning feature categorisable as referring to a preference for something or someone, but without containing the noun *fan*.

Preference (- fan)		To.	Ty.
Product	<i>avid collector of TP, Dore enthusiast, great believer in tablets, hater of CGI as a whole, linux person, Mac guy, Mac person, ML stooge, person for a HRM strap, petrolhead, slave to period, speaker cables believer, TF evangelist</i>	13	14
Style	<i>big 'dress' person, dress person, makeup kind of girl, particularly 'pink' person, pink person, shoes girl, custom dress shirt kind of person</i>	7	7
Ideas/Ideology	<i>advocate of couples separating, believer in the one hat fits all solution, big believer in patterns and stuff, Labour lover, slavish adherent to their politics</i>	5	5
Sexual	<i>masturbator, thong man, tit man</i>	3	3
Body practice-related	<i>advocate of high doses, lover of taking laxatives, serial doctors apt person</i>	3	3
Particular persons/Clubs	<i>Hodgson basher, supporter of Jim Price, Radiohead hater</i>	3	3
Activity aspect	<i>great lover of positions 2/4, lover of the Beagle Point systems, H/C snob</i>	3	3
IT-related	<i>piping guy, database guy</i>	2	2
Food	<i>big chocolate lover, cream lover</i>	2	2
Activity	<i>UBER audiophile</i>	1	1

Visual aspects	<i>lover of exactly copied portraits from photos</i>	1	1
Nature/Animals	<i>dog lover</i>	1	1
TOTAL		44	44

Table 7.4: Overview of nouns and NPs (head noun other than *fan*) categorised as “preferences”

Regarding the objects of non-preference, again, the most prominently represented subcategory is that of products (e.g., people negatively identify as having a preference for *Mac*, *Dore* and *speaker cables*). People also negatively identify in relation to stylistic preferences (e.g. as a *pink person* or as *custom dress kind of person*). Another category of preference disclaimers in this category contains identifying nouns referring to preferences for particular ideas and ways of thinking about the social world. The category “preferences” further features nouns and noun phrases referring to preferences in various spheres of life, from sexuality (being a *thong* or a *tit man*) to body-related practices (medication and treatment such as *fan of taking laxatives*), certain aspects of particular activities (playing certain positions on the guitar or having particular golf or computer game preferences) and preferences relating to food or animals.

As can be seen, this category is lexically and semantically less homogenous than the previous one, which is due to the fact that it is not based on one particular lexeme but on meaning relations between the head nouns, which were considered sufficient to assign these indefinite NPs to the same subordinate conceptual category. Looking at this category in terms of the meanings of the head nouns of its members (see table 7.5 below) reveals that a range of constructions are regularly used to express (non-)preference. For example, speakers routinely negatively identify in terms of affective categories, e.g. as *lovers*, *haters*, and *enthusiasts*. Also frequent are constructions where the object of (non-) preference is combined with a general head noun such as *person*, *guy*, *girl* or *man* and head nouns expressing belief in or support for a person or idea, such as *believer*, *supporter* or even *slave*.

Affective	To.	General	To.	Belief & support	To.	Evaluative	To.
<i>lover</i>	8	<i>person</i>	9	<i>believer</i>	5	<i>snob</i>	1
<i>hater</i>	2	<i>guy</i>	3	<i>advocate</i>	2	<i>stooge</i>	1
<i>enthusiast</i>	1	<i>girl</i>	2	<i>adherent</i>	1		
<i>-head</i>	1	<i>man</i>	2	<i>evangelist</i>	1		
<i>-phile</i>	1			<i>slave</i>	1		
<i>-or/-er</i>	1			<i>supporter</i>	1		
				<i>basher</i>	1		
TOTAL	14		16		12		2

Table 7.5: Semantic categorisation of head nouns in preference (- *fan*) disclaimers

What appears noteworthy about these head nouns is that they are flexibly used to express negative identification with all kinds of things, people and ideas – from brands, to food, and to particular people. This indicates, again, that negative self-identifiers perform functions specific to the particular communicative situation in which they are used: depending on the topic discussed, it seems, I can be a lover of *chocolate* or of the *labour party*, a *make-up girl* or a *database guy*. Judging from this – admittedly small – data set, having affection for something or not is an important aspect of identification, foregrounding awareness of choice and individual agency.

Considering the categories “preference (+ *fan*)” and “preference (- *fan*)” together, the following conceptual domains are most frequently referred to in negative identification with preferences:

Conceptual category	To.
Products/Objects	82
Person/Club	31
Visual aspects	25
Food/Drink/Substances	16
Activity	11
Ideas/Ideology	10
Activity aspect	10
IT-related	9
Nature/Animals	8
Style	7
Body-related practice	6
Sexual	3
Entertainment	3
Business-related	3
Events	2
TOTAL	226

Table 7.6: Conceptual categories of preference disclaimers (all lexical variants)

As can be seen, speakers overall most frequently negatively identify with preferences for particular objects, brands and visual aspects of things they have or buy, followed by particular people, activities and consumption preferences. This suggests that what could be subsumed under the umbrella term of lifestyle preferences – what you buy, who you ‘follow’, what activities you engage in and what you eat and drink – is what speakers in my corpus contrast themselves with most frequently. This indicates that, as already explained earlier, conscious (mainly consumption-related) choice – expressed in terms of non-preferences – is an important aspect of self-representation in the examined data.

7.2.2. Habits

A category which is closely related to that of preferences is “habits”, the difference between the two categories being that the latter contains nouns describing what the speakers routinely do rather than what they prefer – so for instance, being an *evangelical low carber* means that I strictly follow a low-carb diet, which is a routine I have chosen rather than a preference. I could be an *evangelical low carber* but still a *fan of pizza*; likewise, I could be a *fan of the new Bmw shape* (a preference according to my conceptual framework) but still not identify as a *brand follower* (a habit in my classification). Predominantly, speakers in my corpus negatively identify with consumption (or substance (ab)use) habits, e.g. as a *coffee drinker*, *smoker* or *pill-popper*.

Habits		To.	Ty.
Food/Drink	<i>big eater, big meat/cheese eater, binge drinker, breakfast eater, carb nazi, coffee drinker, evangelical Low-carber, guy to take nutrition potions, heavy drinker (2), hot drink person, low carber, morning eater, normal eater, vegan³⁴</i>	15	14
Substance	<i>drinker or smoker, drug user, very big drug user, drug user outside of mj, heavy smoker, intravenous drug user, pill-popper, regular smoker, smoker (7)</i>	15	9
Routine activities	<i>early morning person, forum person, regular corrie watcher, big gamer, huge bar guy, morning person (3)</i>	8	6

³⁴ *Vegan* is a case of a noun that might well be considered to express an ideological stance. Still, since refraining from consuming animal products has a major impact on nutrition habits, it is categorised as food/drink-related habit here.

Product-related	<i>brand follower, n+1 person</i>	2	2
TOTAL		40	31

Table 7.7: Overview of nouns and NPs categorised as “habits”

7.2.3. Expertise and Professionalism

Three categories that contain nouns referring to expertise are differentiated here. One is based on the frequently appearing head noun *expert*; another features lexical elements assignable to the concept of (non-)expertise without containing the noun *expert*; and the third category contains nouns referring to what would conventionally be considered professions/job titles.

- **Expertise (+ *expert*)**

The second biggest lexeme-based conceptual category is constituted by (variants of) the noun *expert*, which frequently appears on its own (105 tokens), sometimes refers back to something mentioned before (18 instances, categorised as anaphoric reference in table 7.8 below) or occurs together with postmodifying prepositional (and, rarely, other phrases) specifying the field of expertise (40 tokens altogether).

Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>)		To.	Ty.	
General	<i>expert (103), full expert, real expert</i>	105	3	
Anaphoric reference	<i>expert (at these things, at this, in these matters, in this area, in this field (2), on such matters, on the matter, on the subject, on these points, on this (6), on this sort of thing)</i>	18	12	
Premodified by adjective	Legal	<i>legal expert (2)</i>	2	2
	Business/services	<i>financial expert, postal expert</i>	2	2
	Medical	<i>medical expert</i>	1	1
Postmodified by prepositional phrase	Nature	<i>expert [for cetaceans, in fish, in mammals, on bees, on birds, on feline anatomy, on hymenopterans, on ID, on ticks, on their behavior, on these type of creature]</i>	11	11
	Technical	<i>expert [at modelling, on Indian signalling, on kerosene, on metal detecting, on oil, on small horticultural engines, on the various types/standards of gas cylinders/fitting]</i>	7	7
	Products	<i>expert [in Normandy maps, in Nike's ethics, on Austrian military uniforms, on shoes, on the dot product]</i>	5	5
	IT/Gaming	<i>expert [at drivers/optimisation, in this verification lark, on slimming world, with Meshlab]</i>	4	4
	Arts/Sports	<i>expert [in training techniques, on ski jumping, on the 2 step (dancing style), on the popularity of this music]</i>	4	4
	Medical	<i>expert [on HRT]</i>	1	1
	Science	<i>expert [at geology]</i>	1	1
	Business/Services	<i>expert [on house prices]</i>	1	1
	Ideological	<i>expert [on religious matters]</i>	1	1
	Leisure	<i>expert [at this game]</i>	1	1
	Linguistic	<i>expert [at pronouncing things]</i>	1	1
Postmodified by other phrases	IT/Gaming	<i>expert [when it comes to inserting kits into the game, when it comes to configs]</i>	2	2
	Nature	<i>expert [to tell you what bird it's from]</i>	1	1

Head in nominal compounds	IT/Gaming	[linux (2), PHP, programming (2), server class CPU, computer game, economist~game theory expert~doctorate ³⁵] expert	8	6
	Technical	[audio, asbestos, Bluetooth, electronics, vehicle electronics, wood] expert	6	6
	Product	[DICOM, Dennis [type C colours, my comment], jean, military truck, amplifier] expert	5	5
	Nature	[conformation, moth, shark (2), wood] expert	5	4
TOTAL			192	81

Table 7.8: Overview of nouns and NPs (+ expert) in the category “expertise”

This analysis shows that web forum users routinely negatively identify as experts without specifying the precise domain in which they lack expertise. The reason for this could be that speakers assume that their interlocutors lack the knowledge to understand the specification of the kind of expertise, or that the speakers negatively identifying as experts themselves do not have any specialist terms at their disposal that would allow them to be more specific. Thus, their use of expertise disclaimers could be seen as reflecting their (potentially implicit) awareness that they are exchanging lay expertise (see section 4.2.1.2) on these forums. In any case, the high number of unspecific disclaimers suggests that they might function more as discourse markers than as truly informative statements. In example 7.3 below, an unspecific disclaimer of expertise is used in an exchange the purpose of which is the identification of the source of ‘weird’-looking ‘poo’. A negative self-identifier is used by speaker B after providing their ‘diagnosis’ upon seeing the picture:

- 7.3. A: *weird poo?!
dogs found this the other day, like poo but maybe not?!
[photo]
it was like all hairy, cheers, [Name].*
- B: *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]!*

Another example of a negative self-identifier epistemically postmodifying assessments and diagnoses is 7.4 below. Just like in the above example, where the negative self-identifier is coordinated with a statement commenting on the degree of certainty of the previous utterances (*and might well be off the mark*), the co-text of the negative self-identifier in 7.4 works to reduce the certainty of the speaker’s identification of the beetle in question:

- 7.4. [Picture of beetle]
- Definetly a deathwathch beetle. if they are you might hear them tapping their heads against the wall. **I'm no expert** so I might be wrong.*

Again, in this example, the speaker acknowledges their lay status and the possibility of being mistaken in their identification of the animal in the picture as a “deathwatch beetle” using a modal verb (*so I might be wrong*); the conditional clause following their assertion also serves to mitigate their claim. Interestingly, though, the speaker at the same time uses the adverb *definitely* when providing their identification, thus in a way undermining the acknowledgement of their lay status. In the next chapter,

³⁵ This expression strictly speaking does not fit into any of the categories presented. For the sake of exhaustive categorisation of data, though, I am considering *expert* as head of *economist~game theory expert~doctorate* here.

I examine whether negative self-identifiers of this type are a salient linguistic choice in similar co-texts, which would indicate that they function like discourse markers, used by speakers to formally index their lay status, allowing them to act like experts while still coming across as modest.

In addition to the most frequently used unspecific disclaimers of expertise, there are 40 instances of identifying NPs in the corpus in which the noun *expert* is postmodified by a prepositional (or other) phrase specifying the field of expertise and 24 nominal compounds with *expert* as head. A large number of constructions with *expert* are used to refer to very specific fields of knowledge that probably would not formally or traditionally be considered expert fields, but rather as specific interests people might have – such as *Indian signaling*, *Austrian military uniforms* or *metal detecting*. As for what domains are most often linguistically associated with expertise, table 7.9 below shows the results of the semantic analysis of all instances of *expert* with a postmodifier.

Field of expertise	To.
Nature	17
IT/Gaming	14
Technical	13
Product	10
Arts/Sports	4
Business/Services	3
Medical	2
Legal	2
Ideological	1
Leisure	1
Linguistic	1
Science	1
TOTAL	69

Table 7.9: Areas of expertise referred to by NIs from the domain of specific expertise (+ *expert*)

As can be seen, speakers in my corpus often negatively identify as experts in the field of nature, mostly on subjects relating to particular species (such as *feline anatomy*, *cetaceans*, or *sharks*). There are also a high number of instances of negative identification with expertise on specific IT and technical subjects – from *small horticultural engines* to *programming*, *linux* and *asbestos* – and with expertise with particular products (e.g. *the dot product*) and commodities (e.g. *jeans*).

By choosing to negatively identify with nominal constructions featuring the noun *expert* to indicate their lack of expertise with these things, phenomena and activities, speakers linguistically represent and thus implicitly acknowledge them as fields of expertise. On the one hand, this could reflect that the concept of the ever-more specialised expert is becoming increasingly important in people’s self-representation online and point towards speakers’ orientation to demands of the contemporary job market and images of the self that feature prominently in it. In this context, the concept of employability as a mainly individual project is worth mentioning (Moreau & Leathwood 2007). On a blog providing advice on how to succeed professionally, for instance, it is stated that “the best way to make yourself extremely valuable in a team” is to be “a master of something”. “The goal is to become a *trusted resource about a certain topic*” and “[t]herefore, a focus area doesn’t mean you can ONLY do that one thing, but simply that you are BEST at doing it” (Ucros 2018, my italics). In this context, the linguistic association of particular products with expertise is interesting because it suggests that

expertise is represented as not necessarily coming from education, but also from what marketers would refer to as ‘customer experience’. As discussed in section 4.2.1.2, consumers are becoming increasingly active, with online product reviews exerting a key influence on buying decisions. Similarly, knowledge acquired through buying and using particular products is becoming an important form of expertise negotiated online (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). On the other hand, that negative identification with expertise in this wide variety of domains is linguistically expressed as “*expert* + preposition + field of expertise” suggests that speakers routinely and flexibly use the noun *expert* as an ad-hoc disclaimer which can be flexibly adapted to whatever topic is being talked about. In other words, the great variety of nominal expressions with *expert* used on forums points to the underlying assumption that there surely must be an *expert in/on/at* pretty much anything, but also indicates that speakers undermine the status of experts by ‘pragmatically appropriating’ nominal constructions with *expert* to serve their situationally specific communicative goals.

Besides constructions with *expert*, there are many more nouns and noun phrases used to refer to someone with expertise in a particular field. As can be seen from table 7.10 below, there are 12 noun tokens referring to levels of proficiency in general (from *absolute beginner* to *professional*) and 39 noun tokens, mostly pre- or postmodified, referring to someone with specific expertise:

- **Expertise (- *expert*)**

Expertise (- <i>expert</i>)			To.	Ty.
General levels of expertise	<i>absolute beginner, beginner, champion, consistent performer, novice, person who can advise you on the matter, pioneer (2), pro, professional, specialist or collector, specialist</i>		12	11
Noun	Technical	<i>techie (2)</i>	2	1
Adjective + noun	Linguistic	<i>eloquent wordsmith, particularly lyrical guy, great blogger</i>	3	3
	Medical	<i>medical person (2), medical professional</i>	3	2
	Nature	<i>big grower of mesembs, good birdwatcher</i>	2	2
	Legal	<i>legal eagle</i>	1	1
	Technical	<i>technological man, expert builder</i>	2	2
	Housework	<i>very good cook</i>	1	1
	Science	<i>astronomical type</i>	1	1
	Sports	<i>expert runner³⁶</i>	1	1
Nominal compounds	Other	<i>tactical guru, confident driver</i>	2	2
	IT	<i>advanced IT person, bash guru, computer boff, IT guy, IT person, license guru, Revit master</i>	7	7
	Technical	<i>electronics guru, fire door specialist, qualified HV switching person, tech geek</i>	4	4
	Business	<i>VAT specialist</i>	1	1
	Science	<i>math wiz</i>	1	1
	Health	<i>professional on OCD, stranger to drugs, stranger to how PD affects people, stranger to injecting</i>	4	4

³⁶ *Expert runner* is a problematic case which could theoretically also be assigned to either the conceptual category “activities” or “professions” (see table 7.1 and the accompanying discussion of criteria for category inclusion). Because it contains the pre-modifier *expert*, though, it is considered to belong to the conceptual category “expertise (- *expert*)” here in an attempt to be maximally consistent.

Noun + prepositional phrase	IT	<i>layman when it comes to these things (enable PS one emulator), noob to UAE4ALL</i>	2	2
	Housework	<i>huge one for composting, natural in the kitchen</i>	2	2
	Nature	<i>great one for birdsong</i>	1	1
	Arts	<i>authority on paint work</i>	1	1
Metonymic			4	4
	<i>Armstrong or Cavendish, Mo Farah, Nostradamus, Aladdin's genie</i>		4	4
TOTAL			57	54

Table 7.10: Overview of nouns and NPs (- *expert*) in the category “expertise”

Most of the head nouns used in such disclaimers of expertise designate persons with a high level of expertise, such as *professional* and *specialist* or, more informally, *boff*, *geek* or *wiz*. As with negative self-identifiers of preference discussed earlier, some disclaimers of expertise are constructed by combining a general head noun like *person* with a pre- or postmodifier providing the ‘specialist’ meaning component, as in, e.g., *advanced IT person* or *medical person*. Or, conversely, the ‘specialism’ can be provided by the premodifying (evaluative) intensified adjective (e.g. *very good*), with the head noun specifying the field of expertise (e.g. *driver*). In one case, *eloquent wordsmith*, both premodifying adjective and head noun contain the meaning ‘proficiency’. This wide variety of (seemingly spontaneous, informal and even original) nominal constructions, created by speakers to contrast themselves with expertise in often highly specific fields, suggests, once again, that speakers acknowledge the importance of the concept of expertise, but also care very little about finding ‘proper’ labels for the specialists they claim not to be, freely referring to all kinds of experts to suit their own communicative goals. References to a lack of expertise or experience through nouns like *stranger* (to something), *noob* or *layman* are comparatively rare, which suggests that the notion of the expert – in its different lexical realisations – is more salient a conceptualisation in speakers’ linguistic negative self-representation (perhaps because when interacting on forums, belonging to the group of laypeople is the default and socially preferred option, while linguistically highlighting non-membership with the group of non-experts would be perceived as immodest and thus ‘marked’). All this could be a sign of speakers using these variants of negative self-identifiers to mark their discourse as different from, but not inferior to, expert discourse.

An example which illustrates that acknowledging non-expertise or even poorly evaluating their own skills does not stop speakers in my corpus from performing speech acts that seem to contradict the meaning of the negative self-identifier is *I am not a very good cook but do recommend experimenting*. There are also examples of speakers negatively identifying with actual experts (e.g. *Armstrong* or *Cavendish*) or figures metonymically standing for particular abilities (e.g. *Nostradamus*). In the following example from my corpus, the speaker negatively identifies as *Mo Farah*, (perhaps self-) ironically acknowledging his lack of professionalism while at the same time emphasising their own ambitions: *Could you give me an indication of what time the last finishers tend to cross the line in? I am no Mo Farah but I certainly don't wish to finish last!!!* Table 7.11 below provides an overview of the different semantic categories of head nouns and pre-modifiers combined to create nouns from the conceptual category of expertise.

Functional category	Conceptual category	Data	To.	Ty.
Head noun	Expertise	<i>guru (4), specialist (2), professional (2), master, geek, boff, authority, natural, wordsmith, wiz</i>	15	10

	General	<i>person (4), guy (2), type, man</i>	8	4
	Experience/ Inexperience	<i>stranger (3), noob, layman</i>	5	3
	Evaluative	<i>huge one, great one</i>	2	2
	Other	<i>eagle</i>	1	1
Pre-modifier	Evaluative	<i>big, confident, eloquent, expert (2), good, great, very good</i>	8	7
TOTAL			39	27

Table 7.11: Conceptual profile of head nouns and modifiers expressing expertise (or lack thereof)

The fields of expertise with which speakers most frequently negatively identify are again “IT” and “technical”. This could indicate that few people feel qualified enough not to index their lay status in these contexts (indeed, it can be assumed that there is likely to be uncertainty in several of the fields of expertise identified in table 7.10). Metonymic expressions are not included in this categorisation, hence the lower number of instances represented.

Field of expertise	To.
Nature	17
IT/Gaming	14
Technical	13
Product	10
Arts/Sports	4
Business/Services	3
Medical	2
Legal	2
Ideological	1
Leisure	1
Linguistic	1
Science	1
TOTAL	69

Table 7.12: Areas of expertise referred to by NPs from the domain of specific expertise (- *expert*)

- **Professions**

One of the three biggest semantic categories differentiated in this conceptual profile contains single and compound nouns referring to particular professions. Most nouns in this category denote medical professions, with the noun *doctor* being the second most frequently occurring type after *expert* in the entire corpus (103 unmodified instances). The analysis revealed that unspecific disclaimers of expertise are most common in health forums. The fact that the relatively unspecific noun *doctor* occurs so frequently indicates that negative self-identifiers are often used in discussions on health issues, i.e. in somewhat ‘delicate’ contexts, where speakers might consider it particularly necessary to epistemically mitigate the impact of their utterances. Speakers in my corpus also frequently negatively identify with professions from the domain of IT (notably being or not being a *programmer*) and technical professions such as *mechanic*, *engineer* or *builder*. This indicates that medical and technology-related knowledge has an important status for people on web forums (an observation already made when discussing identifying NPs in the conceptual domains of expertise). In contrast, negative identification with academic qualifications, e.g. as *geologist* or *scientist*, is comparatively rare. This could reflect that forums tend to be oriented towards discussing problems of everyday life – like building a carport or

setting up a computer programme – for which practical skills, rather than formal education, play a role. Table 7.13 presents the nouns assigned to the superordinate conceptual domain “professions” in their respective subcategories.

Professions		To.	Ty.
Medical	<i>cardiologist, doctor (23), dr., entomologist, geneticist, gp, medic (4), medical professional (2), neurologist, pharmacist, pharmacologist, physician (2), psychopharmacologist, pwp</i>	41	14
IT	<i>beta tester, coder (2), dba, dev, developer (2), fano developer, hard core programmer, html programmer, programmer (10), pt admin or developer, windows programmer</i>	21	10
Technical	<i>audio engineer, builder (2), car mechanic, chainsaw technician, electrical engineer, electrician, engineer (4), expert tig welder, mechanic (5), pilot, plumber, technician, very good mechanic</i>	21	13
Arts/Sports	<i>artist (2), cheerleader, designer, dj, motoring journalist, musician, photographer, very good photographer, professional dance instructor, professional footballer, ref, texture artist, university educated writer, writer</i>	15	14
Science	<i>chemist, economist, geologist, historian, mathematician, nuclear physicist, physicist, rocket scientist, scientist (5)</i>	14	10
Business/ Finance	<i>accountant (3), bookseller, experienced investor, financial advisor, consultant or pd, postman, salesman, super manager, supervisor</i>	11	9
Legal	<i>lawyer (5), solicitor</i>	6	2
Education	<i>du student, pshe teacher, qualified teacher, 'second', student, ta, teacher (2)</i>	7	6
Nature	<i>botanist, gardener, zoologist, hymenopterist</i>	4	4
Other	<i>fucking butler, fieldtester</i>	2	2
TOTAL		142	84

Table 7.13: Overview of nouns and NPs categorised as “professions”

The overall frequency of nouns from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism – whether denoting actual professions or constituting constructions with *expert* and nouns with similar meanings – suggests that knowledge, is a key identifying concept in the examined corpus. The conceptual category of professions represents a pole on the continuum of conceptualisations I have mentioned, as reference to formal qualifications can be considered the most prototypical – or at least conventional – form of identifying with expertise. The fact that the conceptual category “expertise”, which is based on occurrences of the noun *expert* with various specifiers, is actually more prominent in the corpus, however, could suggest that in the examined online contexts, (lay) expertise, rather than formal education, is a key concept in people’s self-representation. While contrasting themselves with experts, speakers also appear to quite confidently engage in the very practice of informally exchanging ‘non-expert’, unprofessional knowledge (as example 7.2 has shown). This could mean that there is a certain tension between what speakers do with language (discussing ‘expert topics’) and what they claim not to be.

7.2.4. Activities

This category contains single and compound nouns representing nominalisations of verbal processes, i.e., they are used to negatively identify speakers in relation to activities, e.g. as a *climber*, *runner* or *builder*. Whereas these identifying NPs can be used to imply expertise (or lack thereof, for that matter), they cannot per se be unproblematically assigned to the category of expertise: for example, negatively identifying as *World of Warcraft player* primarily means that the speaker chooses not to engage in this game, which could either be an expression of a non-preference or non-practice (hence non-expertise). This is why “activities” constitutes a fringe category. As will be shown at the end of this section, fringe

categories are interesting in that they share features of other, more clearly definable categories (in this case, the categories of expertise, preferences and habits). By being conceptualisable in relation to other, more robust categories, fringe categories indirectly support these reference categories. Together, more robust and fringe categories seem to provide us with a continuum of conceptualisations defined by ‘poles’ of unproblematic reference categories – which, as will be shown, coincides with and reveals salience of particular conceptualisations in the corpus.

Activities		To.	Ty.
Sports	<i>climber, fast runner (2), gym person, "hill walk", hillwalker, runner (4), ultra distance runner, ultra runner, road rider, TGS kind of rider</i>	13	9
Gaming/Entertainment	<i>big gambler [gambler], collector, gamer, hard-core gamer, huge board game player, World of Warcraft player</i>	6	6
Arts	<i>fast writer, piano player, fx guy</i>	3	3
Leisure	<i>single traveller, happy camper</i>	2	2
Nature	<i>"fossil hunter"</i>	1	1
TOTAL		25	21

Table 7.14: Overview of nouns and NPs categorised as “activities”

7.2.5. Characteristics

The conceptual category broadly labelled “characteristics” contains identifying NPs used to identify the speaker in evaluative terms, in relation to health and illness, beliefs and ideologies, in demographic or relational terms, and in relation to particular social, physical or other characteristics. As can be seen, speakers most frequently negatively identify with evaluative nouns and noun phrases, whereby it is possible to distinguish between literally evaluative nouns and noun phrases (e.g. *creep, nasty person*) and nouns and noun phrases used metaphorically (e.g. *pig*) or metonymically (e.g. *pain*) or both (e.g. *12 year old text talking cunt*³⁷). As these examples show, the evaluative meaning is either provided by the head noun (as in *12 year old text talking cunt*) or the premodifying adjective (as in *nasty person*).

Characteristics		To.	Ty.
Evaluative (literal)	<i>bad person (2), bad racist, clever man, creep, danger to my step son, drama queen, fussy person, good boy, good girl, good host, hater, hero, hoolie or a fighter, idiot, lunatic overbearing mother, nasty person, 'overprotective' mother, pervert, proper mum, prude (2), real stickler about monetary things, scare monger, sexist, show off, thief (2), threat to my daughter, violent person, wierdo</i>	31	28

³⁷ Two points appear important to mention when categorising (mostly pejorative) metaphorical and metonymic expressions (in this table and in table 7.18 below). Firstly, as the arrangement of table 7.15 is intended to indicate, it could be argued that expressions such as *cunt* are both metaphorical and metonymic: a part of a person stands for the person as a whole and characteristics of the body part are attributed to the person. It appears, though, that the comparison is more pivotal in most contexts than the part-whole relationship. This shows, for example, in the fact that some of these expressions could be used to refer to people, animals and objects or even ideas that do not have the part metonymically representing them (for example, I could call my computer a ‘dick’, in which case the *pars pro toto* relation would not apply). Secondly, some pejorative terms (e.g. *monster* in table 7.15 or *bastard* and *bitch* in table 7.18 below) are so well-established that they might be considered dead, or at least sleeping metaphors (Goatly 1997: 78). A dead metaphor is defined by Pawelec (2006: 18) as “a lexical item with a conventional meaning different from its original meaning (or some previous meaning in the chain of semantic change)”. As for pale, or sleeping, metaphors, Caponi (2010: 26) describes them as analogies “derided” as metaphors whose “lifeblood of figurative indirectness [is] almost gone”. According to Goatly (ibid.), there is a “metaphorical cline” from most to least active metaphors, and the more conventionalised a metaphor is, the least pragmatic inferencing is involved. An example of an expression on the ‘dead’ end of the scale is *pupil*, whose metaphorical roots one might not even be aware of without consulting a dictionary (e.g. Merriam Webster 2021: online). Expressions such as *bitch* are not entirely ‘dead’ (since the analogy with dog-like qualities could still be seen as playing a role), and are therefore categorised as metaphors (albeit not very active ones) in my analyses.

Evaluative (metaphorical)	<i>animal, complete monster, complete scutter³⁸ monster, mug, pig, fucking product, robot that someone can program into liking this or that, saint</i>	9	8
Evaluative (metaphorical and metonymic)	<i>12 year old text talking cunt, dick, pain, twat³⁹</i>	4	4
Metaphorical	<i>spring chicken, tortoise</i>	2	2
Health/illness	<i>addict, alcoholic, bedwetter, compulsive eater, diabetic (3), eczema sufferer, great sufferer, hypochondriac, insulin user, methamphetamine "addict", newly diagnosed diabetic, pain patient, very patient patient, parky, patient of argc, recovering addict, severe case, very strong asthmatic, victim of caffeine addiction</i>	21	19
Ideological/religious	<i>buddist, catholic (3), communist, 'defacto leader', extremist, leaver, libdem, liberal, nationalist, practising christian, purist, rastafarian/stoner/hippie, religious person, trumper,</i>	16	14
Relational/Demographic	<i>bridesmaid (2), descendant, descendant of fred archer, parent (3), "real" bridesmaid, schoolboy, youngster</i>	10	7
Physiological/Physical	<i>7-12 or a 7-19 or any, easily hypnotised person, flexible person, good sleeper (2), great one for scars healing, great sleeper, heavy guy, sound sleeper, tall or stocky sort of person</i>	10	9
Social	<i>"single-person", face to face group person, 'I told you so' type of person, isolated person, networking person, particularly 'weddingy' person, 'people person', Singleton</i>	9	9
Geographic	<i>Aberdonian, EU resident, Glasto newbie, resident, town dweller, UK resident (2), Widnesian resident</i>	8	7
Linguistic	<i>native speaker (3), native English speaker (2)</i>	5	2
Psychological	<i>anxious person (2), masochist</i>	4	3
Temporary/Mood	<i>happy bunny (2), happy chappie</i>	3	2
Gender-specific	<i>'girly girl', one of those girls who have always dreamed about their wedding, sir</i>	3	3
Sexual orientation/practice	<i>pedophile</i>	1	1
TOTAL		136	119

Table 7.15: Overview of nouns and NPs categorised as "characteristics"

The frequency of references to evaluative expressions suggests that web forum users are careful to position themselves not only regarding the subject matter the respective forum is devoted to, but also as individuals with particular personality traits. The fact that the conceptual category mainly consists of negatively evaluating NPs could indicate that face management plays an important role in the context of web forums. In a discourse context where people who are unlikely ever to meet or have met each other in real life discuss quite personal issues such as health (Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020), the need to provide information about one's 'real-life' personality and to prevent potential threats to one's own (positive) face by pre-emptively disclaiming potential negative implications of an utterance might be greater than in other situations (Mackiewicz 2010a, Seargeant & Tagg 2014). Of

³⁸ According to the Urban Dictionary (2007: online), *scutters* is an Irish slang term referring to diarrhea; hence, it is interpreted as evaluative metaphorical expression here.

³⁹ *Twat*, according to Collin's COBUILD Dictionary (online), refers to a woman's genitals and is used as a pejorative term.

course, there is no comparative data to test whether the prevalence of evaluative personality disclaimers is higher in the context of the examined web forums than in other discourse contexts.⁴⁰

Contrary to what one might expect, identifying NPs defining speakers' identities in relation to particular worldviews, beliefs or ideologies occur rather infrequently in comparison with nouns and noun phrases from other conceptual domains. This could have to do with the medium of investigation: web forums might just not be the sites for discussing political issues (in the widest sense), but are rather used for exchanging perspectives and knowledge on very specific fields of interest. These constitute the *raison d'être* for the forum in the first place and thus create a sense of shared identity that is 'disembedded' from the participants' normal social and political realities, in which their ideological position might play a more important role. In other words, web forums, as topic-defined sites of knowledge and opinion exchange, might not necessitate ideological positioning, as the shared interest the forum is devoted to is mostly apolitical, setting a discourse context in which being or not being, say, a *liberal*, does not really matter – after all, liberals and conservatives might be united by their common interest in motorbikes, or by suffering from the same health condition.

7.2.6. Roles

Another relatively prominently represented conceptual category of identifying NPs I labelled "roles" because it defines the speaker in relation to particular sites or forums of social interaction. More specifically, this category contains nouns defining speakers via their role, status or behaviour in relation to the forum on which they are interacting (e.g. as *member* or *frequent user* of a forum), their role in business and trade (e.g. as *seller* or *Prime customer*) or their affiliation to organisations and clubs (e.g. as *member* or *active contributor*).

Roles		To.	Ty.
Forum-internal		46	38
Role	<i>forum admin, member (8), member of any groups, member of any (forum), member of Seller Central, member of that shithole forum, member of vendor central, member on the forum, member on this site, moderator, OM, prime member (2), pro member, unknown person on Longevity.org, visitor, subscriber</i>	24	17
Usage	<i>big poster on this site, forum guy, frequent user, frequent visitor, power user, regular contributor, regular in here, regular poster (2), regular user, very active member</i>	11	10
Behavior	<i>big flasher, forum predator, saint on this forum, spammer</i>	4	4
Virtual identity	<i>mobian, part of the elite universe, pirate, quiverfull, rich player</i>	5	5
Current interaction	<i>good choice, help</i>	2	2
Business roles		31	25
Seller/Provider	<i>personal seller, "darkroom under the stairs" merchant, approval lending service, ATEX SME, big commercial seller, big seller (2), BMVD seller, branded seller of this product, business owner, business (2), fraudulent seller, landlady, major supplier, massive company, merchant seller, new seller, pro-seller, seller (3), seller with Amazon (2), YouTube partner</i>	25	20
Buyer/Customer	<i>big investor, client, Prime customer, victim of online fraud</i>	4	4
Staff	<i>employee (2)</i>	2	1
Affiliation Status		6	3
<i>active contributor to FF, member of the previous club, member (4)</i>			

⁴⁰ What adds to this problem is that the web forums examined here constitute by no means a homogenous discourse type, so they are hard to compare to other discourse types in the first place.

TOTAL	83	66
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Table 7.16: Overview of nouns and NPs categorised as “roles”

As can be seen, the largest subcategory here is that of forum-internal roles: speakers often negatively identify as members of particular forums, or in relation to particular positions within the forum. For instance, some forums differentiate between *regular* and *prime* or *pro members*, and it apparently makes a difference whether one makes a contribution to a forum as *visitor* or *subscriber*. Speakers also negatively identify in relation to their forum-internal behaviour, e.g. as *spammers*, *saints* or *predators* and evaluate their own performance in a particular social interaction on a forum, negatively identifying as *help* or *good choice* (for advice). Finally, there are a few instances of negative identification with fictional or virtual identities, e.g. as *Mobian* or *part of the elite universe*. Negative identification with roles likely to be exclusively relevant for the current interaction on web forums occurs relatively often, which indicates that speakers are aware of and orient themselves towards particular conventions of forum usage. For instance, example 7.5 from my corpus suggests that being a regular poster is associated with greater authority among forum users:

- 7.5. A: *[Name of C], I see you are fairly new to the site. I can recommend Dwight Van Driver as a completely 100% reliable poster. He is ALWAYS right. Please take what he has to say as gospel, and he is the only poster here that I would say this about.*
- B: *As a certain tennis player used to say.... "You can't be *serious*"He is not exactly wet behind the ears where this site is concerned :o)*
- A: *OOPS! Just checked his profile, I see he registered 8th Nov alright, but in 2002! My humble apologies!*
- C: *No offence taken - I've not been a regular poster since joining, so probably fair to say I'm a little damp behind the ears. Very grateful for all replies.*

In this exchange, speaker A states that another speaker, C, is new to the site, and goes on to recommend an experienced poster for reference. Upon speaker B's correction, according to which C is, in fact, not *wet behind the ears*, C assures A that he is not offended by their wrong accusation, conceding that not being a regular poster probably means being *damp behind the ears*, i.e. inexperienced.

The high number of instances of negative identification with forum-specific roles in a corpus of web forum discussions implies, again, a relation between negative self-identifiers and discourse context, i.e., it seems that negative self-identifiers are mainly used to strategically modify the interpretation of speakers' utterances within the parameters of the given communicative situation. At the same time, negatively identifying with forum-internally relevant categories by using the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP” is, without even taking into consideration the linguistic context of use, a linguistic choice by which forum-internal roles and behaviour are conceptualised as noun phrases and, thus, as entities (i.e. identity) rather than processes (i.e. activity). That being considered a new forum user can be taken as an offense, judging from the example above, might indicate that forum identities are also relevant for speakers' ‘forum-external’, i.e. more permanent, identity.

Besides forum-internal roles, speakers often negatively identify in relation to roles one can assume in business relationships, namely as sellers or providers of particular services and products, as buyers or customers and as staff within a company. Scrutinising the discourse contexts of some negative self-identifiers in this conceptual category suggests that these negative self-identifiers are more likely to

be used to convey propositional content, i.e., the ideational function here seems to be in the foreground: the reason why speakers negatively identify, e.g., as particular kinds of sellers in the situational context of a sellers' forum is that they seek to provide more specific information about themselves to facilitate finding a solution to a problem together with the other forum members. The following example is a case in point:

7.6. *As the thread title suggests... I've been a very long term Amazon seller, for over a decade. I had my selling privileges removed once before, two or three years ago, but they were rescinded after I spoke to someone there. This time it's been very different.*

*I received no notice or warning, but the privileges were suspended a week or so ago for late shipping. I know this is my own fault. **I'm not a big commercial seller but a private individual who sells the odd item**, and recently have been so busy with work that I shipped some items a day or two late and shipped others on time but forgot to click the 'sent' button on the site, so my performance notifications for shipping times suffered.*

In this example, the speaker negatively identifies as a *big commercial seller* on an Amazon sellers' forum, pointing out more specifically that she is *but a private individual*. The function of the negative self-identifier here is thus to contrast the speaker not with the category of sellers as a whole, but with other members in the category of sellers, thus specifying what kind of seller she is. The reason why the speaker provides this information is to justify her imperfect shipping performance, i.e., specification in this case mitigates the threat to the speaker's own face represented by her self-criticism. Negatively identifying with big commercial sellers may also index aspects of the speaker's identity beyond the immediate communicative situation, such as a more permanent ideological opposition to large corporations (the characterisation of the items sold as *odd*, too, seems to undermine the idea that the speaker could be mistaken for a commercial business) – but this is just a speculative interpretation.

7.2.7. Usage, consumption and ownership

As indicated before, conceptual profiling always involves devising criteria according to which lexical elements can be considered to fall into the same conceptual category. Depending on the chosen criteria, the resulting category is more or less homogenous and robust. Sometimes, as mentioned when discussing the category “activities” in section 7.2.4, certain linguistic elements seem to occupy a middle ground between other, less problematic categories and do not fit well with any of them. Three small groups of identifying NPs that represent such cases are “usage”, “consumption” and “ownership”, which can be explained by reference to, but do not share sufficient characteristics with, members of the more prominently represented categories.

As for the category “usage”, identifying NPs containing the lexeme *user* are considered to constitute a category in its own right because they do not seem to be assignable to any of the other conceptualisations found to be frequently expressed in the corpus: *user* does not, per se, imply expertise, because I could be a user of something without being proficient at using it. It is not quite the same as a (leisure or sportive) activity in the sense of *climber*, either, because in contrast to *climb*, the nominalised verb *use* is transitive (and hence, you are a user *of something*). It can, but does not necessarily, imply a specific preference for something (I could say that I'm a smartphone user simply because this is standard practice today), and it can be interpreted as indicating a relation (i.e. in the sense of *energy suppliers* versus *energy users*) like the nouns assigned to the category of “roles” in my profile. What unites the instances of *user* in this corpus is that they all specify products or applications as objects of usage, which makes the category conceptually similar to that of product preferences.

The nominal compounds assigned to the category of “consumption” also imply choice and thus preference, but also a habit, in that being a SKY TV subscriber, for example, implies habitually using SKY. Finally, regularly consuming something might also imply expertise, in that regular customers may well be expert customers (for example, being a O2 customer can imply having experience with O2 services); the same applies to “ownership”. Summing up, the category “usage, consumption and ownership”, which is deliberately conceptualised as a fringe category, shows that it can be difficult to clearly categorise nominal identifiers used to contrast speakers with preferences and choice and, respectively, with habitual practice and expertise. As will be discussed in more detail below, I think it is precisely these fringe categories that appear to reflect potentially changing conceptualisations of identity.

Usage, consumption and ownership		To.	Ty.
Usage	<i>big user of Talking Point, big user of this, big user of wire, Maya user, serious user of the later versions of FTM, user of delay, user of Facebook or Twitter, Vibe user</i>	8	8
Consumption	<i>LTSB customer, o2 customer, perfume buyer, Sky customer, SKY subscriber, TalkTalk customer, TT customer</i>	7	7
Ownership	<i>owner of a BTS, owner of a house</i>	2	2
TOTAL		17	17

Table 7.17: Overview of nouns and NPs in the category “usage, consumption and ownership”

7.3. Summary and implications of results

The aim of this chapter was to establish a conceptual profile of the nouns and noun phrases with which speakers in my corpus negatively identify. I described, classified and quantified identifying NPs occurring in my dataset of 936 negative self-identifiers used in web forums, differentiating them according to their ideational meanings and taking into consideration their formal appearance (i.e. whether they are represented by (potentially pre- or postmodified) single nouns or compounds).

The categories in this profile serve to explicate and quantify one – crucial – variable of the negative self-identifiers in my corpus, viz. the possible forms and meanings of the identifying NP, serving as the departure point for the analysis of the interaction between negative self-identifiers and their linguistic context.

To approach the categorisation process systematically and ensure maximal transparency, I set up an initial framework according to which nouns can be assigned to super- and subordinate categories. Borrowing the concept of prototypes, I argued that establishing a conceptual profile, at least in the case of this analysis, which exclusively examined nouns and noun phrases, might best be approached in terms of robust categories (with definable characteristics and a prototypical representative) emerging from iterative data analysis and constituting the departure point for establishing other categories in relation to them. Approaching nouns and noun phrases this way was intended to handle the problem of fuzziness of categories: being clear about what the prototypical features of an element assigned to a category are, and acknowledging the fact that this ‘focal semantic point’ is an interpretatory decision and thus not entirely objective is I think better than postulating clear-cut boundaries between rigid – and constructed – categories of authentic language in use. In other words, I assume that salience is not something that can best be accounted for by presenting tables with category frequencies, as claiming that a category with 101 members is conceptually more important than one with 90 members probably does not say much about the relations between language, the mind and the social world.

Based on these considerations, the final representation of the results of this analysis of identifying NPs here takes the form of a lexicosemantic landscape, representing the different conceptualisations found to be distinguishable and more or less salient in the corpus.

7.3.1. Conceptual landscape of identifying NPs

The following concepts emerged as ‘focal concepts’, i.e. as semantically differentiable in my data. As will be seen, they largely correspond to the superordinate tags introduced earlier; the reason for this is that – as mentioned – the data was not annotated prior to, but as part of, the analysis.

- **Expertise and professionalism:** being good at something; knowing something (e.g. *expert, physician, math wiz*)
- **Preference:** actively choosing/liking something (e.g. *dog lover, fan of air ride*)
- **Activity:** doing something regularly; possibility of becoming proficient/knowledgeable (e.g. *climber, winter camper*)
- **Personal characteristics:** a characteristic, trait or belief somebody can be said to have, considered in isolation or in relation to others (e.g. *flexible person, masochist*)
- **Role:** a label which someone can be given in relation to bodies, institutions and particular sites and forms of interaction, i.e. groups of people commonly representing something or jointly participating in some activity (e.g. *employee, member*)
- **Habit:** something done regularly, usually not involving the possibility of becoming proficient/knowledgeable (e.g. *smoker, early morning person*)⁴¹

To check, at least informally, if a semantic tagger would also identify the concepts of expertise and professionalism (i.e. “knowing”) and preference (i.e. “liking”) as salient upon being ‘fed’ a (derived) corpus of identifying NPs, I had the tagging software Wmatrix 4.0 (Rayson 2008) create a key word cloud (Figure 7.2). This cloud represents particular words which are significantly more often represented in the negative self-identifiers in my data than in a reference corpus (in this case the informal written component of the BNC). I also had Wmatrix produce a semantic tag cloud (Figure 7.3), which compares automatically tagged semantic domains of the examined corpus to semantic domains identified in a reference corpus, again, the BNC Sampler Written Informal. Of course, this has to be taken with a grain of salt, because comparing a list of noun phrases to a corpus of texts is not technically a valid comparison: after all, a list of noun phrases will significantly differ from a normal text corpus by virtue of having a significantly larger (namely 100%) proportion of nouns. Still, what such a key word and semantic cloud can, indeed, reveal is the prominence of particular nouns or semantic classes of nouns in relation to other nouns and semantic classes of nouns in the examined corpus as opposed to the meanings prominently featuring in another corpus.

⁴¹ Some people might, however, object to this claim, arguing that it is indeed possible to become an expert smoker or a very experienced early morning person.



Figure 7.2: Key word cloud (Identifying NPs of my corpus compared to BNC Sampler Written Informal)

The most frequently occurring words in my set of identifying NPs as compared to the reference corpus are, firstly, the adjectives *big* and *huge* as well as the preposition *of*, which is due to the fact that the analysed nouns and noun phrases are often pre-modified by these adjectives and postmodified by prepositional phrases. Regarding the word class of interest, nouns, the most prominently represented nouns in this cloud are *doctor*, *expert*, *programmer* and *mechanic* (belonging to the conceptual category “expertise” in my classification), *eater* and *smoker* (which I classified as habits), *runner* (an activity in my framework), *seller* (i.e. a role) as well as *fan* (preferences). The prominence of the nouns *guy* and *person* is due to the fact that, as mentioned, many identifying NPs are constructions where a category-changing specifier (usually a premodifying noun or adjective) is combined with a semantically neutral head noun (as in *Mac guy*, *guy for a HRM strap*, *medical person*).

The semantic cloud also identifies the semantic fields “knowledgeable”, “like” and “medicines and medical treatment” as key domains. The keyness of the first domain is due to the frequent occurrence of the noun *expert*, the category “like” is based on the numerous instances of *fan*, and the semantic field “medicines and medical treatment” in Wmatrix is mainly made up of references to *doctor* and other medical professions. As mentioned before, most negative self-identifiers were found on health forums. This could mean that health is the context in which the structure of interest is used most frequently or that web forums for this topic are particularly frequent. Regarding the prominence of the semantic field “size:big”, this is due to the fact that the analysed nouns and noun phrases are often pre-modified by the adjectives *big* and *huge*; the category “unmatched” stands out in this cloud because the examined data is full of references to brand names uncategorisable for Wmatrix, such as *Longevity.org* and *meshlab*, as well as informal expressions unknown to the programme, such as *wierdo* [weirdo], *twat* or *libdem*.



Figure 7.3: Semantic tag cloud (Identifying NPs of my corpus compared to BNC Sampler Written Informal)

Figure 7.4 below represents the conceptual categories I have identified in the form of one prototypical member each, with larger fonts representing relatively more frequent occurrences. The figure is framed by the superordinate, or focal semantic categories introduced above, which serve as points of orientation and which are arranged to indicate their (postulated) relations and fuzzy boundaries/overlaps. Thus, for instance, *I’m not a dress person*, representing the conceptual category “preference (- fan)”, occupies a middle ground between the concepts of “preference” and “personal

characteristics”, and similarly *I’m not a member* is negative self-identification with a role, according to the postulated focal concepts, but it can also imply a conscious choice against membership and hence be considered to index a (non-)preference. Of course, it could also have implications for a person’s level of expertise (which shows in the differentiation between prime members and regular members etc.), which is why it is positioned somewhat halfway between the semantic poles “expertise” and “preference” here.

The reason why expertise and preference are considered as ‘poles’, i.e. as main orientation points standing out in this conceptual landscape, is their prominence in terms of two aspects:

- Frequent occurrence of a lexeme: a particular lexeme (type) reoccurs in variants and thus constitutes and prototypically represents a conceptual category in its own right (category-defining lexeme, e.g. *fan*).
- Frequent representation of a conceptual category: a definable concept (e.g. “preference”) is frequently represented (token frequency) by a variety of semantically related types.

Summing up, the analysis revealed that the nouns *expert* and *fan* not only appear prominently in the corpus overall, but also occur in many compounds and together with prepositional phrases referring to specific kinds of ‘fandom’ and expertise. Another category which emerged as relatively prominent is that of personal characteristics, which indicates that negative self-identifiers are used by people engaging in web forum discussions to carefully position themselves not only with regard to their knowledge and preferences, but also in terms of very personal aspects, such as their personalities, bodies and behaviours.

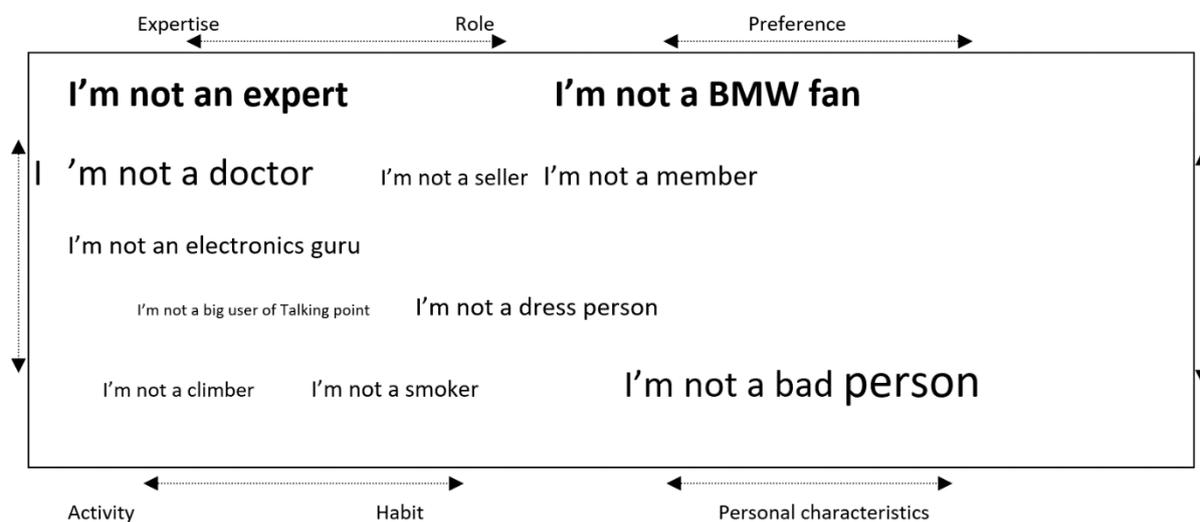


Figure 7.4: Conceptual landscape of NIs

To learn which conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers feature prominently in a different set of data, I applied the same categorisation system to conceptually profile the set of 246 instances of the variant “I’m not a/n + identifying NP” produced by searching the Spoken BNC2014 (see section 2.4.2, which explains the details of the queries performed). In contrast to my self-compiled corpus of negative self-identifiers in their co-texts as used in UK web forum discussions, the Spoken BNC2014 is a representative sample of spoken face-to-face interaction in British English and therefore represents interesting data to (informally) compare my findings with. The most frequently represented conceptual

categories of nouns and noun phrases with which speakers in this data contrasted themselves are presented in table 7.18 below.

CHARACTERISTICS		85
Evaluative (literal)	<i>ageist, amazing person, bad person, bad sort of sea traveler, cheater, fool, freak, fucking idiot, fucking imbecile, gayist, good parent, idiot (3), liar [liar], lazy person, racist⁴² (3), snob, twit (3), violent person</i>	24
Evaluative (metaphorical/metonymic) ⁴³	<i>asshole (2), bastard, bitch, bum, cow, dick, dickhead (2), fanny, friendly voice, heartless monster, little wife, pretty face, princess, sponger</i>	16
General	<i>adult, child (3), lad, little girl, man (2), parent, teenager, young man</i>	11
Ideological/religious	<i>anti-Semite, granddad about sex on the TV, Muslim, PC person, practising Christian, traditional by the book Christian type</i>	6
Psychological	<i>deep thinker, dweller, impatient person, perfectionist, romantic, tough hard guy, quitter</i>	7
Social	<i>celebrity, couple, loud party-throwing person, people person, team player, widow</i>	6
Geographic	<i>Brummie, fucking northerner, Geordie, southerner</i>	4
Physical/Physiological	<i>big eater, light sleeper, size sixteen, small person</i>	4
Metaphorical	<i>animal, spring chicken</i>	2
Sexual orientation	<i>Lesbian</i>	1
Gender-specific	<i>girly girl</i>	1
Metonymic	<i>a hundred percent</i>	1
Health/ill-health	<i>alcoholic</i>	1
Other	<i>exam-taking person</i>	1
PREFERENCES		84
Preferences (+ fan)		61
General	<i>big fan (6), fan (4), huge fan (2), massive fan (2)</i>	14
Food/Drink	<i>big carrot fan, big Mc Donald's fan, lentil fan big fan of: artichokes, beer, crumble, French beers, pizza, porridge, pumpkin pie, sparkling wines, those wraps, churros fan of: ginger, pizza, waffles, wine huge fan of: Chinese [food], Skittles massive like fan of it (Chinese food)</i>	20
Persons	<i>big Ridley Scott fan, Larry David fan big fan of them fan of: anyone, his, like Ameri- you know how people go around like, the whiners, them</i>	8
Arts & Entertainment	<i>big Alice in Wonderland fan fan of: sequels when it comes to Disney, the song big fan of R and B massive Shakespeare fan, massive Queen fan</i>	6
Nature	<i>big fan of leaves, great fan of the trotter, massive insect fan</i>	3
Products & Things	<i>fan of these TTs, massive fan of ankle length things, big fan of that (Joy division poster above your bed)</i>	3

⁴² It is arguable whether *racist* should be categorised as a literally evaluative term (which is justified if we assume that being a racist is inherently negative) or as referring to a person's ideological orientation (which means adopting a 'neutral' view on racism). I, for one, adopt the first perspective.

⁴³ It should be mentioned, again, that some of the evaluative terms listed as metaphorical/metonymic here are so well-established that they might rather be considered pale metaphors (e.g. *bastard*).

Chapter 7 — Conceptually profiling negative self-identifiers

Specific but not specified	<i>big fan of the (.) I du n no I think they look, fan of that kinda stuff, big fan of it</i>	3
Ideological/religious	<i>fan of the stated aims, big fan of change</i>	2
Sports	<i>big rugby fan</i>	1
Metalinguistic	<i>fan of hon</i>	1
Preferences (- fan)		37
Food/Drink	<i>big drinker (2), big drinker of coffee and tea, condiment person, dunker, dunker of croissants, great lover of aubergines, great one for a fry up first thing in the morning, lover of Marmite, mangetout person, Rice Krispies fiend, vegan, vegetarian, very fishy person, winer</i>	15
Activities	<i>bath man, beachy surfy kinda person, big film lover, big shopper, boat person, cave person, foodie, gym person, Massive formula one person, music person, phone person, pub person, sand person, sports person</i>	14
Activity aspect-related	<i>massive gig person, speeder</i>	2
Sexual practice	<i>one night stand kind of guy, threesome girl</i>	2
Body-related practice	<i>very resty person</i>	1
General	<i>slave to it</i>	1
Products & Things	<i>sort of massive opponent of ebooks</i>	1
Style	<i>leggings wearer</i>	1
EXPERTISE & PROFESSIONALISM		54
Professions	<i>academic, acoustic engineer, Chinese teacher, counsellor, engineer, good cook, good enough hairdresser, good musician, graduate, great painter, great sewer, hair- (dresser), engineer, legal guardian, meteorologist, million pound businessman, model, natural teacher, nurse or a doctor, professional baker, professional skier, qualified counsellor, researcher, scientist, sheriff, Soldier, soldier, spy, student (2), surgeon, uni graduate, writer cum author</i>	33
Specific expertise (- expert)	<i>bad player, good judge of character, good reader, good talker, good walker (2), great reader, natural driver, performing cat⁴⁴, quick learner, terrible driver, very good critique, very good photographer, very good swimmer</i>	14
Specific expertise (+ expert)	<i>expert on Chinatowns, expert in politics, DIY expert</i>	3
General expertise (+ expert)	<i>expert</i>	2
General expertise (- expert)	<i>authoritative person, specialist</i>	2
ROLES		8
Role: Business	<i>charity (2), customer, regular customer</i>	4
Role: Crime	<i>rapist, victim</i>	2
Role: Affiliation	<i>part of it (their team)</i>	1
Role: Virtual identity	<i>Sim</i>	1
USAGE, CONSUMPTION, OWNERSHIP		1
	<i>one of your big users</i>	
OTHERS		18
TOTAL		246

Table 7.18: Conceptual categories of identifying NPs in 246 NIs in the Spoken BNC2014

As can be seen, the three conceptual categories of identifying NPs found to be key in the data examined for this study – preference, characteristics and expertise and professionalism – could also be identified as key among the instances of negative self-identifiers occurring in the Spoken BNC2014. While

⁴⁴ I interpret this metaphorical expression as referring to experience with being on stage.

negative self-identifiers from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism represent the biggest conceptual category of negative self-identifiers in the corpus examined for this study, they only account for 22% of the set of negative self-identifiers from the Spoken BNC2014; in this corpus, negative self-identification with particular personal characteristics accounts for 35% of the examined instances of the structure, compared to only 15% in the data used for this study. This might indicate that expertise plays a bigger role in the context of online forums than in spoken offline conversation, where evaluative disclaimers appear to be used more often. While this of course is just a small-scale comparison, these findings could mean that expertise is an issue of conceptual struggle on online forums – I discuss this in more detail in the next section.

	Total no. of NIs	Preference		Expertise & Professionalism		Characteristics	
		Total Frequ.	% of instances of NIs	Total Frequ.	% of instances of NIs	Total Frequ.	% of instances of NIs
Corpus of NIs	936	246	26%	393	42%	136	15%
Spoken BNC 2014	246	84	34%	54	22%	85	35%

Table 7.19: Conceptual categories of identifying NPs in 246 NIs in the Spoken BNC2014 and in my corpus

7.3.2. Implications: “I might not be an expert, but I know what I do not want”

Regarding the question of potential implications of these results in light of the social research interests of this study, the way of positioning the conceptual categories emerging from my analysis in this figure is intended to visualise not only their respective prominence in terms of tokens assigned to them, but also my evaluation of these results. I do not think that it is a coincidence that the domains of expertise and preference are so prominently represented, neither do I think that (not) being an expert or a fan are entirely unrelated conceptualisations.

Just as the concept of expertise is so often made relevant, thereby implicitly acknowledging the hierarchical difference between experts and laypersons and indexing membership with the social group of non-experts, the concept of choice by non-preference is also frequently foregrounded, constructing speakers as ‘wise choosers’ – an identity category which might become just as important as (or even more important than) that of the expert when strategically managing one’s utterances in web forum interaction. My analysis revealed that the structure in focus is highly context-dependent, being used to contrast speakers with categories deemed relevant for their self-representation in particular communicative situations. This is precisely why negative self-identifiers say something about these contexts of usage: if speakers make their non-affiliation with the category of experts relevant in the context of discussing subjects traditionally associated with a high degree of technicality and complexity, they in fact undermine the importance of formal education in these subjects. At the same time, other strategies of construing expertise might become more pivotal in these contexts. According to Sillence (2010), trustworthiness is mainly established through showing (and thus, per implication, not necessarily mentioning) expertise. The analysis suggests that one of these strategies could be to identify via (very specific) non-preferences on forums defined by a common subject of interest, which serves to construe a highly specific position in an already specialised discourse. For example, on a forum on the football management simulation game *Football Manager* (which, I shall argue, could be considered a niche of interest in the first place), negatively identifying as *fan of the AXT-11 template* in example 7.7 below construes the speaker as very involved with the subject of the forum.

7.7. A: *scrapped my old template because it was shit, now started on a new one*
[pic]

B: *i like it GGG75 the design is good but I am not a fan of the AXT-11 template just looks a bit dirty*

Using epistemic disclaimers to index one's lay status while discursively performing expertise could represent an effective strategy of coming across as trustworthy, but careful and self-aware regarding the epistemic status of one's utterances, as well as socially sensitive, using language to create a modest, rather than authoritative, impression. In other words, speakers may construe themselves as experts while negatively identifying as such, drawing on a range of linguistic strategies to do so.

Thus, liking and knowing appear as related concepts in my corpus insofar as negatively identifying with very specific preferences constructs the speaker as opinionated in the sense of being well-aware of the plurality of available options and, thus, knowledgeable – albeit not in the traditional sense of having formal qualifications or expertise. I therefore assume, based on the results of this analysis, that the following two related conceptual trends (defined by Marko 2015a: 130 as “general beliefs and attitudes organising more specific ones”, which “come to the fore as trends over larger stretches of text”) manifest themselves in people's use of negative self-identifiers on web forums:

- De-expertisation: using negative self-identifiers to disclaim epistemic authority, and, thus mark an assertion as opinion. This can serve various interactional functions, e.g. it can serve to open the floor to debate, index speaker alignment with a community of non-experts and thus highlight common ground, or even ‘mock’ people claiming to be or perceived as experts.
- Re-expertisation by informed choice: identifying via non-preferences in a discourse community defined by a common preference, thereby positioning oneself as making an informed choice. The foregrounding of individual choice could be considered an emancipatory tendency, as the opposition between fan and non-fan involves less of a power differential than that between experts and non-experts by construing the speaker as the agent of choice rather than as someone lacking expertise.

The significance of these results with a view to potentially changing conceptualisations of self-identity can be illustrated quite well when considering them in reference to a simple example, namely an extract from a blog on the topic of professional specialisation. The following statements taken from a blog post called “How to choose your specialisation” (Grassilli 2013) suggest that these conceptual trends – examined only in relation to negative self-identifiers here – might, indeed, play a role for people's self-identity more generally. More specifically, they can be considered to exemplify a shifting conceptualisation of expertise in so far as it seems to be increasingly related to, and seen as resulting from, choice and preference rather than, say, formal education:

7.8. A – *focus on what the market needs – first analyse the market, then choose the subjects to specialise in*
B – *focus on what you like – choose the areas you are passionate about, then offer your expertise to the market.*

What if you could be the specialist in gluten-free or vegan products, for example, because you're passionate about healthy food?

In example 7.8 above, the author discursively merges the notions of specialist knowledge (using the verbs *focus*, *analyse*, and *specialise*) and personal preference and choice (*choose*, *like*, *passionate*). The rhetorical “What if” question seems to summarise the possible implications of results of this analysis:

the simultaneous prominence of the concepts of expertise and preference in the examined forums might suggest that the boundaries between these two concepts are becoming increasingly blurred, to the effect that being an experienced consumer might be perceived as expertise (this is supported, e.g., by Mackiewicz (2010a: 4), who shows how asserting product familiarity may serve as a credibility marker).

If such conceptualisations can be shown to manifest themselves in the way people position themselves in relation to what they say in everyday, informal conversations, this would imply that they implicitly structure people's identity management in discourse and, thus, that they are becoming naturalised (which, as will be discussed in more detail below, can have sociopolitical implications beyond local communicative situations in which people use the structure "I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP"). In other words, of particular interest for this study are negative self-identifiers which are routinely used to serve particular pragmatic functions, thus constituting 'commonsensical' ways of self-representation in online interaction. Judging from the semantic analysis of 246 negative self-identifiers as used in the Spoken BNC2014, negative self-identification with preference and expertise/professionalism appear to represent quite routinised ways of speaking: together with negative self-identifiers used to contrast speakers with particular (mainly evaluative) personal characteristics, they are the conceptual categories most frequently represented in the sample of spoken British English I have analysed.

To conclude, in this chapter I have answered the first research question of this study. I analysed what noun phrases people posting to web forums negatively identify with and created a conceptual profile of identifying NPs. By determining the frequency of occurrence and lexical variation of these nouns and nominal structures assigned to various conceptual domains, I established how prominently the respective domains, and particular lexemes within them, feature in the examined data. The analysis revealed that negative identification with nouns from the fields of preference and expertise are particularly prominently represented in the corpus. In light of the wider sociopolitical context in which people use language to contrast themselves with particular concepts, this, I argued, can be interpreted as pointing towards related conceptual trends, namely de-expertisation on the one hand and re-expertisation by informed choice on the other. In section 4.2.1, I explained how expertise relates to notions of both risk and trust. I suggested that online forum communities represent sites where novel forms of expertise, based on lay experience, may be created, distributed and negotiated, and that they are trusted by peers precisely because of their subjective nature (Vermeulen & Seegers 2008, Vázquez 2014, Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020). It follows that the foregrounding of preference through non-identification as a fan, and the disclaiming of expertise so as to implicitly align with a lay community, might figure as the preferred discourse management strategies in these contexts.

To study negative self-identifiers in their co-texts, I will turn to Research Question 2 in Chapter 8 and functionally analyse negative self-identifiers in use. More precisely, I will explore the formal-functional relations between negative self-identifiers with their co-texts as well as the question whether co-texts with particular (experiential) functions can be found to co-occur with particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers.

8. Negative self-identifiers and their immediate formal-functional co-texts

While the previous chapter examined the meanings of identifying NPs with which speakers contrast themselves, this chapter and the next address Research Question 2:

- A. What are the formal-functional relations of negative self-identifiers in my corpus and their clause-internal and clause-external co-texts?
- B. What are the meanings and functions of co-texts with certain formal links to the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP”, and how frequently are they represented in the corpus?
- C. Do co-texts with particular meanings and functions occur together with particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers in patterned ways?

What implications, if any, does this have for the broader sociopolitical context?

More specifically, the analyses presented in this chapter examine, firstly, the clause-internal co-texts of negative self-identifiers to establish if, and how, instances of the structure in my corpus are pre- and/or post-modified. Secondly, they study the formal-functional relations between the instances of the structure “I + copula + not + indefinite NP” represented in my corpus and their clause-external co-texts, i.e. sentences and clauses preceding and following them (RQ2 A) (section 8.1). Thirdly, an experiential profile of co-texts with particular formal-functional links to the structure is presented (RQ2 B), and potential relations of co-occurrence between co-texts with particular functions and particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers are identified (RQ2 C) (section 8.2). As will be explained, establishing categories of co-text of the structure in focus raised several theoretical and methodological issues concerning the criteria based on which these categories can or should be set up. The result of the analyses presented in this chapter is a contextual profile of negative self-identifiers which not only sheds light on the usage of negative self-identifiers in general, but also helps answer the question whether or not my expectations about de- and re-expertisation formulated in the previous chapter play a role for the functions of negative self-identifiers.

The interaction of negative self-identifiers with their co-text can be examined from two perspectives. The first would be to start with the conceptual category of the identifying NP and examine the relations of instances of that category with their co-text. Alternatively, one can start by looking at the co-text of all negative self-identifiers, initially ignoring the conceptual category of the identifying NP, in order to identify categories of context which occur particularly often. These prominently represented categories can then be examined to determine whether they co-occur with particular types of negative self-identifiers.

In the analysis to be presented below, I took the second approach, i.e. I began by examining formal-functional categories of context preceding and following all negative self-identifiers in the corpus, regardless of the conceptual categories of identifying NPs, to establish whether particular contexts occur particularly frequently before or after instances of the structure in focus. Thus, the analysis sheds light on the usage of the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP” in this corpus from a more general, structure-oriented perspective to find out whether there are (a) particular positions in a conversation and in a sentence where negative self-identifiers occur relatively frequently, and (b) particular forms and meanings which constitute the co-texts of negative self-identifiers particularly often. These conceptually prominent contexts are then examined in more detail, taking into account the conceptual values of the negative self-identifiers they interact with.

8.1. General co-textual profile

The internal and external co-texts of negative self-identifiers can initially be differentiated as follows:

- **Turn-internal co-text**

Clause-internal co-text: This refers to textual elements pre- and postmodifying the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” (see table 8.1 below for examples).

Clause-external co-text: This refers to the clauses and sentences immediately preceding and following the negative self-identifier, i.e. independent sentences, coordinated or super-/subordinated clauses. Assuming that there is a tighter conceptual link between sentences and clauses that are formally linked, I prioritise the conjoined clause or sentence in the contextual analysis. This means that if a negative self-identifier is, for example, preceded by an independent sentence not related to it by a connecting adverb or a conjunction, and followed by an independent sentence introduced by *however*, I analyse the second sentence first.

Table 8.1 provides examples of clause-internal context (shaded in grey) and clause-external context. It also indicates the order in which elements of the former are considered in the analysis:

Sequence used in the analysis	3.	1.	2.	(4.)
Clause-internal co-text		<i>I'm not a technological man at all</i>		
		No of course <i>I'm not a pirate</i>		
Clause-external co-text	<i>No offence taken -</i>	<i>I've not been a regular poster since joining,</i>	<i>so probably fair to say I'm a little damp behind the ears.</i>	
	<i>Perhaps your doctor can send you to someone who can help you sort it out and reduce the likelihood of infection?</i>	<i>I have never been a fan of shaving</i>	<i>as I was always told hair is there for a reason,</i>	<i>although I know lots of ladies de hair themselves in a number of ways</i>

Table 8.1: Clause-internal and clause-external co-texts of NIs considered in the analysis

- **Turn-external co-text**

This refers to textual elements pertaining to turns of other speakers, e.g. A's turn in example 8.1 from my corpus. In this example, the negative self-identifier fulfils a different function than e.g. disclaimers of expertise, merely conveying factual information.

8.1. A: *If you're an individual seller you are bound by Amazon's default shipping prices - you can only create your own postage prices if you are a pro seller (subscription only)*

B: *No I am not a personal seller and I have set all my shipping prices for my listings.*

All three kinds of co-text are relevant when analysing negative self-identifiers, as they might occur as independent sentences or as part of complex clauses, turn-initially and turn-finally and as they may or may not be uttered in response to another speaker's turn. In addition, of course, negative self-identifiers might be pre- or postmodified by adverbs, phrases and discourse particles with various functions, which should also be taken into consideration.

To provide a general co-textual profile of negative self-identifiers, I differentiated between negative self-identifiers according to their position in the turn and sentence, and their formal relations with different kinds of co-text for a general overview of the use of the structure. I then analysed in more detail particular co-texts with particular relationships with the matrix clause which emerged as frequent from the first contextual analysis.

The general co-textual profile presented further below takes into consideration where in the turn the negative self-identifier appears, considers textual elements modifying the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP”, and distinguishes between negative self-identifiers based on whether they are followed by a coordinated, super- or subordinated or independent clause. A distinction between independent sentences preceding and following negative self-identifiers is made according to sentence type (declarative, interrogative, directive, exclamative) and different functional relations between clauses and sentences established by adverbs and conjunctions (cause, contrast, concession, consequence). Of course, not all functional relationships are established by adverbs and conjunctions, i.e., two independent sentences not related by any conjunction and not containing an adverb indicating a functional relation may still stand in relation of contrast. Table 8.2 sums up the mentioned criteria for establishing the general co-textual profile:

Preceding co-text	Negative self-identifier	Following co-text
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 0 = turn-initial - Independent sentence (declarative, interrogative, directive, or exclamative) - Coordinated/subordinated clause - Other element 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Separate sentence⁴⁵ (possibly introduced by a conjunctive adverb establishing a functional relationship with previous textual elements) - Part of a complex clause (i.e. as sub- or superordinate clause, or as coordinate clause) with a particular functional relationship with its syntactically related co-text - Parenthetical - Pre- and postmodification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 0 = turn-final - Independent sentence (declarative, interrogative, directive, or exclamative) - Coordinated/subordinated clause or independent sentence introduced by conjunctive adverb - Other element

Table 8.2: Approach to creating a general co-textual profile

The general co-textual profile presented in table 8.3 below gives an initial overview of the relations between negative self-identifiers and their co-texts, i.e. considers which linguistic elements precede and follow them. Parts of speech directly preceding, and thus occupying the first position left to the negative self-identifier, are categorised as L1 co-texts, while those directly following the structure in focus, occupying the first position right to the negative self-identifier, are referred to as R1 co-texts. High-frequency categories are highlighted by grey shading.

Tag	Category of clause-external co-text	L1	R1
<cj:+>	Conjunction/adverb: addition: <i>and</i>	24	138
<cj:cau>	Conjunction/adverb: cause: <i>as, because, since, when, in case</i> (used causally)	41	20
<cj:con>	Conjunction/adverb: contrast: <i>but, however, but then, then again, though, yet</i>	86	279
<cj:conc>	Conjunction/adverb: concession: <i>(al)though, while, even if</i>	27	5

⁴⁵ While separate sentences could, in a corpus of formal written language, easily be identified by punctuation, punctuation does not play an important role in this analysis as speakers tend to omit it or use it in non-standard ways. For instance, a comma often appears in places where one would normally expect a full stop or exclamation mark (e.g. *valid point dear friend, I have never been a thong man*). I am counting cases such as this as two separate sentences, even though they are joined by a comma.

<cj:cq>	Conjunction/adverb: consequence: <i>so, thus</i>	4	94
<hella>	Turn-initial, following greeting formula: response	43	0
<hello>	Turn-initial, following greeting formula: not responding	15	0
<ina>	Turn-initial: response	120	0
<ini>	Turn-initial: not responding	52	0
<is:exp>	Independent sentence: exclamative	31	10
<is:imp>	Independent sentence: directive	4	5
<is:q>	Independent sentence: Interrogative	47	23
<is:s>	Independent sentence: Declarative	376	196
<list>	List of items	7	0
<np>	Noun phrase	6	0
<nv>	Non-verbal element	4	0
<par>	Parenthesis	15	24
<q>	Quote	5	0
<rel>	Relative pronoun	21	2
<sub:*>	Subordinate clause	8	7
<corr>	Correction	0	40
Others	Infinitive phrase, Superordinate clause	0	6
<end>	Turn-final	0	87
TOTAL		936	936

Table 8.3: Formal appearance of NIs: General profile of clause-external co-texts

As can be seen, the examined negative self-identifiers are most often preceded by declarative sentences (376 cases). They appear turn-finally without further post-modification in only 87 cases overall and turn-initially in 228 cases overall, framing what speakers are about to say. 163 of these ‘framing’ instances are uttered in response to a previous turn by another speaker, sometimes preceded by a greeting. (An example would be *Hi [Name], welcome to the forum, I’m no expert on Slimming World, but have read on here that some plans are more suitable than others for people with diabetes.*) The high number of negative self-identifiers occurring at the beginning of responding turns might indicate that negative self-identifiers are salient linguistic choices in the context of giving advice, being used as turn-initiating disclaimers before presenting one’s opinion on a particular subject. Responding turn-initiating negative self-identifiers are also the ones most likely to take up an identification category mentioned or implied by the previous speaker’s turn. A case in point is example 8.2 below, where B’s negative identification as an *expert on oil* clearly relates to A’s request for advice on which oil to use:

8.2. A: *Hi everyone, can you help with this question please. We have just bought a Mc Culloch Petrol Rotary Mower 46s 500 series. It has a Briggs and Stratton Engine, and recommends using SAE30 oil, which we have bought. As you know this is quite expensive to buy, can we use an alternative, like say 5w30, 10w30 or 20w50, without there being any risk of damaging the engine. Our rotovater engine (Tecumseh 3.5) and our Qualcast Classic 45s petrol mower, both advise SAE 30 oil for the engines, but also says a multigrade oil of 15w40 or 20w50 is acceptable, we use the 20w50 in both, with no problems. Your advice would be most appreciated.*

B: *Hello [Name] I am not an expert on oil, [...].*

Negative self-identifiers are often introduced by conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs coordinating them with preceding textual material (overall 182 cases, an example would be *I took a wild guess at*

the 20's/30's but I'm no historian), and overall 536 negative self-identifiers, i.e. almost 60% of all examined instances, are followed by a conjunction or conjunctive adverb linking them to following textual material (e.g. *I'm not an owner of a BTS yet. But I already have myself a 4x2x2 vivarium*). In 15 cases, they occur as parentheticals, in 24 cases, they are followed by one. Only in 71 of 936 examined cases does a turn-medial negative self-identifier appear on its own, i.e. as separate sentence or without any pre- or postmodifier. This means that the instances of the structure examined are mostly tightly interwoven with the rest of the text, which points towards their high functional interactivity. In 40 cases, negative self-identifiers are followed by what I named “correction”, that is, affirmative identifiers such as: *I'm by no means an expert – I'm a complete amateur!* These corrections either appear as declarative sentences as in this example, or as elliptical constructions, as in *I am no pain patient, [I am] just a substituted ex-heroin user*.

In the following, I first discuss clause-internal pre- and post-modification of negative self-identifiers (e.g. as in *I am no expert (at ALL)*), and then move on to consider clause-external textual elements with different formal and functional relations with negative self-identifiers. I will then present the results of the analyses of negative self-identifiers formally related to their co-text by conjunctions and adverbs, as the most frequent type of appearance of the structure in my corpus, and of instances preceded by declarative sentences, which are the second most frequent type.

8.1.1. Clause-internal modification

The following table gives an overview of linguistic elements which with negative self-identifiers themselves are pre- and postmodified. In total, 170 negative self-identifiers come with modifiers.

Preceding text	To.	Following text	To.
Temporal adjunct			
<i>in this time, throughout my career, since..., so far, usually</i>	5	<i>12 hours yet, after [+ clause], as long as [+ clause], before (3), even before [+ clause], for [+ NP denoting a time period] (14), lately, long, long enough to (2), not even as a kid, over the last month, since... (7), so far, these last 20 months, until (2), up to now, yet (3)</i>	41
Total			46
Information status/importance highlighter			
<i>as/like I say/said (10), note (3), I should/have to say (3), again (2), I repeat (that) (2), I must stress here, I want to be clear that, please note, once again, just to be clear, this is to show, I should add that, mind, you will be aware that, as you see, as many on this forum will know, as I was telling sb. in another thread, as you can see from my previous post in this thread, you know, as my subject states, I said before</i>	36	<i>mind you</i>	1
Total			37
Discourse markers			
<i>well (5), now (3), anyway (3), ok (2), oh, hesitation (hmm), stance (I must admit)</i>	16		
Total			16
Information label			
<i>PS (4), disclaimer (2), memo, edit, as an aside, FYI, just a thought, warning</i>	12		0
Total			12
Range of application			
<i>speaking of..., with regard to..., for..., except for, as for..., basically</i>	6	<i>when it comes to (2), if it comes to, except for, especially when...</i>	5
Total			11
Sequence			

<i>finally (3), first, first off, furthermore, let me start off by saying that, the second thing is that, other than that</i>	9	<i>by the way</i>	1
Total			10
Epistemic			
<i>obviously (2), clearly (2), contrary to how it may seem, granted, of course</i>	7	<i>obviously</i>	1
Total			8
Intensification			
		<i>at all (3), by any means (3), by any stretch of the imagination, in the slightest</i>	8
Total			8
Comparative			
<i>like your friend, like you, like...you mention, likewise</i>	4	<i>compared to, as much as, like you, like some of the great people around here</i>	4
Total			8
No-intensification			
<i>e.g. no, I'm not a low carber</i>	4		
Total			4
Specification			
		<i>as such, really</i>	2
Total			2
Locative adjunct			
		<i>in..., outside of..., in a ...environment, on here</i>	4
Total			4
Evaluative			
<i>sadly, unfortunately</i>	2	<i>sadly, unfortunately</i>	2
Total			4
TOTAL			170

Table 8.4: Overview of textual elements pre- and postmodifying NIs

As can be seen, in 46 cases negative self-identifiers in my corpus occur together with temporal adjuncts, which means that temporal adjuncts are the most frequent type of clause-internal pre- and post-modification of the structure in focus and, thus, that the temporal dimension of not belonging to a particular identity category is most often foregrounded. Table 8.5 below shows to which conceptual categories (as discussed in the previous chapter) temporally modified negative self-identifiers can be assigned.

Conceptual category of identifying NP	To.
Role: forum-related	9
Characteristics: Health/ill health	5
Professions	5
Role: Membership	4
Activity/Expertise	3
Characteristics: Social	3
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	2
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Person	2
Role: Business	2
Usage, Consumption and Ownership	2
Characteristics: Physical/physiological	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Food/drink	1
Specific expertise (+ <i>expert</i>)	1
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>)	1
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Product	2
Habit: Routine	1
Habit: Substance	1
Role: Virtual	1
TOTAL	46

Table 8.5: Conceptual categories of temporally modified NIs

Speakers in my corpus most frequently specify the temporal validity of their non-identification when talking about membership with particular groups and forums (e.g. *member of the previous club*, *active contributor to FF*). This indicates that duration of membership and frequency of contribution on a particular forum plays a role for the discursive self-representation of people interacting on the examined forums. This might have to do with perceived and actual authority in this discourse, with longer membership potentially being associated with greater prestige and practically with more user rights in comparison to regular/short-time users (an observation also made when discussing example 7.3 in the previous chapter). Example 8.3 features an instance of a negative self-identifier serving as a factual self-description by the speaker. It is a case of long-term membership and regular forum activity being represented as linked to a status of greater respect among forum users. The topic of the thread is the question of who should be nominated as “most intelligent/intellectual poster”, and for the speaker, only long-term posters deserve this award:

8.3. *Re: Most intelligent/intellectual poster 2015*

*Got to be [Name], [Name] or [Name] for me. Always enjoy debating them even when we disagree. Have decided to play rock paper scissors with my lovely wife and eldest son in order to pick which of the three will get my final vote. I'm surprised (albeit pleased) to see my name on the list given how little I have posted this year and would like people to know I don't think they should vote for me because I don't deserve to win it when **I haven't been a regular contributor**.*

The second biggest group of modifiers are what I classified as information status/importance highlighters. These include (a) expressions which metadiscursively comment on the status of the information provided (i.e., speakers often highlight that they have already negatively identified with a particular conceptual category, e.g. by using the premodifier *as I have said*), and (b) expressions which indicate that the speaker considers the information provided by the negative self-identifier – their non-

identity claim – as important for the recipient (e.g. by using the premodifier *please note*). This indicates that speakers, at least in these cases, use negatives not *en passant*, but consciously enough to metadiscursively foreground them for other participants. Regarding the question of whether information status/importance highlighters occur particularly often with particular conceptual categories of indefinite NP, it is interesting to observe that speakers are particularly cautious to stress their non-identification when it comes to being or not being an expert. As table 8.6 below shows, information status/importance highlighters most frequently (in 26 of 37 cases) modify negative self-identifiers from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism.

Conceptual category of identifying NP	To.
General expertise	11
Specific expertise (+ <i>expert</i>)	7
Professions	5
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>)	3
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Nature	2
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	2
Characteristics: Evaluative	1
Characteristics: General	1
Characteristics: Health/ill health	1
Characteristics: Social	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Person	1
Habit: Substance	1
Ideological	1
TOTAL	37

Table 8.6: Conceptual categories of NIs preceded/followed by information status/importance highlighters

The classification system presented in table 8.4 above also distinguishes the category “information label”. This category includes modifiers which metadiscursively name the information provided by the negative self-identifier, e.g. *PS*, *disclaimer*, or even *warning*. These labels in some cases comment on the negative self-identifier in terms of information structure, i.e. by setting the negative self-identifier apart from the rest of the utterance by classifying it, for example, as a post script (*PS*) or *as an aside*. They may also index the type of information being provided, e.g. a *warning* or *just a thought*. Since labels of this kind occur together with negative self-identifiers in only 12 cases, though, this co-occurrence cannot be claimed to constitute a pattern of language use.

8.1.2. Relations of negative self-identifiers with elements of the clause-external co-text

As shown in the general overview of the co-text of negative self-identifiers (table 8.3), the structure is often preceded, and mostly followed, by contrasting conjunctions (notably *but*, which is the conjunction contrasting a negative self-identifier with another clause in 68 of 86 cases). This indicates, regardless of the content of the examined utterances, that negative self-identifiers are most frequently used to highlight a contrast between what speakers claim not to be and what they say immediately before or after using the negative self-identifier. This could point towards a metadiscursive use of the structure in focus, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 9. 138 negative self-identifiers are followed by the coordinating conjunction *and*, which could indicate that many negative self-identifiers occur together with linguistic elements more specifically describing what not being an X means or entails (e.g. *I have never been a pill-popper and just hate taking medication*). (The experiential meanings of the clauses coordinated with negative self-identifiers are examined in more detail in section 8.2.) In 94 cases, a negative self-identifier is followed by coordinated clauses introduced by *so* (and other connectors with consequential meaning, e.g. *thus*); complementarily, 41 negative self-

identifiers are preceded by a causal conjunction, mainly *as*, which means that speakers often state the consequences of their non-identification (or explain particular states of affairs by negative self-identifiers). 48 negative self-identifiers are preceded, and 22 followed, by interrogatives, which means that negative self-identifiers are also used in the context of asking questions. However, given that in 571 cases they are preceded or followed by a declarative sentence, making statements is the most popular linguistic choice in the immediate context of negative self-identifiers.

Table 8.7 below provides an overview of the most frequent formal-functional relations between negative self-identifiers and their immediately adjacent co-text, to which they are formally linked by adverbs and conjunctions. As can be seen, a total of 717 negative self-identifiers, corresponding to 77% of the instances of the structure in this corpus, are related to preceding or subsequent textual material. Of course, as mentioned before, there may be relationships (e.g. of cause) between sentences unrelated by adverbs marking that relation. One example is *I'm not a big fan of the opacity, it makes the whole screen look washed out when only one item is bright and the rest are dull*. Because of the dominance of negative self-identifiers formally related to their co-text in the corpus and the conceptually tighter association between sentences whose functional relation is formally marked, the analysis of relations between negative self-identifiers and formally coordinated and subordinated sentences was given priority in this study. The results of this analysis are presented in section 8.2.

Relationship	Preceding co-text	Following co-text	Number of instances	
Contrast and concession				
Contrast	86	279	365	
Negative self-identifier as concessional clause	7	16	23	
Negative self-identifier preceded/followed by concessional clause	4	5	9	
Total			397	42% of all NIs in the corpus
Cause and consequence				
Negative self-identifier as cause	41	93	134	
Negative self-identifier as consequence	4	20	24	
Total			158	17% of all NIS in the corpus
Addition				
Coordination	24	138	162	
Total			162	17% of all NIS in the corpus
TOTAL	166	551	717	

Table 8.7: Formal-functional relationships between NIs and their immediate clause-external co-texts

8.1.3. Summary

Summing up, this section has presented the results of the analysis of the formal relations of negative self-identifiers with their clause-internal and clause-external co-texts. This means that I looked at pre- and postmodifiers of negative self-identifiers, which revealed that overall, 170 instances of the structure in the corpus are modified clause-internally, with temporal modifiers figuring most frequently. The analysis of the formal relations of negative self-identifiers with clause-external textual material preceding and following them showed that the large majority, namely 717 instances, of negative self-identifiers are linked to their co-text by means of conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs. Formal relations of contrast between negative self-identifiers and their co-text occur, most often by

far, with contrasting conjunctions and adverbs linking instances of the structure to textual material following it appearing most frequently (namely in 279 cases). Thus, this analysis showed which formal relations between negative self-identifiers and their co-texts are most prominent in the examined data and provides the basis for more detailed analysis of these frequent relations (as summarised in table 8.7) in section 8.2 and, thus, for answering Research Question 2.

8.2. Negative self-identifiers and their formally related co-texts

The analysis presented in this section draws on the framework of transitivity (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014) to categorise the sentences and clauses with which negative self-identifiers are formally related by conjunctions and adverbs in order to reveal patterns in the experiential structure of textual material in the proximate co-text of the structure. It also explores whether particular types of experiential co-texts and conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers tend to co-occur. Thus, this chapter answers the second research question addressed in this study.

The transitivity system is theorised to enable us to represent and construe our experience of the world as “a quantum of change in the flow of events as a figure” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 213), i.e., it allows us to represent, and thus classify and make sense of, the constant flow of our experiences. The reason for drawing on the transitivity framework to analyse the proximate co-texts of negative self-identifiers is that this makes it possible to approach the data more systematically than analyses of clauses and sentences according to their overall meaning/function, making it possible to divide up the authentic language material under scrutiny into relatively clearly differentiable and, importantly, quantifiable categories. Another big advantage of using the transitivity framework instead of a ‘functionally holistic’ categorisation scheme to create a general profile of the co-texts of a relatively large sample of negative self-identifiers is that this framework takes into account that textual material’s information structure, which is relevant as it makes a functional difference. To illustrate what I mean, consider the following examples from my corpus:

- 8.4. *I’m no expert, but surely a jump from 19k to 32 in a week is far too much*
- 8.5. *I am no expert, but I believe any GAD test over 50 indicates an autoimmune condition*
- 8.6. *I am no expert but you may want to check Plate 1, item 4 of the book British Caenozoic fossils published by the natural history museum.*
- 8.7. *I am no expert on such matters, but 150/90 or 150/80 isn't to [too] far above normal bp, so it may be possible to reduce this by keeping to your diet plan and starting to exercise daily.*

In all four examples, the speaker negatively identifies as an expert, contrasting the negative self-identifier with a sentence introduced by *but*. Now, if we ignored the different perspectives the sentences represented in 8.4 to 8.7 take, and just considered their overall functions, 8.4 and 8.5 and, respectively, 8.6 and 8.7 would be deemed the same: 8.4 and 8.5 represent claims that could be verified or falsified (by actual experts, for example), while 8.6 and 8.7 can be classified as advice. However, assuming that lexicogrammatical choices reflect and construe our conceptualisation of the world, the order in which information is presented and the meanings of the very words chosen, do matter. Indeed, upon closer inspection, the four sentences are quite different: the statement in 8.4 is introduced by the adverb *surely*, which serves to increase the certainty of the speaker’s assessment of the increase of running distance. By contrast, the introductory *I believe* explicitly marks the statement in 8.5 as the speaker’s perspective. The second clause in 8.6 has the addressee – *you* – as its subject

and theme and serves as a piece of advice. Example 8.7, too, is intended to provide information of use to the addressee. Here, the recipient is not directly addressed though; instead, the negative self-identifier is formally coordinated with – and functionally relates to – an assessment of blood pressure values. This means that the sentence is not primarily about the addressee, but about blood pressure norms, which renders the advice more indirect.

To know precisely which participants and processes are formally coordinated with negative self-identifiers makes it possible to categorise and, ultimately, quantify the textual material in the immediate context of negative self-identifiers. If representations of certain experiences – i.e. certain “factual-notional” clause structures (Halliday 1970/1976: 159) – can be found to occur together with particular categories of negative self-identifiers in patterned ways, this would imply that speakers routinely (linguistically and thus conceptually) associate particular identification concepts with particular representations of their experiences of the world. To refer back to my expectations about de-expertisation and re-expertisation based on the results of the conceptual profile in the previous section, the prominence of identifying NPs from the conceptual domains of expertise and preference raises the question of whether these concepts can be found to be frequently made relevant in the context of representing particular processes involving particular participants.

Considering the proximate co-texts of negative self-identifiers solely in terms of participants and processes does not, of course, suffice to fully capture the functions of negative self-identifiers in relation to these contexts. Example 8.8 from my corpus illustrates that examining co-texts of negative self-identifiers in terms of the experiential metafunction can only be a starting point for further analyses:

8.8. *I'm not a road rider so can't really comment on whether this actually happens or not.*

What my analysis of participants and processes in the context of negative self-identifiers presented below can capture is that a co-textual clause formally marked as consequence of the negative identification as *road rider* by *so* is a process with *I* in the sayer role (*comment* constituting a verbal process). If verbal processes frequently occur as co-texts of NIs formally marked as consequence, this could be taken to indicate that negatively identifying with a particular category is a linguistic choice that speakers tend to make when metadiscursively referring to what they say. To really reveal what function this linguistic choice serves, however, one would have to consider that the finite verbal group in the example above is modified by a negated modal verb, *can*, which implies that being or not being a *road rider* is associated with the speaker's *ability* to make a comment. This means that aspects such as mood and polarity would also need to be taken into consideration to get a fuller picture of the functional relationship between negative self-identifiers and their co-texts. Therefore, the experiential co-textual profile discussed and presented in sections 8.2.1 to 8.2.4 below should be considered as the first of two analytical steps. This first analysis examined the co-texts of negative self-identifiers in terms of one strand of language as differentiated by SFL, namely in terms of their experiential functions (Gwilliams & Fontaine 2015: 1). It aimed to find what – if any – experientially describable co-texts are frequently formally (and thus functionally) related to negative self-identifiers. The second step of this analysis – presented in Chapter 9 – was to consider co-texts representing particular participant-process configurations, identified as frequent in the first analysis, in terms of their communicative functions.

8.2.1. Profiling the co-texts of negative self-identifiers: method and categorisation principles

This analysis aimed to find which process types, involving particular participants, are represented by clauses with certain formal links to negative self-identifiers. It considered the immediate and

functionally most tightly related co-text of negative self-identifiers, that is, sentences and clauses formally related to the structure by means of a conjunction (e.g. *but*) or an adverb (e.g. *therefore*). In corpus analytic terms, this co-text is, again, defined as L1 and R1, whereby L1 and R1 here constitute sentences and clauses rather than individual lexical items (e.g. *I'm not a heavy smoker, but I have been smoking for about 3-4 years now; I am not a forum person myself although I see the benefit of it*).

These co-texts were categorised by drawing on the framework of transitivity as proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) (also cf. Koller 2020 for an introduction). The decision to use the transitivity framework to categorise sentences and clauses formally related to negative self-identifiers was made to lend systematicity to the analysis and help establish the frequency of particular lexicogrammatical choices in the co-text of the structure in focus. However, as will be discussed in more detail, assigning the textual material at hand to the categories provided by the transitivity framework often means drawing quite rigid boundaries between instances of language in use, suggesting clear differences (or similarities) between utterances intuitively serving quite similar (or different) functions. This is also acknowledged by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 216), who explain that their “model of experience, as interpreted through the grammatical system of transitivity, is one of regions within a continuous space”. To account for the fuzziness of process type categories and shed light on the co-texts of negative self-identifiers from more than just one perspective, process types found to be frequently instantiated by the textual material examined in this analysis were approached from a functionally more holistic perspective in the analyses presented in Chapter 9. In the following, I discuss how I categorised the co-texts of negative self-identifiers in terms of participants and processes and discuss some of the theoretical and methodological intricacies involved in this process.

My analytical framework categorises clauses according to process types they realise. It subsumes under the label “Role-1” participants functioning as actor in material processes, as sayer in verbal processes, as carrier/token in relational processes, as existent in existential processes, as senser in mental processes and as behavior in behavioural processes. This, in most cases, also means that these participants constitute the subjects⁴⁶ of the clause. An exception is represented by passive clauses, which are marked by a subject-object-swap. While this swap does not affect the functional roles taken by participants (Koller 2020: 59), passive clauses often do not explicitly feature the actor, constituting agentless passives, as in *my videos are monetized*. In cases such as this one, the subjects of the examined clauses were included as participants in the tables summarising my findings despite not taking Role 1 according to my framework. In pre-projected mental clauses serving modal assessments, such as *it seems to me [that...]* or *it would surprise me [if...]*, too, the speaker is listed as Role-1 participant despite not representing the subject of the clause (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 257). In contrast, in relational processes such as *it seems unusual*, it serves as carrier and thus as Role-1 participant. In existential processes in clauses introduced by a non-personal pronoun *there*, the existent is listed as Role-1 participant (ibid.: 268). While I include attributes/values related to Role-1 participants in relational processes in my presentation of results (differentiating them according to the verb relating them to the subject), I did not consider the meanings of as participants taking Role 2 according to the framework presented in table 8.8 below⁴⁷. The reason for the decision to exclude these participants from this analysis is that it is intended as a first experiential profile, the purpose of which is to reveal frequently occurring patterns of participant-process co-occurrence.

⁴⁶ According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 148), the notion of ‘subject’ is understood in terms of “modal responsibility”, i.e., both as a semantic and as a grammatical category.

⁴⁷ Except, as has been pointed out above, in agentless passives.

Role-1 participants were further distinguished in this analysis according to formal criteria (e.g., the participant can be realised by pronoun or by an indefinite NP) and semantic criteria (e.g., the participant can denote a thing or a person) as follows (an overview with attested corpus examples is given in table 8.8):

- First-person singular pronouns (*I* → speaker)
- Second-person singular pronouns (*you* → addressee)
- Third-person singular or plural pronouns (e.g. *they*) or a noun phrase (e.g. *the juddering*)
 These participants were also differentiated semantically depending on whether they refer to humans or animals or inanimate things and ideas (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 385–6). The category of inanimate third-person subjects also includes pro-forms referring back to preceding co-text in turns by the same or by a different speaker (e.g. *I'm no doctor but it doesn't sound like a great idea to me*, where *it* refers to an idea expressed by a different speaker).
- Clauses (e.g. *getting your diabetes under control*)
- Co-texts which do not represent processes, e.g. single NPs serving as substitution for full clauses (e.g. *Hi Gareth, I'm no expert, so no advice*, where *no advice* appears to stand for “I give you no advice”) or as expressives (e.g. *I'm no photographer... but jeeeeeesus!*). These, despite not constituting processes, feature in the tables presenting the results of the different analyses for the sake of completeness.

Referring to the abovementioned intricacies of categorising clauses representing the co-texts of negative self-identifiers according to the transitivity framework, one of them is that differentiating between mental and relational clauses often appears somewhat artificial. The reason for this is, as Halliday & Matthiessen (2014: 542) state, that “‘personal’ ‘attributive’ clauses are closely agnate with projecting ‘mental’ clauses” in that they can be used to construe “inner experiences” and to serve as modal assessments of a hypotactically projected clause.⁴⁸ So, for example, being *confident* that something is the case (a relational process type) is very similar to *thinking* that something is the case (a mental process type).

8.9. *I'm no expert but I don't think the juddering is coming through the clutch peddle.*

8.10. *I am no pro but I am confident [confident] the first photo is a common and harmless hover fly.*

The difference between mental and relational clauses being used to modally comment on acts and facts is that the former construe a relationship between a senser (*I*) and the phenomenon, which may formally be expressed as separate clause (*the juddering is coming through the clutch peddle*), and the latter only construe a relationship between carrier (*I*) and attribute (*confident*) (ibid: 261). Further instances of clauses that appear very similar, but constitute, in fact, different process types, are clauses where a preparatory *it* serves as subject of a modal assessment. Compare, for example, *it would be my guess* (which, despite being marked as the speaker's perspective through the possessive *my*, is a relational process with *it* as Role-1 participant) and *it would surprise me* (which, although the senser

⁴⁸ In fact, they can also construe “outer experiences”, just like material processes. As an example, they cite cases of present progressive predicates as in *She's walking into the dining room*. In my analysis, I treated such instances as material processes.

appears in the structural position of direct object, is a mental process type in which the pre-projected clause serves as an inducer).

8.11. *I'm no expert, but it would be my guess that since the lining of your lungs has a lot of mucous to keep dust and the like from building up in there, it would serve the same function to keep resin from accumulating in the larynx.*

8.12. *It would surprise me if they couldn't vomit. However, I'm no zoologist.*

Another issue that needs to be addressed when categorising the data under scrutiny according to the transitivity framework is how to handle metaphors (Koller 2020: 68). There are two types of metaphors, namely:

- Grammatical metaphors: These are processes and participants which are realised by other grammatical units than the ones they normally correspond to, i.e. there is an incongruent relationship between semantics and lexicogrammar (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 665). For example, while talking to someone is a process and is thus typically realised by a verbal group, this process is nominalised in *have a talk*. Depending on whether the nominalised process of talking in *have a talk* is considered to represent a verbal process (albeit not congruently) or whether the verb *have* is considered to construe a possessive relationship between a carrier and the noun *talk* as attribute, this results in different analyses. In the tables below, *have a talk* is listed as a relational, rather than as a verbal process, just like *have an idea* was counted as a relational, rather than as a mental process. This form-based approach was intended to get an overview of the lexicogrammatical choices in the co-text of negative self-identifiers. In the analyses presented in Chapter 9, then, frequently instantiated process types – used congruently or through grammatical metaphors – were analysed in terms of their discourse-pragmatic functions, taking into account potential metaphorical uses.
- Conceptual metaphors: Conceptual metaphors are “mapping[s] of semantic features from a *source domain* to a *target domain*” (Koller 2020: 78, italics in the original), which serve to express and, in fact, “comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johson 1980: 458). An example featuring in my corpus is *fall in love*, which realises the conceptual metaphors LOVE IS A CONTAINER and CONTROL IS UP. In terms of transitivity, *fall in love* can be analysed as one process type, namely the material process of falling, being used to express another, namely a mental-emotive, one. There are also several instances of metaphors drawing on the understanding of abstract notions in terms of concrete objects, e.g. the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE OBJECTS as in *get it* (a material process standing in for a mental-cognitive one), *take blame* (where the material process of taking represents the process of verbally or mentally accepting responsibility, depending on the interpretation), or *add thoughts*, which is a material process used to metaphorically represent the process of verbally expressing one’s thoughts, putting them on a figurative pile of thoughts already on the table. To keep this analysis maximally form-based and systematic, conceptual metaphors were categorised according to the process type constituting the source domain: *fall*, *get* and *take* were hence counted as (metaphorical) material processes. This, I am aware, has the disadvantage of rendering the analysis somewhat artificial: counting *fall (in love)* as material process obscures the fact that what the speaker meant to linguistically represent was their experience of a mental-emotive process. However, as Koller (2020: 69) explains, from an SFL perspective, “all language use represents a motivated choice from the resources that is the

language system”, which means that “the use of a metaphor by a speaker or writer is functional”. To indicate figurative processes as such, they are briefly commented on in footnotes in my presentation of the data.

- It is also possible that sub-types of processes stand in for other sub-types (Koller 2020: 68). An example from the examined corpus is *find*, which represents a mental-perceptive process but is used in the mental-cognitive sense of having an opinion. Metaphorical uses of such verbs are not distinguished from literal ones in this analysis because the conceptual stretch of a metaphorical mapping within the same process type is shorter; thus, *find* is assigned to the category of mental process here, no matter if it is used in its literal, i.e. perceptive, or in its metaphorical, i.e. cognitive sense (in fact, my framework does not distinguish between sub-types of processes at all).

The following instances of the informal language such as is used in forums provide an additional impression of the intricacies of approaching the data in my corpus with the aim of categorising it according to maximally ‘objective’, i.e. ideally formal, framework-based features.

- 8.13. *Looks like a hoverfly larva, but I am no expert at all and well used to being blown up about my erroneous guesses.*
- 8.14. *I am no expert and very happy to stand corrected on the matter ;-).*
- 8.15. *I’ve never been a fan of going out much anyway, but like everybody, I’m more than capable of having a few [beers] too many.*

In all three cases, attributes are ascribed to the speaker: being used to something, being happy to do something, and being capable of something. Functionally, however, these three utterances are very different. While in 8.13 and 8.14, the speakers’ self-characterisations serve mitigating purposes, making their utterances appear more tentative and modest, the speaker in 8.15 appears to talk about an ability they have (being capable of doing something), but in fact refers to their tendency towards binge drinking. In short, while the differentiation of co-texts according to participants and processes was useful to get an overview of linguistic structures occurring in the context of negative self-identifiers in patterned ways, more detailed, contextualised analysis reveals that function, especially in the case of this data, takes a large variety of forms. Table 8.8 below summarises the differentiation among Role-1 participants and process types with examples from my corpus.

Speaker as role-1 participant	Corpus example	Role-2 participant	Process category
Actor		Goal	Material
<i>I</i>	<i>change</i>	<i>the way I run</i>	
<i>I</i>	<i>fall (in love)</i>		metaphorical
Senser		Phenomenon/Inducer	Mental
<i>I</i>	<i>don't think</i>	<i>the juddering is coming through the clutch peddle</i>	
<i>I (→ me)</i>	<i>It would <u>surprise me</u></i>	<i>if they couldn't vomit</i>	
Sayer		Verbiage	Verbal
<i>I</i>	<i>suggest</i>	<i>Lantus alone might not be the best choice for an LADA type</i>	
Carrier/Token		Attribute/Value	Relational
<i>I</i>	<i>have</i>	<i>a vivarium</i>	
<i>I</i>	<i>have</i>	<i>a conversation</i>	metaphorical
<i>I</i>	<i>am</i>	<i>confident</i>	
<i>I</i>	<i>keep</i>	<i>an eye (out)</i>	metaphorical
Behaver		-	Behavioural (metaphorical)
<i>I</i>	<i>came down⁴⁹</i>		
Existent		-	Existential
<i>I</i>	<i>am</i>		
Other role-1 participants	Corpus example	Role-2 participant	Process category
Actor		Goal	Material
<i>You</i>	<i>I am no scientist but from some research, you initially <u>have to melt</u></i>	<i>all the contents in the bowl</i>	
Clause (including non-finite and subordinate ones)	<i>I'm no expert but as already been suggested, getting your diabetes under control will help.</i>	-	
	Carrier/Token	Attribute/Value	Relational
3 rd person (sg/pl)	<i>I am not a DU student, but my partner is</i>	<i>one (DU student)</i>	
- Animate (human/animal, pro-form referring to human/animal)	<i>I'm no expert, but cocaine is</i>	<i>the second most addictive and most harmful drug out there⁵⁰</i>	
- Inanimate (object/idea/pro-form referring to previous sentence or inanimate NP)	Actor	Goal	Material (metaphorical)
	<i>I am no Dog lover but the whole thing has royally pissed me off.</i>	<i>me (speaker)</i>	
	Carrier/Token	Attribute/Value	Relational
	A: <i>Will it cause any long-term damage or will I just have to take even more time out after the marathon before starting training again?</i>		
	B: <i>I'm no doctor but it doesn't sound like</i>	<i>a great idea</i>	

⁴⁹ *Come down*, here, is used to mean “to stop being high on (a drug)” (Merriam Webster: n.d.). Since this experience of coming down occupies middle ground between a mental and a material process, constituting an involuntary sensory experience but also a sort of ‘activity’, it is classified as behavioural process here (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999: 136).

⁵⁰ It should be mentioned that, since boxes in tables are often read in isolation, certain examples might at least initially look confusing. Thus, *I'm no expert, but cocaine is* sounds as though a drug addict made some sarcastic comment about cocaine being the real expert in life. In fact, however, the coordinated sentence introduced by *but* identifies cocaine as “the most harmful [sic] drug”, thus expressing the speaker’s opinion of the substance in question. The functions of relational processes such as this one are discussed in more detail below (table 8.15).

	<i>I'm no expert, but <u>it would be</u> my guess that since the lining of your lungs has a lot of mucous to keep dust and the like from building up in there, it would serve the same function to keep resin from accumulating in the larynx.</i>	<i>my guess</i>	
	---	Goal	Material
- Subjects in agentless passive clauses	<i>I am not a YouTube partner but <u>my videos are monetized</u></i>	<i>my videos</i>	Material
	Existent	---	Existential
- Existents in existential clauses	<i>I'm not an expert but there <u>are many people</u> on here who have been very helpful to me⁵¹</i>		

Table 8.8. Overview of Role-1 participants and processes as categorised in this analysis

In the tables presenting the results of this analysis, i.e. in the experiential profiles of co-texts of negative self-identifiers discussed in sections 8.2.2, 8.2.3 and 8.2.4, the following conventions of presenting the data apply:

Data represented	Presentation of data
Deictic expressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referents in the proximate co-text are indicated in square brackets (provided they are words or short phrases) (e.g. <i>these [caves]</i>) Referents in the more distal preceding co-text are metalinguistically indicated by [anaphoric ref]
Impersonal <i>it</i> and <i>there</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicated as such by [impersonal]
Ambiguous verbs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information needed to disambiguate between two word senses provided in square brackets, e.g. <i>get [become]</i>
Relational processes	Attributes and values in relational processes are indicated after the verb expressing the relational process, e.g. <i>be: 0 degrees</i>
Existential processes	Only existents are indicated in the tables
References to non-authorial text and non-verbal elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quotes: [quote] Pictures: [pic]

Table 8.9: Conventions of presenting data in this chapter

8.2.2. Contrast and concession

Firstly, co-texts logically linked to negative self-identifiers by contrasting conjunctions and adverbs were examined in accordance with my framework for experiential context analysis. As has been shown, it is this type of formally marked functional relation between negative self-identifiers and their immediate co-text that occurs most frequently in the examined data. Table 8.10 below shows the identified process types, the verbs denoting these processes and their frequency of occurrence.

⁵¹ While the clause introduced by *but* is an existential process, the identifying relative clause following it is actually important for the function of the utterance as a whole: that the people referred to have helped the speaker is represented as relevant in relation to their status as a layperson. This, again, shows that transitivity analysis of the clauses immediately adjacent and formally linked to NIs just serves as a starting point for finer-grained analysis. As for existential processes, in particular, these were found to be very rare, which is why they are not discussed in more detail.

CONTRAST AND CONCESSION		
CONTRAST		
CO-TEXT FOLLOWING NEGATIVE SELF-IDENTIFIERS		
Process	Role 1: I	To.
Mental	<i>agree, appreciate (2), assume (2), believe (5), decide (2), discover, doubt, enjoy (3), experience, find (2), guess (3), hear (3), hope, imagine, know (4), learn, like (3), look at, love (3), notice, prefer, recall, research, see [understand] (2), see (4), suspect (2), think (17), understand (2), want to⁵² (5), wish (2), wonder (2), worry, like to</i>	82
	Modal assessments in mental 'please' clauses ⁵³ <i>it does seem to me, it looks to me</i>	2
Relational	<i>be (16): comfortable, confident, certain, diabetic, a fan of this little knife, impressed, married, more than capable of sorting it, on the periphery of the app, a private individual, shocked, a sole trader, a spy, sure (3)</i>	34
	<i>find myself (2): oddly refreshed, drawn to these shades</i>	
	<i>feel: humiliated</i>	
	<i>get [become] (2): stuck, unlucky</i>	
	<i>have (9): a conversation, a few years of experience, a tinker, a vivarium, experience, high cholesterol, impression, memory, lower back pain</i>	
	<i>own (2): a diablo red 106s, a Dennis</i>	
Material	<i>change, create, cut in 1/2, cut out, deal with, go back, get (3)⁵⁴, go fossiling, go with the flow, have fitted, hesitate to come back, make up for sth, manage to get up running,⁵⁵ play, raise, smoke, start clearing, take [photo], use (3), visit, water, work (3)</i>	28
	<i>offer, recommend, say (5), share, suggest (2), tell (2), thank</i>	13
Behavioural	<i>sneeze</i>	1
Existential	<i>be</i>	1
TOTAL		161
Role 1: third-person NP (non-human)		
Participants	<i>[quote], 150/90 or 150/80, 4-aco-dmt, a few thoughts, a jump from 19k to 32 in a week, a lot of ibuprofen, all the photos, an interface, an Italian Restaurant, cocaine, half of my plate, high gain amps, it [anaphoric ref] (2), it [if it did re-open], it [impersonal] (2), it [never having been a professional footballer], it [O/A], it [to remove the fizz], Kermod's love of the best films in the genre, magenta, mine [my photo], my brain, my guess, my understanding (2), North, Soho, some other tips, something weird about a person who can take 200mg of trazadone without a tolerance within an hour and say they felt a "weed like high" and then not be knocked the fuck out, swear words and obscenity, that the XK engine is one of the best engines ever made, that thing, the 6 week outage, the active ingredients, the alternative, the Bosch FR, the final hurdle, the whole thing, the list of bits and pieces that I like to carry, the only way to deal with OCD, the palladium, the story, these [caves], these two [nutrition potions], they [e21], they [mac style icons], they [tits], things, this [advice], this [anaphoric ref] (3), this [behaviour], this [experience], this [pic] (5), this [poke hack], this</i>	70

⁵² These occurrences of *want* feature in projecting clause nexuses such as *want to remove*. This could be seen as posing a problem for categorisation because it raises the question whether the first process (a mental process type) or the second process (a material process type, in this example) should be counted. The reason for categorising the mental process is based on the view that "the relation between *want* and *to do* is one of projection" and that, consequently, "a projection of *do it* [...] is a meaning, and thus does not imply 'does it'" (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 584). Thus, verbal group complexes such as *want to do* contrast with expansions with verbs such as *try*.

⁵³ Cf. Halliday & Matthiessen (2014: 680f.)

⁵⁴ The instances of *get* referred to here are *get stitches*, *get sleep* and *get it*. The verb *get* is thus interpreted as being used in a sense similar to that of 'acquire', which Halliday & Matthiessen (2014: 236) consider to represent a material clause type. *Get it* is used to mean 'understand it' by the speaker, i.e. it is an instance of a metaphor through which an idea is conceptualised as object.

⁵⁵ [I] *manage to get up running* is categorised as material process here because the first verbal group *manage to* serves as an extension of the second verbal group *get up*, a semantic relation which is referred to as conation in SFL (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 572).

Chapter 8 — Negative self-identifiers and their immediate formal-functional co-texts

	<i>[woody cab], this stuff, those pretty flowers, UTR numbers, whippets, your offshore installation, your raison d'être</i>	
	Goal as subject	
	<i>my videos, sperm</i>	2
Relational	<i>be (34): 0 degrees, a Austro-Hungarian Uniform, a few thoughts, a generator isnt a portable/moveable or stationary appliance, a good move, far above normal, far too much, good, helpful, marvellous, much more comprehensive programme, my hair trial, my MIL2B's, my shaky understanding of the stiffness of tubes, nice, nifty, non starchy veg, not quite as the mail reports, odourless, one of outsmacking, opiates, outstanding, roughly right, scary, something special, that endurance training can itself cause Wenckeback phenomenon to occur, that my unit has some problem with the input sensitivity, the Bosch FR, the middle ground between white gold and platinum, the only thing from your report that may suggest MS, the place, the second most addictive substance, to correct the first and last name one to my full passport name, to learn how to change the way that we react to our thoughts</i>	53
	<i>look (6): better and better, damn good, good, different, phenomenal, unsafe</i>	
	<i>have (4): live conductor, a letter at the end, adverse reaction, uses</i>	
	<i>look like (2): monster, salvia-divinorum</i>	
	<i>seem (3): unusual, a summary of advice I have had before, popular</i>	
	<i>need, require (2): solid state pre amplification on top, the presence of water</i>	
	<i>sound like (2): PD, a great idea</i>	
	<i>take: 20 mins</i>	
Material	<i>bypass, cause, change, expand, hurt, lead, move, monetize, make, pick up, piss off, stop, supply</i>	13
Existential	<i>an Italian restaurant, a few thoughts, something weird about a person who can take 200mg of trazadone without a tolerance within an hour and say they felt a "weed like high" and then not be knocked the fuck out, swear words and obscenity, the 6 week outage</i>	5
Verbal	<i>define</i>	1
TOTAL		72
Role 1: third-person NP (human/animal)		
Participants	<i>any dementia sufferer, anyone (2), Blake, Fred, GT towing, he, he [Captain of Liverpool FC], he [the tenor], many people who have been very helpful, MC fans, my partner, Sally Ann, several musicians, she, the bird, they [anaphoric ref] (2), they [Queen], who</i>	
Relational	<i>be (7): fine, linked to Amy's life, DU student, expert, one of those bands that you occasionally realise wrote great song, son of William Archer, about the size of a seagull</i>	8
	<i>sound: good</i>	
Material	<i>animate, give stick, service, take [blame]⁵⁶, try fixing⁵⁷, use, receive, win</i>	8
Verbal	<i>encourage</i>	2
Mental	<i>think</i>	1
Existential	<i>many people who have been very helpful</i>	1
TOTAL		20
Role 1: You		
Material	<i>check, fault, get, go wrong, increase, invalidate, list, melt, pique, protect yourself, search, use (2)</i>	13
Relational	<i>be: aenemic have: POA for welfare need: more protein</i>	3
Mental	<i>believe</i>	1
TOTAL		17
Role 1: We		
Relational	<i>get: lucky</i>	1

⁵⁶ This is an instance of a metaphorical material process representing a verbal process (in the sense of confessing to guilt).

⁵⁷ Verbs such as *try* and *start* (to do something) are treated as expansions in SFL. This means that they imply that the process they expand is actually being carried out (so *try fixing* here implies doing the fixing – whether this is successful or not) (cf. Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 584).

		TOTAL	1
		Role 1: Clause	
Participants	<i>doing stats, getting your diabetes under control, to see new projects around, to despise the scum</i>		
Relational	<i>be (3): not that complicated, interesting, in the genes</i>		3
Material	<i>help</i>		1
		TOTAL	4
		Others	
NP	<i>just an idea, maybe something like this</i>		2
Exclamative	<i>Jeeeeeesus, thanks for the suggestions</i>		2
		TOTAL	4
		TOTAL	279
CO-TEXT PRECEDING NEGATIVE SELF-IDENTIFIERS			
		Role 1: I	
Process			
Mental	<i>believe, consider, guess, hope (2), know (2), like (3), mean, prefer, read (2), see [watch], taste, think (7), understand (2), wonder</i>		27
	Modal assessments in mental 'please' clauses		
	<i>it would surprise me</i>		1
Material	<i>do exercise, edit, follow, put up image, show, sort, take (2), try to drink, use</i>		10
Relational	<i>be (7): allowed, Christian, happy, hooked, new to the forum, sure, vegetarian become: healthier have: experience</i>		9
Verbal	<i>say (3), need to consult, prove⁵⁸</i>		5
		TOTAL	52
		Role 1: third-person NP (non-human)	
Participants	<i>better ways, heavy industry and pollution, it [advice], it [eclecticism], it [manual], it [pic] (4), it [anaphoric ref] (4), it [truck], it [VW Golf Mk4], my room, my username, nothing I can say here, nothing much to do, printing, resources, some of them [photos of A rezia], the design, the pace, the term, these [pic], this [BED], this [quote]</i>		
Relational	<i>be (16): a user rights/permissions thing in win 10, arguable, as strong as, a case of slipping into 'gravity' mode, ChamSys.be, complete rip-off, confusing, false widow spiders, good, King Alfred's Cakes, limited, meadow tick, my hobby, small, strikingly dissimilar, way to run programs look (like) (3): British, hoverfly larva, lime seem: strange</i>		20
Material	<i>change, disappear, handle, kill, start</i>		5
Existential	<i>better ways, heavy industry and pollution, nothing much</i>		3
		TOTAL	28
		Role 1: third-person NP (human/animal)	
Participants	<i>Buzz, my HV, my mum, the pope, they [bees]</i>		
Verbal	<i>recommend, say, suggest, tell</i>		4
Relational	<i>be: gentle little creatures</i>		1
		TOTAL	5
		Role 1: You	
Material	<i>lose</i>		1
		TOTAL	1

⁵⁸ Since proving something to others necessarily involves verbalising what one considers evidence of a particular claim, I see *prove* as verbal process.

TOTAL		86
TOTAL CONTRAST		365
CONCESSION		
NI AS CONCESSIONAL CLAUSE: FOLLOWING CONTEXT		
Role 1: I		
Mental	<i>enjoy, imagine, see, think</i>	4
Verbal	<i>admit, answer, point out</i>	3
Material	<i>cruise, visit</i>	2
Relational	<i>deserve: one of those frames</i>	1
<i>TOTAL</i>		10
Role 1: third person (non-human)		
Participants	<i>it [privacy glass], the kindle</i>	
Relational	<i>fit into: elastic retainers</i> <i>suit: the car</i>	2
<i>TOTAL</i>		2
Role 1: third person (human/animal)		
Participants	<i>he, schools, someone</i>	
Relational	<i>be (2): to Graceland, a recovering addict</i>	2
Material	<i>hire</i>	1
<i>TOTAL</i>		3
Role 1: You		
Relational	<i>keep: friend</i>	1
<i>TOTAL</i>		1
TOTAL		16
NI AS CONCESSIONAL CLAUSE: PRECEDING CONTEXT		
Role 1: I		
Material	<i>get, buy</i>	2
Behavioural	<i>wait</i>	1
Relational	<i>deserve: a Christmas</i>	1
<i>TOTAL</i>		4
Role 1: third person (non-human)		
Participants	<i>this dosage, the TVs</i>	
Material	<i>help</i>	1
Relational	<i>have: a nice design</i>	1
<i>TOTAL</i>		2
Role 1: third person (human)		
Participants	<i>schools</i>	
Material	<i>hire</i>	1
<i>TOTAL</i>		1
TOTAL		7
CONCESSIONAL CLAUSE = FOLLOWING CONTEXT		
Role 1: I		
Material	<i>play, register</i>	2

Mental	<i>see, love</i>	2
Relational	<i>be [to Gracelands]⁵⁹</i>	1
<i>TOTAL</i>		5
TOTAL		5
CONCESSIONAL CLAUSE = PRECEDING CONTEXT		
Role 1: I		
Mental	<i>hope, know, see</i>	3
Relational	<i>have: PD</i>	1
<i>TOTAL</i>		4
TOTAL		4
TOTAL CONCESSION		32
TOTAL CONTRAST AND CONCESSION		397

Table 8.10: Role-1 participants and processes in clauses and sentences contrasted with NIs

The analysis revealed that, in most cases, a negative self-identifier is preceded or – much more frequently – followed by a clause with *I*, i.e. the speaker, in Role 1. The second most frequently occurring Role-1 participants are ‘inanimate’ third-person NPs, i.e. things and ideas. The chart below provides an overview of the relative frequency of the Role-1 participants in clauses presenting a contrast or a concession to negative self-identifiers.

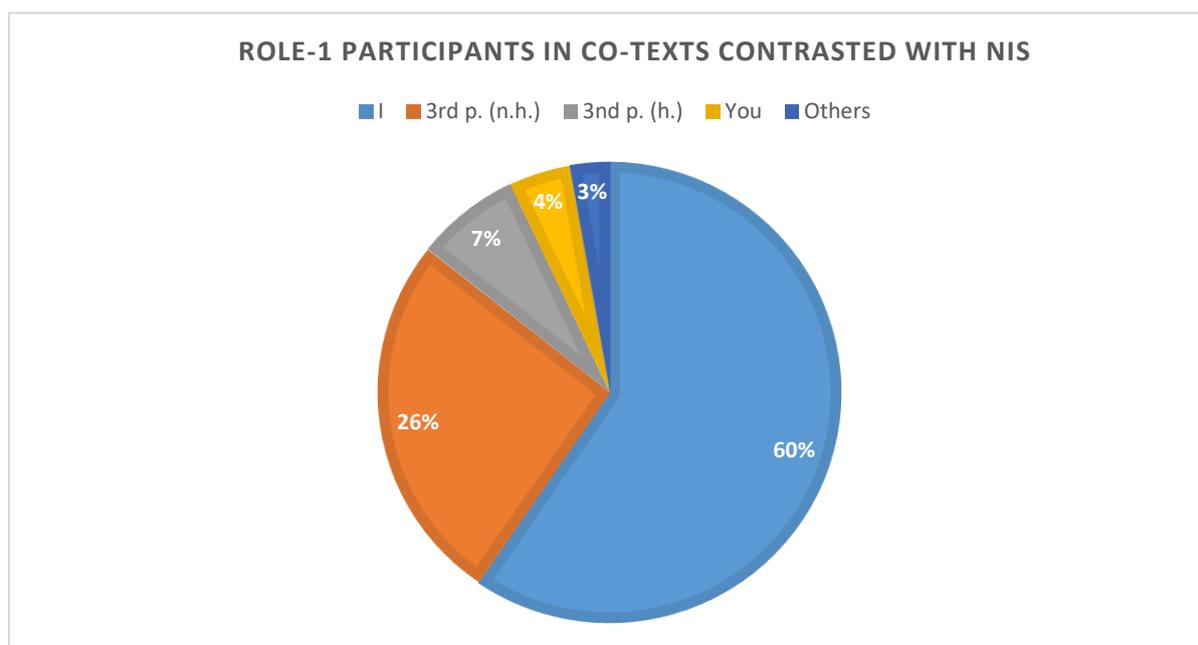


Figure 8.1: Distribution of Role-1 participants in co-texts contrasted with NIs

Overall, of process types in clauses of contrast and concession preceding or following negative self-identifiers (397 in total), mental processes with *I* in the senser role occur, by far, most frequently (121 instances, i.e. 30 per cent of all clauses and sentences linked to negative self-identifiers by means of contrasting and concessive conjunctions). The second most frequent participant-process configuration case are (non-human) third-person NPs in relational processes, i.e., negative self-identifiers are often

⁵⁹ According to Koller (2020: 60), the sentence “The picture is on the wall” is an existential process, which means that *on the wall*, according to this interpretation, represents a circumstance. This, I think, is reasonable if we consider the wall to represent the place where the picture ‘resides’, i.e. exists more permanently. In Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 301), relations of being in, or to, particular places, are seen as outer experiences construed by relational process types. As an example, they cite “She’s in the dining room”. Accordingly, *be [to Gracelands]*, representing a process of visiting, rather than existing in, a place, is listed as relational process here.

contrasted with a statement about what something is or what attribute something has: 77 cases, i.e. 19% of contrasting contexts examined, are relational processes with inanimate third-person participants in Role 1. The third most frequent participant-process relation is first-person participants in relational (47) and material (44) processes. Categorised as “others” in this table are the few cases where a negative self-identifier is not followed by a process, but by for example a noun phrase, as in *I’m no photographer....but jeeeeeeesus!*

Process	Mental		Material		Verbal		Existential		Relational		Behavioural		Total
	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	
Role 1 Part.													
<i>I</i>	31	90	12	32	5	16	0	1	11	36	1	1	237
	121		44		21		1		47		2		
3rd p. (n.h.)			6	12		1	3	5	21	56			104
	0		18		1		8		77				
3rd p. (h.)		1	1	9	4	2		1	1	10			29
	1		10		6		1		11				
2nd p.		1	1	13	0	0	0			4			19
	1		14						4				
Total	123		86		28		10		139		2		388
Others												9	
Total												397	

Table 8.11: Roles and process types in clauses and sentences contrasted with NIs

Mental processes can commonly be differentiated according to whether they designate processes of perception, cognitive processes, processes of wanting and wishing, or emotional processes. As the table below shows, mental processes with *I* in the senser role in clauses and sentences contrasted with negative self-identifiers are predominantly processes of cognition:

Verbs in mental processes with <i>I</i> as senser	To.
Cognitive	75
<i>agree, assume (2), believe (6), consider (2), decide (2), discover, doubt, experience, guess (4), imagine (2), it does seem to me, it looks to me, it would surprise me, know (7), learn, look at, mean, notice, read (2), realize, recall, research, think (27), understand (4), wonder (3)</i>	
Emotive	19
<i>appreciate (2), enjoy (4), like (6), love (4), prefer (2), worry</i>	
Perceptive	15
<i>find (2), hear (3), see (9), taste</i>	
Desiderative	12
<i>hope (4), want to (5), wish (2), would like to see</i>	
TOTAL	121

Table 8.12: Types of mental processes with *I* as the senser in contrasting co-texts

Considering the conceptual categories of the negative self-identifiers (as discussed in Chapter 7) with which these clauses and sentences are related by means of a contrasting conjunction or adverb yields the following results:

NIs related to mental processes with <i>I</i> as the senser by contrasting conjunctions/adverbs	To.
Expertise (general)	25
Expertise (specific)	23

Professional	20
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>)	9
Characteristics: Evaluative	5
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Person	5
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): General	4
Roles: Forum-related	3
Characteristics: General	3
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Activity	3
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Visual aspects	3
Habit: Routine	3
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	2
Characteristics: Health/ill health	2
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Product	2
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Style	2
Habit: Substance	2
Characteristics: Social	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Nature	1
Ideological	1
Usage, Consumption and Ownership	1
Habit: Food/drink	1
TOTAL	121

Table 8.13: Conceptual categories of NIs formally contrasted with mental processes with *I* in senser role

Overall, 77 of 121 (i.e. 63%) of negative self-identifiers contrasted with mental (as we have seen, mostly cognitive) processes with the speaker in the senser role are from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism. This is not surprising, given that these categories were generally the most frequent. In light of what I have said in the previous chapter about de- and re-expertisation, though, this appears interesting insofar as stating one's view immediately before or after using a disclaimer of expertise can be interpreted as acknowledgement of experts and, at the same time, as subversion of potential implications of the speakers' lay status in the sense of not being able or feeling authorised to comment on a given subject.

As stated earlier, the second most frequent type of process formally contrasted with negative self-identifiers are relational processes with a non-human third-person subject Role 1 (77 of 398, i.e., 19% of the sentences formally contrasted with negative self-identifiers). Relational processes can be classified into identifying processes (where *a* is the identity of *x*; a corpus example would be *mine is my MIL2B's*) and attributive processes (where *a* is an attribute of *x*, as in *this story is not quite as the Mail reports it*). Both types of relational process can be further subcategorised into intensive, possessive and circumstantial processes, which are exemplified in table 8.15 below (examples from my corpus are represented in italics).

	Attributive	Identifying
Intensive (<i>x is a</i>)	<i>they're looking better and better</i>	<i>half of my plate is non starchy veg</i>
Possessive (<i>x has a</i>)	<i>UTR numbers don't have a letter at the end</i>	<i>mine is my MIL2B's</i>

Circumstantial (x is [preposition] a)	<i>a Kindle fits into elastic retainers</i>	'the meeting is at 12'
---------------------------------------	---	------------------------

Table 8.14: Relational processes in my corpus⁶⁰

I further categorised the data semantically to find if particular meanings frequently occur in data representing this participant-process configuration. This was done by initially differentiating among relational processes with non-human third person participants drawing on (but departing from) this framework.⁶¹

Attributive		Identifying	
Evaluation	30	Identification	28
<i>arguable, better and better, as strong as "Whatever you do don't drink alcohol!", confusing, damn good, different, far too much, good (3), (have) nice design, helpful, limited, marvellous, nice, nifty, not quite as the mail reports, outstanding, phenomenal, popular, roughly right, scary, small, so far above normal, something special, strange, strikingly dissimilar, (suit) the car, unsafe, unusual</i>		<i>a Austro-hungarian uniform, a case of slipping into 'gravity' mode, a complete rip-off, a few thoughts, a good move, a great idea, a monster, a much more comprehensive programme, a summary of advice I have had before, a user rights/permissions thing in win 10, a way to run programs, a winchat, British, false widow spiders, hoverfly larva, King Alfred's Cakes, lime, meadow tick, my shaky understanding of the stiffness of tubes, one of outsmacking, opiates, place where we all need open and honest opinions, salvia-divinorum, the most addictive and must harmful drug, the only thing from your report that may suggest MS, the only VW listing, to correct the first and last name one to my full passport name, to learn how to change the way that we react to our thoughts</i>	
Description	9	Informative reference	5
<i>a letter at the beginning, adverse reaction, odourless, PD, the presence of water, uses, fit into: elastic retainers, (have) live conductor, (have) solid state pre amplification on top</i>		<i>[Name].be, my hair trial, my hobby, my MIL2B's, non starchy veg</i>	
Spatial/temporal specification	2	Claims	3
<i>0 degrees, 20 mins</i>		<i>that a generator isnt a portable/moveable or stationary appliance the middle ground between silver and platinum; that endurance training can itself cause Wenckebach phenomenon to occur; that my unit has some problem with the input sensitivity</i>	
TOTAL	41	TOTAL	36

Table 8.15: Conceptual categorisation of values/attributes in attributive and identifying relational processes with non-human third-person participants in Role 1

As can be seen, relational processes with non-human third-person participants largely fall into the categories of evaluation (30 instances) and identification (28 instances), which means that co-texts formally contrasted with negative self-identifiers frequently represent speakers' assessments of particular objects or ideas, the potential interpretations of which are modified by negative self-identifiers. Take, for instance, the sentence *I'm no fan of gta (except vice city) but this does look phenomenal*, where the negative self-identifier is used to relativise the speaker's evaluation of *this*

⁶⁰ Table adapted from Halliday & Matthiessen (2014: 265).

⁶¹ The transitivity framework as proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), it should be added, is in fact much more intricate than what I have presented here, postulating much finer-grained subcategorisations of attributive and identifying processes. For the purposes of this study, though, I am not taking SFL to its true 'depths', complementing categorisations according to functional grammar with less abstract, meaning-oriented, conceptual analysis.

(anaphorically referring to the computer game *GTA 5*) by fending off its potential implications, namely, that they are, indeed, a fan of this game.

Interesting examples are those where speakers use negative self-identifiers to epistemically mitigate their – sometimes very precise and seemingly informed – categorisations of things. For instance, in *I'm no expert but those pretty flowers look just like salvia-divinorum-flowers*, the speaker assigns the referent to the class of *Salvia divinorum* flowers, using a technical term and thus – albeit tentatively, using the comparative *look just like* instead of the epistemically more certain *are* – providing expert information. There are also cases where negative self-identification with expertise reduces the certainty of already hedged opinions, such as *I am no expert but it seems [seems] like a summary of advice I have had before*. Here, the speaker classifies textual material presented in the anaphoric co-text as repeating things they already know, thus criticising information which claims to be in their best interest. However, they do so very tentatively. Such cases of negative self-identifiers being contrasted with contexts representing personal evaluations and assessments suggest that speakers carefully position themselves in relation to both subjective opinion and factual knowledge. Not being an expert does not stop speakers from evaluating advice, challenging the hierarchy traditionally involved in advice-giving (someone tells you what is best for you, thus speaking from a position of greater authority), or from using technical terms in 'diagnoses' which are, simultaneously, perspectivised by using expertise disclaimers. The motto, it seems, is "what I believe or know depends on what I am (not)" – and the effect of using negative self-identifiers to relativise both what is presented as knowledge and what is framed as opinion is that the conceptual boundaries between the two appear to conflate: if everything is relative, nothing can be accepted as certain.

A minor category I distinguished here is "claims", which contains clauses occurring as values in relational processes with participants such as *my understanding*, thus representing – modalised – claims contrasted with negative self-identifiers. The effect of negative self-identifiers contrasted with such sentences, too, is to epistemically mitigate them. Negative self-identifiers are also used in contexts representing what I classified as "descriptions", that is, attributive processes which relate the carrier to particular features, such as having a *nice design* or being *odourless*, as in the sentence *I'm not a big fan of garlic but this stuff is meant to be odourless*. Here, the negative self-identifier is used in a context of discussing the pros and cons of *Kyolic Aged Garlic Supplements*, modifying the speaker's positive assessment of the supplements' lack of garlic smell and thus positioning the speaker in relation to a consumption preference/recommendation. Finally, there are some cases where the identifying relational processes is used to provide information about or to show something, as in *My username is [Name], but I'm not a developer [developer]*, or *I'm not an OM but this was my hair trial*. In these two examples, the negative self-identifier is used to contrast the speaker with a category that is considered relevant for or implied by the textual material with which it is coordinated.

Example 8.16 below represents the exchange within which the negative self-identifier *I'm not a developer* occurs and shows the source of this identity claim, namely a false identity ascription implied by speaker A's request. Upon A's request to add two functions (to a programming forum where features and information are exchanged), explicitly addressed to B, the latter positively identifies with their username, but contrasts this affirmation with what A's request implicitly presupposes about B: namely, that they can fulfil the request. Pragmatically speaking, the negative self-identifier here serves to alert A to the non-fulfilment of the preparatory condition required for the request to be performable (namely, that B is a developer and can thus add the features).

- 8.16. A: *Probably my two most used functions setting up a busking show on other consoles.. Rate Masters and Speed Masters. Please add this soon, [Name]!*
- B: *Feature request should be posted in the bug tracker! My username is [Name], but I'm not a developer*

In the second example, represented in its wider co-text in 8.17 below, the speaker negatively self-identifies as OM (which, somewhat sadly, stands for women who are “Off the Market”), contrasting this with what she is doing: she presents a picture of her wedding hair. Because she has not yet married and is thus still ‘on the market’, this picture does not represent her actual wedding hair, as requested by A, but just the one she wore at her hair trial in preparation for the wedding. Thus, the negative self-identifier is associated with the authority to “join in” the discussion despite not meeting the (conversational) entrance requirements.

- 8.17. A: *I thought I knew what I wanted for my hair but I'm having second thoughts and wanted to see some other styles. Can you show me what you did? (you can pixelate your faces if you want!)*
- B: *I'm not an OM but this was my hair trial and how I'll be having my hair, hope you don't mind me joining in!*

In summary, the analysis presented here showed that the co-texts contrasted with negative self-identifiers mostly represent (cognitive) mental processes with the speaker in the sender role, and that these are most often contrasted with negative self-identifiers from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism. This indicates that negative self-identifiers examined here are most frequently used as epistemic disclaimers contrasted with the speaker’s opinions and claims. The second analysis looked at the second most frequent experiential type of sentences contrasted with instances of the structure, namely inanimate third-person Role-1 participants in relational processes. It showed that these co-texts most often express speakers’ assessments and ‘diagnoses’, thus fulfilling similar functions as mental process contexts contrasted with the structure. Hence, these results support the finding that modification of opinions and claims is the most prominent function of negative self-identifiers.

8.2.3. Cause and consequence

In this analysis, I approached negative self-identifiers followed or preceded by conjunctions of cause and consequence in the same way as those standing in contrasting or concession relations with their co-text, which were examined in the previous section. While negative self-identifiers contrasted with their co-texts have been found to mainly serve as hedging devices, it can be assumed that negative self-identifiers fulfil different functions in these co-texts representing their cause or consequence. More specifically, the analysis presented in this section focused on the following types of relations between NIs and their immediate co-texts. These co-texts, again, were categorised by drawing on the transitivity framework:

- Negative self-identifier as a cause, as in
 - a) *I can't really speak for FF as I haven't been a member for year*
and
 - b) *I've never been a smoker so don't know how difficult that would be*
- Negative self-identifier as a consequence, as in
 - c) *I've been involved with electric drive systems since the 1970s so I am no novice*

and

d) *I've not been a frequent user lately as have been busy*

The most frequently occurring cases are negative self-identifiers serving as cause, preceded or followed by co-texts representing their consequences, i.e. cases (a) (41 sentences) and (b) (93 sentences). Speakers in my corpus thus often explain what not belonging to a particular identity category means and use negative self-identifiers as explanations for particular states of affairs.

CAUSE/CONSEQUENCE		
FOLLOWING CONTEXT AS CONSEQUENCE		
Process	Role 1: I	To.
Mental	<i>decide, find⁶², guess, know (5), like, listen, miss, opt for, prefer, think (4), view</i>	18
Relational	<i>be: authoritative, concerned, damp behind the ears, interested, sure, surprised, unable, unsure, worried, wrong (2)</i> <i>pretend to be: expert</i> <i>got: feeling</i> <i>do without: chorus</i> <i>have: enough food, feeling, great girl, gross mistakes, idea (3)</i> <i>lack: knowledge</i> <i>own: a harness</i>	23
Verbal	<i>admit, answer (2), comment (2), explain, guarantee, name, talk, vouch for</i>	10
Material	<i>add [thoughts]⁶³, base on⁶⁴, fall [in love]⁶⁵, get [it] (2)⁶⁶, give, go in, have sth. made, wander, send</i>	10
TOTAL		61
Role 1: third person (non-human)		
	<i>all repairs, any advice, any pointers in that direction, any way to fix this, HF start, it (8), my question, some errors within the hint text, that, the focus, these, what</i>	
Relational	<i>be: the best I could do, an essential feature, a huge board, one of those beasts, on the practical application, outside my experience, rubbish, the only types of things I know to try, the optimal way to fix this, title, useful, your choice</i>	12
Existential	<i>all repairs, any way to fix this, it, some errors within the hint text (be)</i>	4
Material	<i>go off</i>	3
	Subject as goal in agentless passives	
	<i>be set up, be received</i>	
TOTAL		19
Role 1: You		
Mental	<i>bear with, forgive</i>	2
Material	<i>take, take sth as (3)⁶⁷, attempt (sth.)</i>	5
Relational	<i>have: conflicts</i> <i>need: additional advice</i>	2
TOTAL		9

⁶² *Find* can be seen as a mental-perceptive process being used to metaphorically represent a mental-cognitive one (cf. Koller 2020: 68).

⁶³ *Adding thoughts* is, of course, used metaphorically to describe the process of verbally expressing one's thoughts.

⁶⁴ *Base on* is a grammatical metaphor in which a material process of physically putting something on a basis serves to figuratively refer to the cognitive-mental process of basing one's arguments, claims etc. on solid ground.

⁶⁵ This is a conceptual metaphor, where the material process of falling stands in for the mental-emotive one of (involuntarily) developing feelings for someone.

⁶⁶ These, again, are instances of *get* being used metaphorically to stand in for a mental-cognitive process.

⁶⁷ Used metaphorically to refer to the process of interpreting something in a certain way.

	Role 1: Clause	
	<i>to crave it, to say this</i>	
Relational	<i>be: unusual, easy</i>	2
TOTAL		2
	Role 1: 3rd person (human)	
	<i>somebody</i>	
Material	<i>shed [light]⁶⁸</i>	1
TOTAL		1
	Others	
NP	<i>no advice</i>	1
TOTAL		1
TOTAL		93
PRECEDING CONTEXT AS CONSEQUENCE		
	Role 1: I	
Mental	<i>appreciate (2), choose, hope, know (3), learn, like, relate, think, understand</i>	12
Relational	<i>be: impressed, sure (2), unable to get more stock to sell, unclear, undecided</i> <i>have: idea</i>	7
Verbal	<i>ask (2), answer, prove, say, speak for</i>	6
Material	<i>do poorly, do, put off, post</i>	4
TOTAL		29
	Role 1: You	
Material	<i>enlighten sb.⁶⁹, put sb. in their place⁷⁰, register, take sth. as</i>	4
TOTAL		4
	Role 1: 3rd person NP (non-human)	
	<i>it (decision), this (advice), nothing much to add, that (the forum is shit), the same</i>	
Relational	<i>be: no-brainer, the best I can do</i> <i>apply to: Heinz's HP sauce</i>	3
Behavioural	<i>stand</i>	1
Existential	<i>be (nothing much to add)</i>	1
TOTAL		5
	Role 1: 3rd person NP (human)	
	<i>they</i>	
Verbal	<i>offer</i>	1
TOTAL		1
	Role 1: Clause	
	<i>to ask me, to go see him</i>	
Relational	<i>be: difficult, pointless</i>	2
TOTAL		2

⁶⁸ *Shed light* is an instance of a metaphorical material process, used to represent the process of helping understand something.

⁶⁹ While instantiating a material process type, *enlightening* somebody metaphorically represents the process of making somebody aware of, or understand, something.

⁷⁰ The material process of putting somebody somewhere is, of course, used metaphorically here.

TOTAL		41
FOLLOWING CONTEXT AS REASON		
Role 1: I		
Relational	<i>be: busy, too little, used to old ones</i> <i>get: to grips⁷¹</i>	4
Mental	<i>feel, think (2)</i>	3
Material	<i>pay for, take up</i>	2
Behavioural	<i>come down⁷²</i>	1
TOTAL		10
Role 1: 3rd person NP (non-human)		
	<i>contract of employment, ear buds, much room for misunderstanding, they (bottles), they (hydration packs)</i>	
Existential	<i>be (2) (contract of employment, much room for misunderstanding)</i>	2
Material	<i>fall out, bounce out</i>	2
Relational	<i>look: clumsy</i>	1
TOTAL		5
Role 1: 3rd person NP (human)		
	<i>they (the local branch of the Alzheimer's Society)</i>	
Relational	<i>be: on doorstep</i>	1
TOTAL		1
Other		
NP	<i>(because of) their ultra-thin sidewalls, the disastrous start</i>	2
TOTAL		2
Role 1: You		
Mental	<i>know</i>	1
TOTAL		1
Role 1: Clause		
	<i>eating just 800 cal a day</i>	
Relational	<i>be: hard</i>	1
TOTAL		1
TOTAL		20
PRECEDING CONTEXT AS REASON		
Role 1: I		
Mental	<i>focus on</i>	1
Relational	<i>be: involved with electric drive systems</i>	1
Material	<i>get: popped out</i>	1
Role 1: goal		
TOTAL		3
Role 1: 3rd person NP (non-human)		

⁷¹ *Get to grips* is a metaphor for coping with something. It is categorised as relational process here, based on an interpretation of get to as meaning 'coming to have' (a grip).

⁷² As already explained above, *come down* is used metaphorically here to describe the process of feeling the effect of drugs wear off.

	<i>my cruise pace</i>	
Relational	<i>be: about 9.20 minutes miles</i>	1
TOTAL		1
TOTAL		4
TOTAL CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE		158

Table 8.16: Processes (and non-processes) in co-texts causally related to NIs

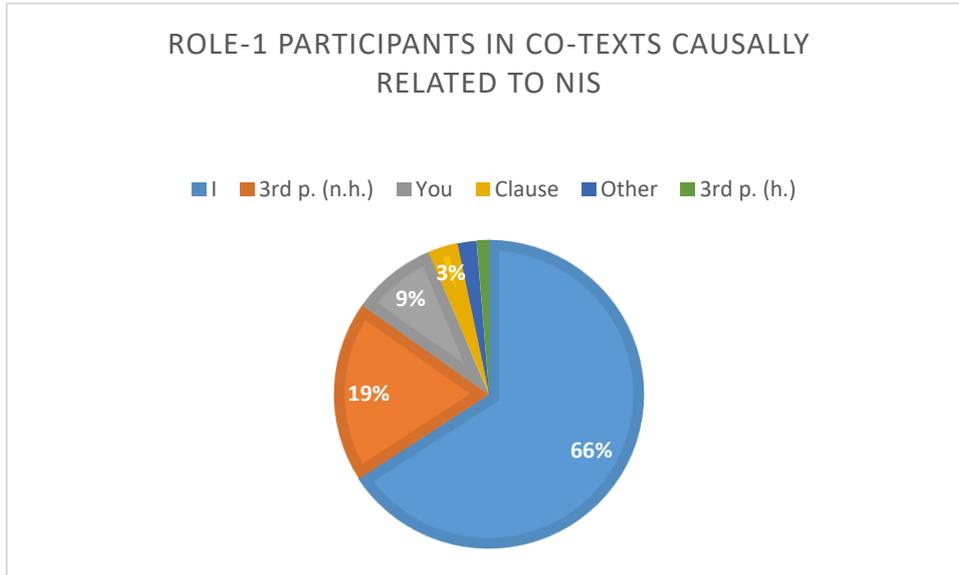


Figure 8.2: Overview of Role-1 participants in co-texts causally related to NIs

Overall, as shown in figure 8.2, processes with the speaker as Role-1 participant are most frequent in the examined co-texts again, followed by non-human third-person subjects in Role 1. The process types most frequently related to negative self-identifiers by means of a conjunction of cause or consequence are mental and relational processes, with the speaker in the senser and, respectively, the carrier/token role (30 sentences each) and represented as consequences of negative self-identification.

Process	Mental		Material		Verbal		Existential		Relational		Behavioural		Total
Negative self-identifiers as reason													134
Role 1 Part.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	
<i>I</i>	12	18	4	10	6	10			7	23			90
Total	30		14		16				30				
<i>3rd p. (n.h.)</i>				3			1	4	3	12	1		24
Total			3				5		15		1		
<i>You</i>		2	4	5						2			13
Total	2		9						2				
<i>Clause</i>									2	2			4
<i>3rd p. (h.)</i>				1	1								2
<i>Other</i>													1
Negative self-identifiers as consequence													24
Role 1 Part.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	Pre.	Fol.	
<i>I</i>	1	3	1	2					1	4		1	13
Total	4		3						5		1		
<i>3rd p. (n.h.)</i>				2				2	1	1			6
Total			2				2		2				
<i>You</i>		1											1

Total	1						
Clause					1		1
3rd p. (h.)					1		1
Other						2	2

Table 8.17: Participants and process types in co-texts in relations of cause and consequence with NIs

This means that negative self-identifiers are most frequently represented as causes with particular consequences, the consequences mostly being processes of thinking. Mental processes and relational processes dominate, whereby taking a closer look at table 8.16 shows that most of the latter are used by speakers to describe their mental states (e.g. modal assessments like *be sure/unsure* or nominalised mental processes like *have an idea*).

Less often, the consequences of negative self-identifiers are relational processes with inanimate third-person subjects in Role 1, i.e., things and ideas are assigned particular attributes, as in *I'm no writer, so it's [describing what the speaker has written, mentioned earlier in the thread] probably rubbish anyway*. In a nutshell, these results show that negative identification is often represented as a reason for (not) having particular assumptions (mental processes) and for ascribing particular attributes to things – a prototypical example from the corpus for the first case would be *I have never been a bridesmaid so have no idea!*; an example for the second case would be *I'm no writer, so it's probably rubbish anyway*.

Regarding the question of which conceptual categories of identifying NPs occur in mental processes with *I* as the senser, it is again NPs from the superordinate domain of professionalism and expertise (13 instances overall) which occur most frequently, followed by NPs from the field of roles (6 instances overall) and preferences (6 instances); the rest come from a variety of conceptual domains.

Conceptual categories of identifying NPs (NIs causally/consequentially related to co-texts with <i>I</i> as the senser)	
Professional	6
Role: Forum	3
Characteristics: Health/ill-health	3
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	3
Role: Business	3
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): Specific	3
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): General	2
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>): Specific	2
Characteristics: Evaluative	1
Characteristics: General	1
Habits: Food/Drink	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Activity	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Person	1
Habits: Routine	1
Habits: Substance	1
Ideological	1
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Product	1
TOTAL	34

Table 8.18: Conceptual categories of NIs causally related to mental processes with *I* in senser role

8.2.4. Addition

Regarding clause-external co-texts related to negative self-identifiers by additive conjunctions, the following table demonstrates that additively connected co-texts in most cases follow the matrix clause.

The Role-1 participant-process type configurations that occur most often are / as the senser in mental processes and as the carrier/token in relational processes (again, relational processes here should be taken with a grain of salt, because many of them are used to express processes of thinking, such as *be aware/sure*, or emotive processes, like *be disappointed, unimpressed*). In a total of 22 cases, inanimate third-person subjects take Role 1 in relational processes and again, it is mainly judgments which are passed (things are evaluated, e.g. as *good, repulsive* or *average*).

ADDITION		
CONTEXT FOLLOWING NI		
Role 1: /		To.
Relational	<i>be</i> (21): <i>aware, Aladdin's genii, disappointed, fan of TVRs, happy to stand corrected, in the chair at FFD, more than capable of wiring a house up, off the mark, one for writing reviews, privy to such information, regular swimmer, sure</i> (5), <i>that old, type 2, unimpressed, used to being blown up about sth., wrong</i> <i>feel</i> (2): <i>guilty, disinterested</i> <i>have</i> (5): <i>account, chance, history with Meth, luck, Mig/tig welder</i> <i>own</i> (3): <i>a host of 26 inch wheel street, my Pi, SKY box</i> <i>lose</i> : 3 kg <i>gain</i> : <i>satisfaction</i> <i>stand</i> : <i>ready</i>	34
Mental	<i>enjoy, experience, find</i> (2), <i>hate, intend, know</i> (6), <i>look for, prefer</i> (2), <i>read, regret, relate, see</i> (2), <i>seek, suspect, think</i> (5), <i>understand</i> (2), <i>want [to], wish, wonder</i> (2), <i>would like</i>	34
Material	<i>battle my way, complete, do</i> (2), <i>eat, get, go out, install, label, lean towards</i> ⁷³ , <i>make, open, pass on</i> ⁷⁴ , <i>play</i> (2), <i>sell, set, sign up, walk</i>	19
Verbal	<i>advise, answer, ask, speak, welcome</i>	5
TOTAL		92
Role 1: third person (non-human)		
	<i>5-stud to 4-stud converters, a lot of detail, all the shoes I ever bought, Corrie, everyone's stroke, healthier version, historical reasons, it, it [if you eat a diet that is almost totally carby], my name, my size 10 feet, Neuroshima theme, no two strokes, skis, storylines like this, it [that my fiance said he didn't like makeup], it [that so many called high end production folders come out with this steel], it [the c word], the emails, the information above, the last step, the thoughts and delusions, the underactive thyroid discovered at my pre-op, this [anaphoric ref] (2), this issue, this track, times</i> (2), <i>to upset my pattern, what you do for your children, yogurts I eat</i>	
Relational	<i>be</i> (18): <i>a litgant in person, anyone one this thread is either, average, awful, beyond my capabilities, Bez, cobbled together, different, disappointing, easy to describe, full or low fat, good, one of the most dangerous, promising anything, repulsive, same, your call</i> <i>cost</i> : <i>less</i> <i>lose</i> : <i>appeal</i> <i>take</i> : <i>much</i> <i>have</i> : <i>adverse effect</i>	22
Material	<i>change</i> (4), <i>come, help, seal, slaps, sort</i>	9
Existential	<i>a lot of detail</i>	1
TOTAL		32
Role 1: third person (human)		
	<i>Amazon, Amazon Prime, anyone on this thread, Chelsea, most people in our family, my husband, someone, that boy, the captain of the football team, they</i>	
Relational	<i>be</i> (3): <i>great sleepers, one of my favourite clubs, very bad</i> <i>deserve</i> : <i>hero</i> <i>have got</i> : <i>money</i>	5

⁷³ *Lean towards*, while constituting a material process type, is used metaphorically to represent the mental-cognitive process of favoring one thing or idea over another.

⁷⁴ If you *pass something on*, that is technically a material process; here, it is used to metaphorically represent the process of verbally relating information.

Material	<i>charge, give, help, invite</i>	4
Mental	<i>consider</i>	1
TOTAL		10
Role 1: 2nd person		
Mental	<i>rely on</i>	1
Relational	<i>need</i>	1
Verbal	<i>contact</i>	1
TOTAL		3
Role 1: impersonal (agentless passive)		
Material	<i>sort</i>	1
TOTAL		1
TOTAL		138
CONTEXT PRECEDING NIS		
Role 1: I		
Relational	<i>be (9): a fan, a fan of wago type connectors, convinced, deputy, doctor, fed up, sorry (2), without the amp have: kids</i>	10
Material	<i>get⁷⁵, register, stop, live</i>	4
Mental	<i>hate, love, want [to]</i>	3
Verbal	<i>predict</i>	1
TOTAL		18
Role 1: third person (non-human)		
	<i>control, new bond film, programming experience, that logic</i>	
Relational	<i>be: part of the application questions look: good</i>	2
Existential	<i>control</i>	1
Material	<i>work</i>	1
TOTAL		4
Role 1: Clause		
	<i>waking up covered in urine</i>	
Relational	<i>be: my case</i>	1
TOTAL		1
NPs		
	<i>good luck</i>	1
TOTAL		1
TOTAL		24
TOTAL ADDITION		162

Table 8.19: Co-texts related to negative self-identifiers by additive conjunctions

Considering, again, the overall instantiations of the different process types with first person Role-1 participants reveals that relational and mental processes dominate; for inanimate third-person participants, it is, again, relational processes which are clearly most prominent.

⁷⁵ *Get* is used metaphorically in the sense of ‘understanding’ here, but following my approach towards categorising metaphorical processes outlined in section 8.2.1, is listed as material process type.

CONTEXT AS ADDITION			
	Preceding	Following	Total
I in role 1			110
Relational	10	34	44
Mental	3	34	37
Material	4	19	23
Verbal	1	5	6
Third-person NP (non-human) in role 1			36
Relational	2	22	24
Material	1	9	10
Existential	1	1	2

Table 8.20: High-frequency roles and process types in clauses and sentences in additive relations with NIs

Table 8.21 below reports the conceptual categories of identifying NPs additively related to mental processes with *I* as sensor. As can be seen, a variety of conceptual categories appear in this context, though it is again negative self-identifiers from the domain of expertise and professionalism which dominate (14 overall), followed by preference disclaimers (11 overall).

Conceptual categories of identifying NPs (NIs additively related to co-texts with <i>I</i> as sensor)	To.
Professional	6
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	6
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>)	5
Characteristics: Evaluative	3
Expertise: General	2
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Food	2
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Product	2
Role: Forum	2
Usage/Ownership/Consumption	2
Role: Business	1
Role: Business	1
Characteristics: Gender-specific	1
Characteristics: Physical/Physiological	1
Activity/Expertise	1
Habit: Substance	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Visual	1
TOTAL	37

Table 8.21: Conceptual categories of NIs additively related to mental processes with *I* in sensor role

8.3. Summary

The analyses presented in this chapter answer part A of RQ 2 by having determined the ideational meanings of co-texts with certain formal relations to the instances of negative self-identifiers examined here. Table 8.22 summarises the results of these analysis by comparing the frequencies of process types in contexts with *I* as Role-1 participant formally related to the matrix clause by a contrasting/concessive, causal/consequential or additive conjunction or adverb. It shows that, overall, mental processes account for almost half of the examined cases (192 of 443, i.e. 43%), featuring as most prominent process type in co-texts with the most frequent type of formal link to the structure in focus, namely contrast and concession. In co-texts additively or causally related to negative self-

identifiers, relational processes constitute the largest process type category. This means that negative self-identifiers as used in my corpus are most frequently formally and thus conceptually related to processes of thinking and feeling.

Process Type (Role 1 = I)	Relation of co-text and negative self-identifier			Token
	Addition	Cause/Consequence	Contrast/Conc.	Total
Mental	37	34	121	192
Relational	43	35	47	125
Material	23	17	44	84
Verbal	6	16	20	42
TOTAL	109	102	232	443

Table 8.22: Process types represented by co-texts with different formal links to NIs

Regarding the overall proportions of conceptual categories of identifying NPs in co-texts with *I* as a participant in a mental process, it is clearly identifying NPs from the areas of expertise and professionalism that occur most often: 103 of 192 (i.e. 53%) negative self-identifiers formally related to contexts representing mental processes contrast the speaker with a noun denoting a profession or a person with expertise; the second most prominent conceptual category are preference disclaimers (39, i.e. 20%). Since the overall proportion of disclaimers of expertise and professionalism in the corpus is 41%, no comparatively closer relation between these contexts and expert disclaimers can be claimed. Still, the results seem to point towards a tendency for disclaimers of expertise and mental processes to co-occur in the examined data. That contexts formally related to negative self-identifiers are, predominantly, mental processes with the speaker in the role of senser is not surprising at first sight: after all, web forums are sites for exchanging views and knowledge on subjects of shared interest, so talking about what one thinks and knows does not appear unusual. At the same time, however, it is interesting that speakers emphasise their lack of expertise or authority right before or after expressing their views in so far as given the very nature of forums, one might assume that they are not sites intended for expert discourse. As argued before, against this background, routinely highlighting non-membership with the group of experts appears significant.

Conceptual category of identifying NPs formally related to mental processes with <i>I</i> in senser role	To.
Professional	32
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): General	29
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): Specific	26
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>)	16
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	11
Characteristics: Evaluative	9
Role: Forum	8
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Person	6
Characteristics: Health/ill health	5
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Product	5
Role: Business	5
Characteristics: General	4
Habit: Routine	4
Habit: Substance	4
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Activity	4

Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): General	4
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Visual	4
Usage, Consumption and Ownership	3
Habit: Food/drink	2
Ideological	2
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Style	2
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Food	2
Activity/Expertise	1
Characteristics: Gender-specific	1
Characteristics: Physical/Physiological	1
Characteristics: Social	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Nature	1
TOTAL	192

Table 8.23: Conceptual categories of NIs formally related to mental processes with *I* in senser role

Mental processes with *I* in the senser role were found to be the most frequent participant-process configuration in all three examined context types, viz. contexts presenting a contrast to, the cause or consequence of, or an addition to the structure “*I* + copula + not + indefinite NP”. This subset of 192 instances of negative self-identification, as well as formally related co-texts representing relational and material processes with the speaker as Role-1 participant (125 and 84 instances, respectively), were selected for a more detailed functional analysis, the results of which are presented in the next chapter.

9. Exploring (patterned) discourse functions of negative self-identifiers

The previous chapter presented a general co-textual profile of negative self-identifiers, exploring how they are modified clause-internally and drawing on the transitivity framework to create an experiential profile of the clause-external co-texts of the structure. This chapter will be concerned with the discourse-pragmatic functions of particular co-texts of negative self-identifiers and the question of whether they relate to particular conceptual categories of the structure in focus.

The first part of this chapter (section 9.1) presents analyses that examined the functions of certain co-texts of negative self-identifiers with certain formal relations to the structure, which were identified as prominent in Chapter 8. The goal of the analyses was to establish if particular meanings with particular discourse functions occur together with particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers in patterned ways. More specifically, sentences and clauses were functionally examined that:

- (a) immediately precede or follow negative self-identifiers;
- (b) are formally related to instances of the structure by means of a contrasting, causal/consequential or additive conjunction or adverb as shown in Chapter 8, these are the most frequent formal links between instances of the structure and their co-texts in the corpus;
- (c) constitute mental processes (section 9.1.1), relational processes (section 9.1.2) or material processes (9.1.3), which have emerged as the three most frequent types of experientially differentiated co-text of the structure in focus.

The decision to analyse these subsets of data is based on the assumption that the formal and semantic similarities of these co-texts in which negative self-identifiers are used are a good prerequisite for finer-grained analysis, as comparing similar things can reveal their differences more clearly. For co-texts of each process type (mental, relational and material), a functional framework was devised prior to analysis. Each of the three subsections first introduces the respective framework and then presents the results of the analysis. A summary of the findings of these three analyses is given in section 9.1.4.

The second part of this chapter (section 9.2) is concerned with textual material preceding instances of negative self-identifiers with no formal links to the structure in focus, functionally examining sentences and higher-level textual units to find, firstly, if findings about the data explored in section 9.1 also play a role when a different subset of data is studied, and, secondly, how negative identifiers functionally interact with categories of co-text defined on the basis of functional, rather than purely formal aspects. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings of this analysis (section 9.2.2). Section 9.3, then, shows how the analysis of negative self-identifiers as micro-linguistic choices can be related to issues of relevance in the social world at large by presenting a qualitative analysis of two instances of the structure in their local discourse contexts. In section 9.4, then, the overall results of this chapter are reviewed and RQ 2 is answered.

9.1. Functional analysis of formally related co-texts

9.1.1. Functional categorisation of mental processes with / as the senser

The insight that negative self-identifiers in this corpus are most often formally related to linguistic elements representing the same speaker's mental processes is interesting because it shows that the structure is used in patterned ways, frequently constituting a linguistic choice in local discourse

contexts sharing certain formal and semantic features. The next step was to find out what overall communicative functions sentences constituting mental processes with the speaker as the senser fulfil and how they functionally interact with the negative self-identifiers with which they are formally related (by contrasting, causal/consequential or additive conjunctions or adverbs).

To give an example of how negative self-identifiers – or rather their co-texts – are approached in the analysis presented here, two sentences that featured in the previous stage of analysis are:

9.1. *I can't relate to that because I've never been a schoolboy since Viz has been around*

9.2. *I'm no expert in these matters but i do know that digestion effectively starts in the mouth with your saliva*

For the analysis presented in the previous chapter, the underlined sentences in both examples were categorised as mental processes (based on the meanings of the verbs *relate to* and *know*). Example 9.1 features the speaker as the senser causally related to a negative self-identifier and 9.2 also features the speaker as the senser, but here contrasted with the negative self-identifier. Functionally, however, 9.1 and 9.2 are very different: while 9.1 could be described as indexing the speaker's lack of understanding and experience and thus, perhaps, their lack of authority on a particular subject and/or empathy with the addressee, 9.2 is a representation of the speaker's opinion, a claim to knowledge in a particular field, so to speak. And then there are cases like *I'm really not a fan of the above as I think its sub-optimal*, where the clause projected by the cognitive verb *think* expresses a judgment of a previously mentioned referent or proposition (*the above*). To capture such differences, and thus get a fuller picture of the co-texts in which negative self-identifiers are used, this section presents a framework for functionally categorising the data subset defined above.

Establishing and eventually quantifying functional categories is intricate insofar as one and the same utterance – as I argued earlier – may serve to index more than just one aspect of the communicative situation and may simultaneously fulfil various textual and interpersonal functions. A particular function, in turn, may be realised by more than just one form or structure. Besides the possibility of many-to-many form–function mappings, another reason why it is practically impossible to set up solid formal criteria for assigning sentences and clauses to functional categories is that function always takes the communicative situation and the recipients into account, which means that pragmatic phenomena can never be explicated by reference to linguistic forms only. This is why Speech Act Theory usually sets up conditions rooted in the lifeworlds of language users rather than in language alone, vaguely defining, for example, advice as “telling you what is best for you” (Searle 1969: 67) and matching this overall function with linguistic forms prototypically used to realise it. To close the gap between entirely form-based, bottom-up functional analysis (which would be too rigid, ignoring cases where a function is realised other than by the pre-defined forms) and entirely top-down functional analysis (which runs the danger of being too unsystematic), my analysis, based on iterative qualitative analyses of the data, sets up formal features to make the categorisation process maximally transparent, while acknowledging that such a framework is to a certain extent constructed, representing an attempt to bring to light tendencies observable in the data, rather than a definite, deterministic ascription of functions.

Methodologically, I proceeded by first broadly differentiating between intuitively different functions and then analysing these broad categories in more detail to identify linguistic features shared by items in the respective categories. I then once again compared the category members against the postulated

sets of features, weeding out utterances deviating from the detected patterns or changing the criteria for category inclusion if the resulting category turned out to be too heterogeneous and thus probably too broad. I repeated this process until I arrived at a set of features operationally defined as necessary and sufficient for category inclusion. In the following, I briefly discuss the formal features that can be considered when functionally categorising the material at hand.

9.1.1.1. Aspects to consider when categorising mental processes

Processes and participants

All sentences considered in this analysis constitute mental processes, but – as already mentioned in the previous chapter – they can be distinguished semantically according to whether they denote processes of perception, cognition, volition or emotion, as well as grammatically according to whether their complement is an object NP (as in *I love you*), a clause (as in *I think that I love you*) or a verb (as in the invented example *I love revising PhD chapters*). This alone makes it possible to distinguish examples from my corpus such as the ones below:

9.3. *I can see small teeth at the front of the lower jaw.*

9.4. *[I] just hate taking medication.*

9.5. *[I] would like to reduce this dosage to a minimum when possible.*

Example 9.3 represents the speaker's perception of a phenomenon, while example 9.4 serves to express the speaker's emotive attitude towards an activity. In 9.5, a desiderative verb (*like*) is complemented by an infinitive verb complement representing a material process (*reduce*) with the speaker as the actor, which allows classifying this sentence as intention. The infinitive verb complement can also construe the speaker as passive experiencer of a phenomenon not in their control, e.g., *[I] would like to see [it] given a go now* expresses what the speaker desires, but they are not the actor of the desired event (to *give sth. a go*), just the experiencer of this phenomenon (*see*) and, thus, not capable of bringing about the stated event. This means that this sentence is better categorised as wish than as intention.

Mental processes with *I* as the senser do not only take verb complements: they can also have noun phrase complements, as in example 9.6, to the effect that the process the sentence is about is, actually, the speaker's cognitive experience. Alternatively, they may project clauses, as in example 9.7:

9.6. *I don't understand all the problems.*

9.7. *[I] thought Boxing Day was Christmas day.*

Here, the verb *think* projects a clause representing the speaker's thought, so the sentence is also – or even mainly – about the process represented by the clause complement. This makes an important difference for the function of the sentence as a whole. While the sentence in 9.6 serves to say something about the speaker's understanding/grasp of something, *[I] thought* in example 9.7 epistemically frames the proposition "Boxing Day is Christmas day". In cases such as this one, where the mental process projects a clause, the overall function of the examined sentence crucially depends on the function of that clause which in turn depends on the participants and processes it represents (as well as modality and polarity, but see further below). For instance, *[I] thought Boxing Day was*

Christmas day can be considered to represent what the speaker believes because “Boxing Day is Christmas day” is an identifying process by which a non-human 3rd person subject is identified as another one, i.e., a claim about a third party is made. Similarly, attributive processes projected by cognitive mental process verbs, such as *I think any of those scenarios sounds feasible*, represent the speaker’s opinion on a particular subject.

When the addressee – *you* – features as participant in a clause projected by a mental process verb, this can indicate that the function of the overall sentence is addressee-oriented, i.e., that the sentence serves as advice, expression of empathy, (dis-)agreement and the like. For instance, example 9.8 has an interactive character by virtue of making a claim about the response of the addressee of the message, *you*, to content provided before or after the utterance, referred to by *this*.

9.8 *I thought you might find this useful.*

The function of *I thought*, here, is to epistemically frame the utterance, metadiscursively perspectivising it (i.e. marking it as the speaker’s thought) and serving as a mitigating/modesty device. Another case in point is *I do understand where you are*, where the noun clause complement refers to the (metaphorical) position of the addressee, expressing empathy. There might, however, also be cases where the addressee is the subject of the embedded clause and the sentence is not interactive in the sense just described. For example, imagine I told someone “I think you might suffer from Münchhausen syndrome”. Here, my statement, despite featuring the addressee as the experiencer in the embedded clause, serves to represent my knowledge/beliefs as in example 9.7 discussed above.

When the projected clause self-referentially describes the speaker’s communicative behaviour in the forum, as in example 9.9, the sentence as a whole can be considered to index aspects of the current interaction.

9.9. *I thought I’d share my formation.*

In this example, the framing *I think* serves to modify the meaning of the process represented by the clause complement (*I’d share my formation*), metadiscursively signalling awareness and thus highlighting to other participants the process of sharing something.

Tense and aspect

Besides the meaning of the verb and its complements, another element that may be considered as a criterion for functional categorisation of sentences coordinated with negative self-identifiers is their tense and aspect. Tense and aspect are elements of the verbal group system network (as discussed by Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 410). For example, a desiderative verb in the present progressive tense with an infinitive verb complement, as *[I] am wanting to limit the function that the Vodafone hardware plays*, describes a situation currently faced by the speaker and, thus, a context in which the negative self-identifier – in this case *I’m not an advanced IT person when it comes to setting up networks* – is relevant. By contrast, if the same sentence occurred in the past tense – *[I] wanted to limit the function that the Vodafone hardware plays* – it would rather be interpreted as an account of what the speaker did prior to posting to the forum. Likewise, the use of the present perfect tense as in *I have seen a lot of things said and written about “bioidentical/compounded” hormone* indicates that the speaker is talking about their experiences, while *I can’t view them clearly* refers to a problem relevant at the moment of posting to the forum. The only functional differentiation that is possible based on tense and aspect is to distinguish between textual material depending on whether it refers to what is

currently the case, what has been the case up to now and what happened prior to the moment of writing, so tense and aspect – like the other criteria mentioned here – can only be two among several distinguishing features.

Scope of subject influence

Another feature that makes a difference for the meanings of the sentences examined here is what I refer to as scope of influence, differentiating wishes from intentions: what distinguishes the sentences *I hope he suffers for what he has done* and *I want to remove the facepacks I added* is that the mental process verb *hope* in the first one projects a clause with another participant – *he* – as subject and experiencer, representing a state of affairs not under the speaker’s influence, i.e. a wish. By contrast, wanting to do something means volition and thus, typically, intentionality.⁷⁶

Polarity and modality

Finally, the functions of the examined sentences depend on their polarity and modality: for instance, one of the reasons why example 9.10 is classified as “problem” and example 9.11 as “perception” in the framework I devised is the polarity of the clause (not being able to view something is taken not to be in the speaker’s interest).

9.10. *I can’t view them clearly.*

9.11. *I can see small teeth at the front of the lower jaw.*

However, it is not only clause polarity that makes a categorial difference but also the object (thus, if negated – *I can see no small teeth*, for example – 9.11 would still be interpreted as an analytical description of a picture the speaker is looking at). This shows once again that language function is the result of a variety of factors and, thus, that categorising authentic language in use needs to take multiple factors into account, the weighting of which may differ from case to case. In this way, I think, linguistic categorisation is a matter of identifying family resemblance (Geeraerts 1989) rather than of comparing data against a fixed set of features.

In other words, as stated earlier, I believe that justifying functional categorisation by referring to the presence of particular forms can make an analysis more transparent, but given that one form may fulfil so many different functions depending on contextual parameters, and that one function can be fulfilled by so many different forms, it is unrealistic to account for function by means of a fixed combination of forms. As Kuzar (2012: 14) puts it, “a construction is not an entity pre-existing its assessment”, but “a form that is extracted by way of categorization from the substance of language for particular descriptive purposes, using relevant conceptual tools”. The advantage of the functional categorisation conducted here is, as mentioned, the similarity of the co-texts examined here previously categorised according to their experiential functions: the possibilities of usage of sentences starting with, e.g., *I think*, are limited, which makes it easier to predict what linguistic elements could follow and what functions this could have.

9.1.1.2. Functional categories of mental processes

The following table presents the functional categories used to differentiate between co-texts coordinated with negative self-identifiers and representing mental processes. It shows how these

⁷⁶ See Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 584) for a discussion of projecting clause nexuses with mental processes of desideration, whose subjects may or may not be identical with the subjects of the clauses they project.

categories are distinguished in terms of the meaning of the mental process verb, the possible verb complements, as well as the other aspects just discussed, providing concrete examples from the corpus.

Framework for functionally categorising mental processes with <i>I</i> as the senser			
Category name	Mental process meaning	Verb complement	Other aspects considered
Knowledge representation/ opinion	Cognitive, perceptive	Sentence	
	<i>I think</i>	<i>my red palms must be associated with my cancer</i>	
	<i>I have experienced</i>	<i>that different parts of the world may have different properties within the same grade of Kerosene</i>	
		Noun Phrase	
	<i>I see</i>	<i>the benefit of it</i>	
Knowledge/ understanding reference	Cognitive	Intransitive	Sentence makes claim about speaker's ability/understanding
	<i>just guessing really</i>		
		Noun Phrase	
	<i>I don't know</i>	<i>the pros and cons of this item</i>	
		Sentence	
	<i>I believe</i>	<i>I have a good grasp of the laws of the game</i>	
Addressee-oriented	Cognitive, perceptive, emotive	Noun Phrase	NP/S contains explicit reference to addressee (e.g. 2 nd p. sg. pronoun) or implies second person (e.g. verb <i>share</i>)
	<i>I highly appreciate</i>	<i>your reply</i>	
	<i>I know</i>	<i>what you're saying</i>	
		Sentence	
	<i>I thought</i>	<i>you might find this useful</i>	
	<i>I'd share my formation</i>		
Perception	Perceptive	Noun Phrase	Present simple or progressive tense
	<i>I can see</i>	<i>small teeth at the front of the lower jaw</i>	
Preference/ Habit	Emotive	Noun Phrase	Present simple, present progressive or present perfect tense
	<i>I do like</i> <i>I prefer</i>	<i>508s</i> <i>the 52 neck pickup</i>	
Wish	Desiderative	Noun Phrase	Present simple or progressive tense Desideratum expressed by NP or S not in the speaker's scope of influence
	<i>I wish [them]</i>	<i>the best</i>	
		Sentence	
	<i>I hope</i>	<i>he suffers for what he has done</i>	
Intention	Desiderative, emotive	Clause	Present simple or progressive tense Desideratum expressed by infinitive/gerund phrase in the speaker's scope of influence

	<i>I want</i>	<i>to remove the facepacks I added but I didnt</i>	
	<i>I don't like</i>	<i>writing all the NH people off</i>	
Problem	Cognitive, emotive (inherently negative), perceptive	Intrans., optional prepositional phrase	
	<i>i worry</i>	<i>about silly things all the time</i>	
		Noun Phrase	
	<i>I can't view</i>	<i>them</i>	
		Constructions with I as senser and attributor	
	<i>[I] am finding</i>	<i>it tricky to research equivalent posts abroad</i>	
Background	Cognitive	Sentence	Mental process serving as discourse marker more than as an actual claim to knowledge (see example)
	<i>I know</i>	<i>I have two small children</i>	<i>I know</i> in this example frames the projected clause in terms of stance
		Unspecified	
	<i>I chose</i> <i>I opted</i>		'Mental action' verbs in the past tense to describe a status quo
Decision-making	Cognitive	Complement in prepositional phrase + NP/Gerund	
	<i>I might decide</i> <i>I am thinking</i>	<i>on a couple of nights to run during the week</i> <i>of selling all three copies</i>	
Experience	Cognitive, perceptive, emotive, desiderative	Noun Phrase/Sentence	Present perfect or past tense 'Mental action' verbs
	<i>[I] have not experienced</i>	<i>many changes in my medication</i>	

Table 9.1: Framework for functionally categorising mental processes with *I* as the senser

The first category that could be established based on the analysis of the data is “**knowledge representation/opinion**”. This category includes sentences consisting of a mental process verb and a projected clause representing an assumption held by the speaker (example 9.12) or a mental process verb with a noun phrase complement used to express an opinion (example 9.13).

9.12. *I think what is happening is this: [...]*

9.13. *I see the benefit of it*

9.14. *[I thought] you might find this useful*

9.15. *[I know] how hard it is to pull yourself away from *anything**

Excluded from this category are mental process verbs projecting “**addressee-oriented**” clauses, such as examples 9.14 and 9.15. While the former addressee-oriented clause is classified as such by having a second person subject, the latter is identified as such by implicature: the illocutionary force of claiming to know what the addressee is experiencing is to show understanding, not (just) to make a claim to knowledge.

The category “**knowledge/understanding reference**” contains sentences that are used to say something about the speaker’s own knowledge or ability. Linguistically, this either means using mental process verbs intransitively (9.16), with an NP complement (9.17), or using a mental process verb projecting a claim about the speaker’s ability or knowledge (9.18). I have added *not*-negations in square brackets in these examples from my corpus to indicate that in all three cases, polarity changes what is said about the (scope, kind or existence of the) speaker’s knowledge or ability.

9.16. [not] *just guessing*

9.17. *I [don't] know the pros and cons of this item*

9.18. *I [don't] believe I have a good grasp of the laws of the game*

This means that this category includes mental processes which constitute the proposition rather than projecting one in an embedded clause. Co-texts classified as “knowledge/understanding reference” thus function to explicate the speaker’s position towards a particular subject or to provide a self-assessment of their ability/knowledge, sometimes referring back and forward in the ongoing discourse, for example to preceding text as in *now I know why* [x happened, e.g.]. This category, too, excludes cases where the complement is addressee-oriented, as in 9.19, the function of which is not (only) to make a claim about the speaker’s knowledge of what is being said, but to signal understanding for the addressee.

9.19. *I know what you are saying*

The category “**perception**” is relatively straightforward; the criteria for inclusion are the presence of a mental process verb of perception in the present tense and an NP complement. “**Preferences**” and “**habits**” are defined as mental processes where an emotive verb in the present or present perfect tense expresses the speaker’s attitude towards a nominative phenomenon (e.g. *I do like 508s a lot*), or a phenomenon expressed by a verb complement (i.e. usually activities, as for example *I just love beachcombing*).

The category “**background**” comprises sentences with projected clauses describing the speaker’s current situation, as in *I know I have two small children* (where *I know* serves like a discourse marker, framing the projected clause in terms of stance) and sentences with mental action verbs in the past tense describing what has happened so far, i.e. a status quo rather than an experience, e.g. *I chose ‘Other infringemet’*. The categories “**wish**” and “**intention**” include sentences describing a ‘desired situation’, usually by featuring desiderative verbs (9.20). Sentences assigned to this category also tend to be in the present progressive tense, as in 9.21.

9.20. *I hope I won't need both*

9.21. *I am wanting to limit the function that the Vodafone hardware plays*

Then, there are sentences categorised as “**problem**”, either because they contain an inherently negative mental process verb (e.g. *worry*), because they come with a negated modal (*I can't view them clearly*), or because the speaker attributes a ‘problem’-adjective to a carrier (as in *I'm finding it tricky to research...*). The category “**decision-making**” includes cognitive verbs referring to decision-making

(e.g. *decide*) or describing situations of decision-making, being used in the present progressive tense together with a gerund (e.g. *I'm thinking of selling all three copies*).

There are a number of borderline cases of sentences classified in the previous analysis as mental processes and thus featuring in the data set examined here which seem to occupy a middle ground between mental processes and material processes, like *decide*, *research* or *discover*. These, despite being processes primarily involving the mind, also display characteristics of material processes in that, unlike more prototypical mental processes, they could be answers to the question “What happened yesterday?” (thus, the invented *I decided that I will move to Germany* would work as an answer, whereas *I thought that I would move to Germany* can maximally serve as ‘preface’ to an event – e.g., *but then, I changed my mind*). ‘Mental action’ verbs of this kind, occurring in the examined data in the past and present perfect tense (e.g. *i researched and talked to a whole bunch of people*), are categorised as “**experience**” to capture this difference in relation to ‘proposition-projecting’ verbs. Also included in this category are mental processes realised by verbs of perception in the past and present perfect tense (e.g. *I've seen most of the films*), as these also constitute experiences of the mind.

9.1.1.3. Results

The following overview shows how many of the examined co-texts (differentiated by their relations with the negative self-identifier – contrast, cause/consequence, and addition) were assigned to the functional categories just described (a full overview of the data assigned to these categories is, for reasons of space, provided in the appendix).

Functional category	Contrast/Concession	Cause/Consequence	Addition	Total
Knowledge representation/Opinion	55	5	12	72
Knowledge/understanding reference	9	15	7	31
Preference/Habit	13	5	6	24
Experience	17	0	1	18
Addressee-oriented	12	4	1	17
Intention	5	0	5	10
Background	1	2	3	6
Decision-making	2	2	0	4
Wish	4	0	0	4
Perception	2	0	1	3
Problem	1	1	1	3
TOTAL	121	34	37	192

Table 9.2: Functional categories of mental process co-texts with different formal relations to NIs

An overview of the results of the functional analysis of contexts constituting mental processes with *I* as the experiencer – which are most often formally linked to negative self-identifiers – shows that these contexts mostly fall into the category “knowledge representation/opinion”, i.e. they serve to express speakers’ beliefs and opinions, as in *I'd guess a telemark is something to do with the binding*. Overall, 72 of 192 examined contexts can be assigned to this category, so this context type stands out as particularly frequent when formally contrasted with negative self-identifiers: 55 of 121, i.e. 45% of contrastive co-texts constituting mental processes with *I* as senser fall into this category, and 50 of these 55 contexts are contrasted with disclaimers of expertise and professionalism. This indicates that

negative self-identifiers are characteristically used to mitigate the epistemic status of information provided, and beliefs held, by speakers.

The second most frequently represented category of formally related co-text is “knowledge/understanding reference”. In 31 of 192 cases examined here, negative self-identifiers are used in co-texts where speakers reflect on their own understanding or ability regarding a particular subject or the ongoing discourse. More than half of the negative self-identifiers used in these contexts can be categorised as disclaimers of expertise and professionalism: In 16 of 31 contexts in this category, negative self-identifiers such as *zoologist*, *hard-core programmer* or simply *expert* are used. This indicates that speakers explicitly position the knowledge and expertise they refer to in relation to (various forms of) expertise. Interestingly, it is mainly co-texts formally marked as cause or consequence of negative self-identifiers which can be assigned to this functional category, i.e., speakers often causally associate their knowledge and abilities with negative self-identifiers in their self-representation on forums. Rhetorically, this could work to justify potential limitations of expertise speakers share on web forums, but it could also index that speakers, despite not being formally accredited experts, are aware of their knowledge and skills and, thus, project epistemic self-confidence. For example, the negative self-identifier in *I am not an expert in Normandy maps, so I based on GJS Close Combat Maps and books I've read about the battle*, while positioning the speaker as layperson and pointing out potential flaws of the map the speaker has created, is just the cause for the speaker’s description of how they autodidactically acquired the skills necessary to simulate the map in question. Indeed, the rest of their posting suggests that they are proud of 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.*

Conceptual category of identifying NP	To.
Professionalism	6
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>)	5
Characteristics: Health/ill health	3
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): Specific	3
Role: Forum-related	3
Characteristics: Evaluative	3
Characteristics: General	2
Role: Business-related	1
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): General	1
Activity/Expertise	1
Usage, consumption and ownership	1
Characteristics: Physical/physiological	1
Habit: Substance	1
TOTAL	31

Table 9.3: Conceptual categories of NIs in co-texts of the type “knowledge/understanding reference”

The corpus example below is an example of this kind of knowledge negotiation. The speaker first relates their experience with a particular item, just to add they do not know enough to judge its quality. The speaker goes on to cite their bike mechanic using, again, technical terms like *octolink* and *bb shell* in doing so. Thus, professional authority is simultaneously acknowledged – the real mechanic is cited – and appropriated, as the speaker not only passes on the information provided by the expert, but also adds their own experience with the product in the sentence preceding the negative self-identifier.

- 9.22 *I was pleased to be able to find the right part very easily, and it arrived speedily. **I am not a mechanic** so I don't know the pros and cons of this item except that my bike mechanic says that the octolink is a bit outdated, and is always whingeing about the eccentric bb shell.*

The third most frequent category of sentences formally coordinated with negative self-identifiers is “preferences/habits”. As for the conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers in these contexts, 16 of 24 instances of the structure are preference disclaimers (i.e. instances of negative self-identification with nouns such as *fan of cradles*, *Petrolhead*, *fan of narrow gauge modelling*, etc.).

Conceptual category of identifying NP	To.
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	7
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Activity	3
Characteristics: Health/ill health	2
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): Specific	2
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): General	2
Ideological	2
Characteristics: General	1
Characteristics: Gender-specific	1
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): General	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Person	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Food/drink	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Visual aspects	1
Habit: Food/drink	1
Habit: Substance	1
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Product	1
TOTAL	24

Table 9.4: Conceptual categories of NIs in co-texts of the type “preference/habits”

The use of negative identification with particular preferences in formally related co-texts describing the speakers’ preferences and habits suggests that one function of negative self-identifiers examined here is preference-specification in the negative. The following corpus example illustrates this well:

- 9.23. *Folks, I'm looking for a holder or cradle to hold my iPhone 6S. Needs to be handy reached, but nothing too obtrusive. **I've never been a fan of cradles really** and usually prefer the OEM option but the specdock is the closest thing to factory and it's a little low.*

Here, the speaker negatively identifies as *a fan of cradles*, only to talk about their preference for other options. Examples such as this are interesting because while speakers in my corpus frequently contrast themselves with expertise to indicate a lack of (epistemic) authority, when they negatively identify with preference categories, this often has the opposite effect. To stay with the example, the speaker, by negatively identifying as a fan of cradles, presupposes knowledge of this specific sense of a (phone) cradle, when describing their preference. By using the technical terms (*OEM option*, *specdock*), they come across as an expert on the subject.

Co-texts describing the speakers’ experience occur 18 times in the examined data. 17 of them are formally contrasted with negative self-identifiers, as in 9.24.

- 9.24. ***I am not a piping guy** but have heard nothing but positives about the Plant module with regards to valvels and folanges and such.*

Nine of these contexts relate speakers' experience as gained from reading (9.25), researching and talking to others (9.26).

9.25. *I'm certainly no expert on HRT, but over the last 5 years or so I have seen a lot of things said and written about "bioidentical/compounded" hormones.*

9.26. *I really am no 'jean expert', but I researched and talked to a whole bunch of people on whether to size up or stay true to fit.*

Regarding the relation between contexts of this kind and the conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers used, the sample of 18 instances of negative identification here is probably too small to identify patterns.

Another 17 of the examined contexts could be classified as "addressee-oriented", i.e., they serve to signal aspects of the communicative situation. More precisely, these can be differentiated according to whether they metadiscursively comment on the speaker's own utterance, on other users' utterances (in this case mostly to express empathy with what they say), or serve as speech acts such as requests and expressives. That speakers represent negative self-identifiers as a contrast to sharing something they have created (i.e. before or after co-texts categorised as "metadiscursive comment: self" in table 9.5 below) suggests that they discursively perform modesty when it comes to presenting what they know or have done, emphasising their lay status and making their contributions highly tentative. 9.27 is a case in point, and incidentally also shows that speakers in my corpus acknowledge the authority of experts in all kinds of fields, including postal matters.

9.27. *I'm no postal expert but thought I would point this product out to anyone who might want to look into using it.*

Addressee-oriented co-texts	To.
Metadiscursive comment (self)	8
<i>I thought I'd ask here first</i> <i>[I] just wish to share my experiences when possible</i> <i>I hope my post helps you even just a little</i> <i>Hope this helps</i> <i>[I] thought I would point this product out</i> <i>I thought I'd share my formation</i> <i>I thought you might find this useful</i> <i>I didn't want to read and run</i>	
Metadiscursive comment (other)	5
<i>I know what you're saying</i> <i>I can understand your worries</i> <i>I do understand where you are</i> <i>I know how hard it is to pull yourself away from *anything*</i> <i>I can see how hard it is</i>	
Speech act: request	2
<i>I would really appreciate some feedback on this one</i> <i>Hope others can provide help</i>	
Speech act: expressive	2
<i>I highly appreciate your reply</i> <i>[I] just wanted to thank you all</i>	
TOTAL	17

Table 9.5: Categories of addressee-oriented co-texts of NIs

As for the other categories and their frequencies, the analysis revealed that negative self-identifiers are formally related to co-texts which express the speaker's intention or wish (overall 14 sentences, e.g. *[I] am seeking advice and information about it*), in which speakers describe a situation of decision-making (4 sentences, e.g. *I might decide on a couple of nights to run during the week*) or a problem they are facing (3 sentences, e.g. *[I] am finding it tricky to research equivalent posts abroad*). This can – tentatively, given the small sample – be interpreted as pointing to a tendency for the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP” to be used when it is practically relevant, i.e., when belonging or not belonging to a particular category appears to make a difference with respect to a situation representing some kind of ‘turning point’, either because of an impending event or because of desired change. For example, in the sentence *I am no Mo Farah but I certainly don't wish to finish last*, a relation is established between not identifying as Mo Farah and, thus, as a real athlete, and the desired outcome of a situation, viz. the speaker's participation in a marathon. Looking at the whole thread reveals that the post is about the speaker's participation in 5000 or 10000 road races.

Examining the conceptual categories of identifying NPs in negative self-identifiers related to co-texts classified as intentions and wishes shows that in eight cases, speakers negatively identify as an expert or professional, in four cases with particular preferences and disclaimers and in two cases with evaluative categories. This might indicate that reaching particular goals tends to be linguistically associated with expertise, but a larger sample of data would have to be examined to provide stronger support for this assumption. Finally, in six cases, negative self-identifiers are formally related to sentences that can be classified as providing background knowledge about the speaker. A (sad) example is 9.28. Here, the mental process phrase *I know* projects a clause describing the speaker's general situation (she has two children), which is contrasted with negative identification as a *proper mum*. Thus, the speaker implies that having two children alone is not enough to qualify as proper mom, but that particular behaviours or actions are required which she cannot do because of her illness.

9.28. *I know I have two small children aged 3 and 7 but **since dec I haven't been a proper mum** I've been ill from ops and chemo.*

In summary, the present section presented an analysis of sentences formally related to negative self-identifiers and constituting, or being framed by, a mental process with the speaker in the role of the senser. These were categorised according to a set of formal and semantic criteria, and it was examined whether particular functional categories of co-text tend to co-occur with particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers.

The analysis showed, firstly, that speakers most frequently contrast negative self-identifiers from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism with sentences representing their knowledge and opinion, mitigating the epistemic status of their claims. It was also found that speakers frequently causally relate negative self-identifiers to sentences in which they refer to their own understanding and expertise, thus showing a high sensitivity towards the status of the information they share and negotiate. When talking about what they like and dislike, speakers in my corpus often negatively identify with preference disclaimers; one function of this usage of the structure is to specify preferences in the negative, i.e., by saying what they do not like, speakers often in fact provide more specific information about what precisely they want. Negative self-identifiers were found to be formally coordinated and thus conceptually linked to sentences metadiscursively commenting on the ongoing interaction between the speaker and other people posting to the forum, serving mitigating purposes. That speakers use the structure in focus so often to mitigate their claims, but also to

strategically manage the interpretation of their own interactive behaviour on the forum, could indicate that speakers perceive the information they share and negotiate online as epistemically as well as socially delicate. In other words, it appears that the use of negative self-identifiers in the examined online contexts does not only point towards struggles around (various levels and forms of) expertise, but also points towards speakers' attempts to discursively represent themselves as likeable and, thus, trustworthy, online personas.

Negative self-identifiers were also found to be formally related to co-texts describing speakers' experiences, i.e. accounts of what they have read or watched, and how they felt about it. This could be interpreted as pointing to a certain discursive tension between the static category of being and the more dynamic conception of experiencing, lending weight to the concept of (lay) experience. More data has to be scrutinised, though, to find if this observation holds true beyond the small sample examined here. Finally, the analysis revealed that negative self-identifiers occur in co-texts describing speakers' wishes, intentions, problems and current situations. This might indicate that negative self-identification has less to do with speakers' permanent self-concept than with what they deem relevant in relation to the situations they find themselves in at the moment of speaking, fulfilling rhetorical rather than merely assertive functions.

All in all, the analysis showed that negative self-identifiers are frequently used in contexts where speakers reflect on their knowledge and abilities, which implies that the instances of negative self-identification examined here are a salient linguistic choice in the context of speakers talking about what they think they know and can do. The tendency for speakers in my data to represent themselves in terms of their authority could reflect their orientation towards notions of expertise based on a hierarchy between experts and non-experts (Williams 2014). These notions may be relevant in the immediate situational context: for example, in a discussion on a very technical topic, a speaker may index epistemic uncertainty of their utterance using a negative self-identifier, thus at the same time signalling awareness that expertise, as a feature of the self-identity they enact online, is a contractual achievement (Bigi 2011: 69, Lepänen et al. 2014: 112) – whether or not what they say is deemed trustworthy depends on how other forum users perceive their credibility, and not just on whether or not they are, or pretend to be, accredited experts on something in the offline world. On the contrary, in the context of web forums, speakers' own experiences and preferences might even be more important (Rudolf von Rohr et al. 2019), reflecting a tendency for education and knowledge to become redistributed and for notions of experts in the traditional sense to become challenged (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001: 57). Thus, beyond the immediate situational context, the routine use of expertise disclaimers could be seen as reflecting speakers' underlying conceptualisations about the social world more generally, in which risks, competing systems of expertise and struggles around trust play a key role.

9.1.2. Functional categorisation of relational processes with / as the carrier/token

This section presents my analysis of relational processes with / in the role of the token/carrier, which were revealed to be the second most frequent participant-process type configuration in sentences formally related to negative self-identifiers (Chapter 8). The goal of this analysis was to establish whether the tendencies observed in the data examined in the previous section also manifest themselves in the rest of the data, or if other uses of negative self-identifiers emerge as more frequent.

As for the method used to analyse this data segment, I adapted the framework used for the analysis of mental processes presented in 9.1.1 and added new categories that could be identified as relevant

in the process of qualitatively analysing the data. Like the framework for categorising mental processes, the one applied in the analysis presented here refers to the formal appearance, grammatical and semantic features of the linguistic elements examined. Thus, for instance, tense can be the decisive factor when differentiating between the corpus example *I have been a spy, in the house of love* (which would be categorised as “experience”) and the invented example *I am a spy, in the house of love* (which, because it is uttered in the present tense, would be classified as “personal characteristic”). Then, there are figurative idioms in the data, such as being *in the same boat*. The functions of these multi-word units are based on an interaction of formal and lexical aspects and hence cannot be pinned down in purely syntactic/grammatical terms or reduced to the figurative interpretation of one particular word. This, however, does not pose a problem in so far as this framework, like the previous one, is data-based. This means that rather than introspectively creating and listing all possible formal realisations of functional categories, I specified those formal and semantic criteria in this framework which actually occur in and can thus be used for classification of the data, whilst acknowledging that not all expressions can be described this way.

Framework for functionally categorising relational processes with I as the carrier/token			
Category	Description	Formal appearance	Examples
Personal characteristics	General information about persons (age, physical or psychological features) and their relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copula + adjective • Copula + indefinite NP • Copula + adjective [human relation] • Have + indefinite NP • Present simple 	<i>I'm not that old</i> <i>I am a Christian</i> <i>I am married to a T1</i> <i>I have a great girl</i>
Emotional states	States of feeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copula + adjective ['intransitive' emotion] • Present simple or progressive 	<i>couldn't be happier</i>
Responses	Responses to external stimuli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copula + adjective [response] • Present or past simple • Present perfect 	<i>I am shocked to hear that it was reported to be similar to cocaine</i> <i>I was impressed with the documentary</i> <i>[I] have been singularly unimpressed by Aimard</i>
Knowledge/ understanding reference	Referring to one's own knowledge or understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copula + adjective [ability/knowledge] (literal or metaphorical) (+ PP) • Copula + NP [expertise/professionalism] (literal or metaphorical) • Verb of possession + NP [knowledge/ability] • Present simple or progressive • Present perfect • Past 	<i>i am comfortable with computers and software</i> <i>[I] am not one for writing reviews</i> <i>I probably had sufficient experience</i>
Knowledge representation/	Stating what one believes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copula + adjective [certainty] + S/PP 	<i>I'm pretty sure you can get the original Grange</i>

Chapter 9 — Exploring (patterned) discourse functions of negative self-identifiers

Opinion		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verb of possession + NP [knowledge/certainty] • Copula + other adjectives • Present simple 	<p><i>[I] have got the impression that</i></p> <p><i>I probably wouldn't be allowed</i></p>
Possession and entitlement	Stating what one possesses or deserves to have	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verb of possession (e.g. <i>own, have</i>) + NP • <i>Deserve</i> + NP • Present • Present perfect 	<p><i>I already have myself a 4x2x2 vivarium</i></p> <p><i>I deserve one of those frames</i></p>
Preference	Describing preferences/habitual choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copula + adjective ['transitive' emotion, preference] • Copula + NP [preference] • Present • Present perfect 	<p><i>I keep finding myself drawn to these shades</i></p> <p><i>I am a fan of this little knife</i></p>
Problem	Describing a situation that is or has been negative from the viewpoint of the speaker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Have</i> + NP [negative/negated positive] • Copula + adjective [inability] • Copula + NOT + adjective [inability] • Present • Present perfect • Past 	<p><i>[I] have had no luck in searching the forum for a solution</i></p> <p><i>I am unable to source products cheaper than Amazon</i></p> <p><i>I am not able to get more stock now to sell on Amazon</i></p>
Experience	Describing present and past experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copula + adjective [adjective = experience] • Copula + locative [metaphor: location = experience] • Verb of possession + noun [experience] • Verb of possession + noun [experience phenomenon] • Present simple/progressive • Present perfect • Past 	<p><i>I am becoming healthier in a spiritual way</i></p> <p><i>I have been on the periphery of the app</i></p> <p><i>[I] have a long, long history with meth</i></p> <p><i>I have had lower back pain</i></p>
Addressee-oriented/ Discourse-internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy: Establishing common ground between oneself and another participant • Expressive: Expressing gratitude, pity, etc. towards addressee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of adjectives of comparison (<i>same, similar...</i>) • Copula + adjective [addressee-directed emotion] (e.g. <i>sorry</i>) • Presence of 2nd person pronoun (and other references to addressee) • Present • Present perfect • Past 	<p><i>I am in the same boat as you</i></p> <p><i>I'm sorry</i></p>
Decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing uncertainty regarding an upcoming situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copula + adjective [certainty] + PP/VP 	<p><i>[I am] really not sure what activity to do</i></p>

Forum-related characteristics/ attitudes	Describing oneself in relation to the forum as the site of interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference to forum (explicit or by deictic <i>here</i>) • Present • Present perfect • Past 	<i>I'm new to the forum</i>
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Table 9.6: Framework for functionally categorising relational processes with *I* in Role 1

9.1.2.1. Results

Table 9.7 below presents an overview of the numbers of sentences assigned to the functional categories as specified by the above framework. A full overview of the data assigned to these categories is, for reasons of space, provided in the appendix. As can be seen, the most frequently represented co-texts are “knowledge/understanding reference”, i.e. co-texts in which speakers refer to their knowledge or understanding of particular subjects (26 instances), co-texts classified as “knowledge representation/opinion”, where a relational process with the speaker as the carrier represents the speaker’s position towards a projected proposition (as in *[I] have got the impression that they don't flex their immune protocols much*) (20 instances) and sentences describing speakers’ experience (22 instances). These results indicate that, irrespective of whether sentences formally related to negative self-identifiers constitute mental or relational processes, they often represent what speakers think they know or do not know on the one hand and what speakers have experienced on the other.

Functional category	Contrast/Concession	Cause/Consequence	Addition	Total
Knowledge/Understanding reference	3	15	8	26
Experience	14	4	4	22
Knowledge representation/Opinion	10	6	4	20
Personal characteristics	4	1	8	13
Preference/Habit	5	2	3	10
Possession and entitlement	4	1	5	10
Response	2	2	5	9
Problem	1	3	2	6
Emotional states	1	1	1	3
Addressee-oriented	1	0	2	3
Forum-related characteristics/Attitudes	2	0	0	2
Decision-making	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	47	35	43	125

Table 9.7: Functional profile of relational processes formally coordinated with NIs

Considering the conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers formally related to the categories “knowledge representation/opinion” and “knowledge/understanding reference” shows that of 46 instances overall, 29 are from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism. This tendency for negative self-identifiers to occur in co-texts in which speakers talk about what they know or believe was also observed for mental process contexts and seems to constitute a pattern of using the structure under scrutiny. Negative self-identifiers from these conceptual categories make up half of the instances of the structure formally related to sentences classified as “experience” (see table 9.9 below). This suggests that identifying as an expert or professional also matters when talking about

one’s own experiences. However, the sample examined here is too small to observe patterns of language use. The results of the analysis of the relation between experience-representing co-texts and particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers in a larger dataset are reported in the next section.

Conceptual categories of identifying NPs formally related to sentences in the categories “knowledge representation/opinion” and “knowledge/understanding reference”	To.
Professional	11
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): General	11
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): Specific	6
Roles: Forum-related	4
Characteristics: Evaluative	3
Characteristics: Health/ill health	2
Activity/Expertise	1
Characteristics: General	1
Characteristics: Linguistic	1
Usage, consumption and ownership	1
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>): General	1
Habit: Food/drink	1
Habit: Substance	1
Role: Business	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): General	1
TOTAL	46

Table 9.8: Conceptual categories of NIs formally related to co-texts classified as “knowledge representation/opinion” & “knowledge/understanding reference”

Conceptual categories of identifying NPs formally related to sentences in the category “experience”	To.
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): Specific	4
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): General	3
Professional	2
Activity/Expertise	1
Characteristics: Physical/physiological	1
Characteristics: General	1
Characteristics: Social	1
Expertise (- <i>expert</i>): Specific	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Visual aspects	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): General	1
Habit: Food/drink	1
Habit: Substance	1
Ideological	1
Characteristics: Evaluative	1
Role: Forum-related	1
TOTAL	22

Table 9.9: Conceptual categories of NIs formally related to co-texts classified as “experience”

Sentences constituting relational processes of possession, i.e., sentences describing speakers' relations – and thus experience – with particular products might also be seen as pertaining to the superordinate category of "experience". An example of such a 'product experience' sentence is 9.29, where having owned something for a particular period of time is formally and thus conceptually related to negative self-identification as an expert.

9.29. *Before I detail what I did, please note **I am no expert at this**, and have only owned my Pi just over a week.*

Further examples of proficiency or knowledge in particular areas being related to ownership are the following:

9.30. *Now, **I'm not a very good mechanic**, and I dont have a lathe or a Mig/tig welder.*

9.31. ***I'm no Dennis expert** but I do own one bought new by my Dad.*

9.32. ***I'm not a SKY subscriber** and don't own a SKY box so I cannot comment on the details in relation to the settings on the box.*

Cases such as these are interesting insofar as they suggest that authority, in the examined data, while often explicitly referred to, is not construed as something 'out of reach' for laypeople discussing on forums. In contrast, in these examples, ownership alone qualifies forum users to be authoritative on the subjects of importance in these situations (an observation I will come back to in section 9.2).

In 19 cases, speakers talk about their preferences and habits (e.g. 9.33) or their emotive responses to persons, things and events (e.g. 9.34).

9.33. ***I am not a fan of modulation effects** so do without chorus, tremelo and phaser.*

9.34. ***I'm certainly not a linux expert** so I'm constantly being surprised at the small nuances here and there.*

Interestingly, in these contexts, expertise disclaimers do not dominate; instead, a wide variety of preference disclaimers are used in 15 of 19 cases. This indicates that when speakers talk about what they like and usually do, negative self-identification with preference disclaimers (frequently constructions with *fan*) are preferred – a trend already revealed by the analysis of mental process sentences.

Conceptual categories of identifying NPs formally related to sentences in the categories "preference/habits" and "response"	To.
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Product	3
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Activity	2
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Food/drink/substance	2
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Person	2
Expertise (+ <i>expert</i>): Specific	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): IT	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Nature	1
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>): Visual aspects	1
Habit: Food/drink	1
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Activity	1
Preference (- <i>fan</i>): Product	1

Professional	1
Role: Virtual	1
Characteristics: Evaluative	1
TOTAL	19

Table 9.10: Conceptual categories of NIs formally related to co-texts classified as “preference/habits” & “response”

9.1.3. Functional categorisation of material processes with *I* as the actor

In addition to considering mental and relational processes with *I* as the sender which altogether account for 316 instances of negative identification, i.e. 34% of the examined data, I also examined the smaller category of material processes with the speaker in the actor role formally related to negative self-identifiers (84 instances) in more detail. The purpose of this analysis was to find if representations of what speakers do (rather than what they think or consider themselves to be) can be found to co-occur with particular negative self-identifiers with particular functions – possibly different from those revealed by the analyses presented so far.

9.1.3.1. Aspects to consider when categorising material processes

Categorising material processes with a first-person subject in the actor role is relatively unproblematic in comparison to analysing mental and relational processes, because the former are less abstract. Compare, for instance, the straightforward meaning of the verb “use” in *I am using a little more butter than I did* and the attribute “used” and its relation to the overall function of the sentence in *[I am] well used to being blown up about my erroneous guesses*, which serves as a self-ironic comment by the speaker on their lack of knowledge, which, apparently, is often identified as such by others.

Material processes as metaphors

Of course, also with material processes, there are cases where categorisation is difficult; what often constitutes a problem for categorisation here are conceptual metaphors, i.e. meaning extensions of verbs technically representing material processes, like in the following examples:

9.35. *I follow Daveo/Boycie, but I’m not a sexist.*

9.36. *I’m no expert. But I’ll still go with the flow as long as I don’t have any tasty cargo or somewhere to be.*

9.37. *I was going to put up the image of people injecting their naughty bits with saline, but I’m not a complete monster.*

In example 9.35, the meaning of *follow* is constrained by the implied ‘virtual’ context, i.e., what is meant is not the physical process of walking behind them, but probably rather the habit or preference of staying informed about these footballers’ lives and views, or the moral support for their beliefs. Similarly, to *go with the flow* in example 9.36 does, of course, not refer to an actual process of moving, but in this case appears to refer to spontaneous, flexible behaviour of the speaker in situations where they do not have any other duties (here, in a computer game). In example 9.37, the literal meaning of putting up an image (on a wall) is extended so that it serves as metadiscursive comment on what the speaker does not want to describe (but does, nevertheless). Such cases were categorised by functional comparison and assignment to more frequently represented, clear-cut categories of sentences formally related to negative self-identifiers constituting material processes. Finally, there are cases of material processes in the examined data which are used figuratively to function like mental and relational processes categorised as “knowledge representation/opinion” and “knowledge/understanding reference” in the previous analyses and which were consequently assigned to these

categories. For example, *taking a guess* at something serves to express one's knowledge/opinion on a particular subject, and *getting* an argument means understanding it.

Meaning of verb and goal – but where to draw the lines?

In many cases, the meanings of the verb and its object complement, i.e. the goal, alone suggest a conceptual difference. As with all conceptual categorisation, though, drawing the line between different conceptual categories is a matter of focus on particular meaning aspects at the expense of others, where the decision to focus on particular meaning aspects probably results from their prominence in the data – i.e., recurrent meaning aspects are probably more likely to be selected as category-defining rather than ones which only appear only in individual cases. Compare, e.g., “use + butter” in 9.38, “use + it” in 9.39 and “use + accountant” in 9.40.

9.38. *I am using a little more butter than I did.*

9.39. *[I] have never used it [an app called Fastpass Plus] till this morning.*

9.40. *i use an accountant who I pay a lot to.*

One could argue that all three belong to the same category by virtue of describing what the speakers use. Alternatively, one could argue that while the first and the third example both describe habits (employing present tense progressive and simple, respectively), the second one relates the speaker's experience with using something (present perfect tense) (this is how these co-texts were categorised in my analysis); however, it might be objected that using butter is very different from using an accountant (the first describing eating habits and the latter a business transaction).

Tense and aspect

As previously discussed, tense and aspect play an important role for categorisation in this analysis, because there arguably is a conceptual difference between *[I] am battling my way through the install* (the install has not been completed) and (the invented) *[I] have battled my way through the install* (the battle has been won).

Modality and polarity

For the functional categorisation of material processes in particular, modality and polarity play a role as well. To give an example in which modality makes a categorical difference in my profile, 9.41, by virtue of containing the modal *would*, is categorised as an addressee-oriented sentence (serving as a piece of advice by providing information about what the speaker would do, were they in the addressee's situation); another example is 9.42, where the modal *can* makes the sentence function as a statement about the speaker's ability, rather than, say, a mere habit of walking long distances. An instance that is categorised of taking polarity is taken into account is 9.43, where the inability to edit shipping prices (despite having been a merchant seller) indicates a problem faced by the speaker.

9.41. *I'm no expert by any means, but i would definitely go back to the doctors.*

9.42. *I am not a severe case (yet) and can still walk a long way.*

9.43. *Still cannot edit shipping prices. BUT i have not been a merchant seller for most of this year.*

9.1.3.2. Functional categories of material processes

Table 9.11 below presents the functional categories of clauses and sentences representing material processes with the speaker in the actor role.

Framework for functionally categorising material processes with I as the actor		
Category name	Description	Examples
Situative anchor	Tense and other formal specifications Factual background information about the speaker's current situation, setting the scene for the rest of the posting	<i>As I've already paid for a year's <u>subscription to the Telegraph</u></i> <i>I as usual did not get the e-mail.</i>
	Descriptions of general facts that relate to the speaker, but are outside their scope of influence	<i>I'm leaning towards Z1 and Cat 2</i> <i>However I'm not a big seller and I <u>don't get many customer emails anyway</u></i>
Experience	References to experiences stretching over or repeatedly experienced during time spans from a past moment up to the moment of speaking • Tense: present or present perfect	<i>I am not a vat specialist or anything but <u>have worked with it a lot on accounting systems</u></i> <i>I usually <u>get stitches</u> when I bounce up and down too much</i>
	References to actions just completed and immediately relevant to the subject of the ongoing conversation • Tense: present perfect	<i>I've had a tinker with the levels on that photo</i>
Measures	Actions just taken by speakers to address a specific problem • Tense: present perfect, past	<i>I have cut the bread consumption in ½</i>
Habits and principles	Activities done routinely or out of principle • Tense: present simple tense, will-future • Often marked by adjuncts of time (e.g. <i>whenever I get injured, when something hurts, regularly</i>) or conditionals (e.g. <i>if there's a problem</i>)	<i>if there's a problem <u>I'll sort it then and there</u></i>
Ability and inability	Sentences describing the speaker's ability or inability to carry out particular actions (literal or metaphorical) • May be marked by use of the semi-modal <i>can</i>	<i>Still cannot edit shipping prices.</i> <i>I don't get this argument.</i>
Addressee-oriented/ Discourse-internal	Sentences metadiscursively referring to past, present or future communicative (and thus addressee-oriented) actions by the speaker in the discourse context of the forum as a site of social interaction	<i>I haven't been a big flasher these last 20 months, but <u>I will more than make up for it with my report</u></i> (by negatively identifying as <i>flasher</i> , the speaker means that she has not posted many pictures recently) <i>[I] only pass on advice</i>
	Hypothetical actions by the speaker serving as advice • Use of the modals <i>would</i> or <i>could</i>	<i>i would definitely go back to the doctors with your symptoms</i>
Hypothetical actions	Hypothetical actions by the speaker not serving as advice	<i><u>I would buy one</u> even though I'm not a Chelsea fan</i>
Knowledge representation/ Opinion	Material processes used metaphorically to refer to processes of thinking in utterances where speakers state what they believe	<i><u>I don't get it</u></i>
Knowledge/understanding reference	Material processes used metaphorically to refer to the speaker's own knowledge or understanding	<i>I took a wild guess at the 20's/30's</i>

Table 9.11: Criteria for functional categorisation of material processes with I in the actor role

9.1.3.3. Results

Table 9.12 provides an overview of the numbers of sentences assigned to each of these categories. Again, a table with all the data assigned to these categories is provided in the appendix.

Category	Contrast/Concession	Cause/Consequence	Addition	Total
Experience	18	1	3	22
Habit/Principle	11	2	6	19
Situative anchor	3	4	9	16
(In)ability	1	3	2	6
Measures	3	2	0	5
Addressee-oriented/Discourse-internal	3	1	1	5
Hypothetical actions	3	1	1	5
Knowledge representation/Opinion	1	0	0	1
Knowledge/understanding reference	1	3	1	5
TOTAL	44	17	23	84

Table 9.12: Functional categories of material processes with *I* as the actor

Experiences as co-texts

The analysis revealed that the most frequent functional category of sentences formally related to negative self-identifiers and representing material processes with the speaker in the actor role is “experience” (22 sentences overall). This category mainly includes sentences referring to activities and accomplishments by the speaker, such as *cruise the Voyager, raise tadpoles, design frames*, etc. (12 instances). In eight cases, the sentence formally related to the negative self-identifier expresses a material process of buying, using, or consuming something, e.g. *take Senna, do E/mdma, play with it*. One sentence represents an involuntary experience, namely *get stitches*. Of the 12 sentences categorised as “activities and accomplishments” here, 9 are formally contrasted with disclaimers of expertise, which is interesting insofar as not being an expert of some kind is juxtaposed with having, in fact, done and accomplished things.

Functional subcategorisation of sentences constituting “experience” co-texts		
Category	Sentences	To.
Activities and accomplishments	<i>I did create a profile</i> <i>[I] have raised many of my tadpoles in a tank</i> <i>[I] have only completed one marathon</i> <i>i've quite regularly visited the forum and read peoples' experiences with OCD</i> <i>ive not even done a marathon</i> <i>I've managed to get up to running 10 minutes</i> <i>in the past have always worked</i> <i>I never watered Argyrodermas</i> <i>I have worked in a job where I was on my feet 12 hours a day</i> <i>I have fallen in love with this color</i> <i>I have cruised 4 times on Voyager</i> <i>I have been "designing" Spa's frames for a while now</i>	12

Consumption and usage	<i>I have taken senna before I get better quality sleep without opiates [I] have had orthotics fitted professionally [I] have been known to do E/mdma when out clubbing have worked with it a lot on accounting systems have never used it till this morning I've played Football Manager for many years I have "played" with it a few times</i>	8
Involuntary experience	<i>I usually get stitches when I bounce up and down too much</i>	1
TOTAL		21

Table 9.13: Functional subcategorisation of “experience” co-texts

Habits/Principles as co-texts

The second most frequently occurring type of contexts representing material processes is those subsumed under the category “habits/principles”. On closer inspection, these can be differentiated according to whether they say something about practices the speaker generally engages or does not engage in or principles the speaker generally follows (e.g. *I am not a bookseller and i actually do not label my own items*), activities the speaker regularly does (e.g. *I've never been a fast runner and quite often go out with the Durham City Harriers*) or about the speaker's consumption habits (e.g. *I'm not a heavy smoker, but i have been smoking for about 3-4 years now*). One sentence seems to fall in between constituting a habit and a general practice, describing a preference more than a certain habitual behaviour, namely, *I follow Daveo/Boycie*.

Functional subcategorisation of sentences constituting “habit/principles” contexts		
Category	Sentences	To.
Activities	<i>i still use it [the uni athletic track] whenever i get injured when something hurts, I change the way that I run I rarely play without the S1 on i usually play solo I'll still go with the flow as long as I don't have only ever go in when I clock up a few complaints I like to wander around the huge expanse of heather moorland between St. Fillans and Loch Tay quite often go out with the Durham City Harriers I deal with asbestos on a regular basis i go fossiling a bit I do some kind of exercise every day</i>	11
Consumption habits	<i>I am using a little more butter than I did i have been smoking for about 3-4 years now. [I] eat, sometimes, 2 boiled eggs daily</i>	3
General practice	<i>i actually do not label my own items i use an accountant who I pay a lot to I only sell on Amazon If there's a problem, I'll sort it here and there.</i>	4
Preference	<i>I follow Daveo/Boycie</i>	1
TOTAL		19

Table 9.14: Functional subcategorisation of “habit/principles” co-texts

As with the other process types discussed, the kind of interaction between negative self-identifier and formally related co-texts describing activities speakers routinely engage in depends on the formal link between the structure of interest and its co-text: if the coordination *and* is used, the activity intensifies, i.e. describes in more detail what the negative self-identifier entails, or simply adds to the meaning of the negative self-identifier (example 9.44). If the formal link is one of cause or consequence, the activity described causally relates to what is indicated by the negative self-identifier (example 9.45),

and in case of a contrasting relation between negative self-identifier and its co-text, the activity contradicts implications created by the negative self-identifier (example 9.46).

9.44. *I'm not a great lover of positions 2/4 and I rarely play without the S1 on.* (Intensification)

9.45. *I'm not a serial doctors apt person so only ever go in when I clock up a few complaints.* (Consequence)

9.46. *I am not an asbestos expert however I deal with asbestos on a regular basis.* (Contradiction)

In five out of six cases where a habitual activity is contrasted with a negative self-identifier, this negative self-identifier can be classified as a disclaimer of expertise. Despite the non-generalisability of the small sample here, this seems to support previous analyses presented in this chapter which revealed that implicit references to tacit knowledge – gained, these co-texts suggest, from having experienced something or, as in this case, from regularly doing something – tend to be contrasted with expert identities.

In the three cases where a negative self-identifier is added to a co-text representing an activity, the negative self-identifiers, too, come from the conceptual domains of “activities” and “preferences (-fan): activities”. This can mean that the sentence as a whole characterises the speaker’s preferences, as in the following example:

9.47. *I'm not a great lover of positions 2/4 and I rarely play without the S1 on.*

Or, the textual material additively related to the negative self-identifier can contradict or be interpreted as an entailment of what is implied by the instance of the structure, as in example 9.48 below. Here, the speaker first negatively identifies with the category of “fast runners”, just to add that they often join a running club named Durham City Harriers. Depending on whether or not it is evident from the co-text, or implicitly assumed to be known, that this is a club for slow runners, this could either be interpreted as a consequence of the negative identifier (if we assume that the Durham Harriers are slow, too) or as a contradiction to the speaker’s preceding self-identification as slow (if we assume that the Durham Harriers are regular or fast runners)⁷⁷.

9.48. *I've never been a fast runner and quite often go out with the Durham City Harriers on their runs.*

In the two cases where co-texts representing activities are causally related to negative self-identifiers, speakers negatively identify with preferences (e.g. *fan of thrashing about in wet snow*), the causes or consequences of which are then described in more detail, to the effect that the whole sentence describes what the speaker likes or dislikes. The three instances of speakers referring to their consumption habits are formally related to negative self-identifiers from the conceptual domains of food and substance preferences and habits.

Situative anchor

Finally, another category of sentences formally related to negative self-identifiers and constituting material processes which occurs often enough to be mentioned here is what I referred to as “situative anchors” above; these are sentences which describe a ‘status quo’. This status quo, i.e. a description

⁷⁷ Considering more of the co-text surrounding this negative self-identifier reveals that this NI represents a contrast to the co-text following it. The speaker goes on to explain that “I'm always at the back of the pack, but nobody minds waiting for a few minutes every now and then for me to catch up”.

of the situation as it is at the moment of speaking, can result from a past happening or action causing a result state, e.g. *I've already paid for a year's subscription to the Telegraph*), from an activity that has been going on up to the moment of speaking (e.g. *I've been putting it off*) or be constituted by a general fact or state (e.g. *I don't get many customer emails*). In co-texts of this type, it appears that negative self-identifiers more often serve informative purposes than in some of the previously examined ones. Referring back to the analysis of mental process contexts, it has been shown that negative self-identifiers, notably those from the conceptual domain of expertise, often merely function to epistemically mitigate information provided by the speaker, serving rhetorical rather than assertive functions. An example is *I am no expert, but I believe any GAD test over 50 indicates an autoimmune condition*, where the negative self-identifier hedges the speaker's statement, namely their interpretation of a generalised anxiety disorder test. By contrast, in the following extract from my corpus, where a speaker uses a negative self-identifier in a co-text classified as “situative anchor” (underlined), the function of negatively identifying as an EU resident is not that of a stance marker, but to negatively assert information that is intended to help the addressee better understand the speaker's situation – due to the fact of not being a EU resident but having a UK LTD, they might be liable to pay VAT in other countries.

- 9.49. *I am not a EU resident though Ive registered a UK LTD on my name and then successfully registered as a business seller on AMZ UK. During the signup process I didnt pay much attention to the 'SELL ON OTHER EUROMARKETS' (something like that) and ticked the box. I am now in concern that I have to obtain not only UK VAT # but German, French, Spain and Italian VAT # when I reach the limit of 15k.*

Another instance of a negative self-identifier being used with seemingly more ‘mundane’, assertive functions in its formally related co-text is *I have not been a PWP as I took up an assistant psychologist post instead*, where taking up one job is represented as excluding the possibility of identifying with another position (that of a PWP).

Functional subcategorisation of sentences constituting “situative anchor”-co-texts		
Category	Sentences	To.
Completed actions and happenings/ Perfect	<i>Ive registered a UK LTD on my name</i> <i>I've already paid for a year's subscription to the Telegraph</i> <i>I couldn't miss taking a photo of this male Slow Worm</i> <i>I took up an assistant psychologist post instead</i> <i>I never signed up for this</i> <i>[I have] not opened it for a while</i> <i>I have set all my shipping prices for my listngs</i> <i>I have just registered for this purpose</i> <i>I stopped then as defeat for the Federation looked certain</i> <i>I as usual did not get the e-mail.</i>	10
Ongoing/ Progressive	<i>[I] am battling my way through the install</i> <i>I've been putting it off</i> <i>[I] was just installing it through the config menu</i>	3
State/ Non-progressive	<i>[I] don't get many customer emails</i> <i>I get popped or run more often than not when I unwisely try PVP</i> <i>I live a good 2 hours away</i>	3
TOTAL		16

Table 9.15: Functional subcategorisation of sentences constituting “situative anchor” co-texts

All this indicates, once again, that negative self-identifiers and the co-texts with which they are formally related are conceptually related as well, and judging from the data examined here, patterns of

recurring conceptual relations can be observed. In any case, the analysis shows that negative self-identifiers tend to interact strongly with the rest of what is being said and have discourse-modifying purposes: thus, referring to an example from table 9.14 above, eating two boiled eggs daily (a consumption habit) formally and functionally interacts with not being a vegan (categorised here as food-related habit), just like not being a cream lover (a food preference) relates to the quantities of butter used (a consumption-related activity). The analysis of material processes formally related to negative self-identifiers shows that speakers often use the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NP” in the context of talking about what they have done (“experiences”) and in the context of what they routinely do (“habits”). Experiences with particular activities and accomplishments implying the acquisition of skills and knowledge were shown to frequently occur together with disclaimers of expertise. Overall, 12 out of 22 sentences classified as “experience” are formally related to negative self-identifiers with identifying NPs from the conceptual domain of professionalism and expertise, and all but one of them are formally contrasted with experience contexts.

Regarding co-texts classified as “habits/principles”, these sentences are related to an expertise disclaimer in 9 out of 19 cases. The other negative self-identifiers in these co-texts come from the domains of preferences (five instances), activities (two instances), habits relating to food and substances (2 instances) and various others (three instances). So, it could be that talking about one’s experience is more closely associated with being or not being an expert, while talking about one’s habits and principles is also associated with one’s preferences.

Finally, the analysis also showed that negative self-identifiers formally related to material processes can serve to provide more specific information about the speaker against a situational background (“situative anchor”) described by the sentence with which the negative self-identifier is formally linked. This indicates that the structure also has predominantly descriptive uses, where it serves to characterise the speaker in relation to a particular situation.

9.1.4. Summary

Section 9.1 has presented functional analyses of sentences constituting mental, relational and material processes with *I* in the role of the senser/experiencer, the carrier/token and the actor, as these were the most frequent configurations of participants and processes represented in sentences formally related to instances of the structure in focus (see Chapter 8). Analysing each process type category separately, comparing formally and functionally similar textual material and accounting for the formal and semantic properties of sentences representing mental, relational and material processes was intended to render the analysis as criteria-based and as fine-grained as possible. Overall, 401 sentences formally linked to negative self-identifiers were analysed in depth to learn with which co-texts negative self-identifiers are formally and thus conceptually associated. The result of this is a functional profile of ideationally and formally defined co-text types preceding and following negative self-identifiers in this corpus. It is represented in table 9.16 below. The table also shows the respective conceptual categories of identifying NPs dominant – i.e. represented by most identifying NPs – for the four most frequently represented categories of co-text. As mentioned already, these numbers have to be taken with a grain of salt because of the described difficulties with conducting either/or categorisations of authentic language in use.

Functional profile of clauses formally linked to negative self-identifiers					
Functional category	Mental	Relational	Material	Total	Dominant conceptual categories of NIs (%)
Knowledge representation/Opinion	72	20	1	93	66 Expertise/Prof.
Knowledge/Understanding reference	31	26	5	62	47 Expertise/Prof.
Experience	18	22	22	61	54 Expertise/Prof.
Preferences/Habits/Principles	24	10	19	53	59 Preference
Background/Situative anchor (incl. Possession & Entitlement)	6	10	16	32	
Addressee-oriented/Discourse-internal	17	3	5	25	
Personal characteristics		13		13	
Intention	10			10	
Problem	3	6		9	
Response		9		9	
(In)ability			6	6	
Decision-making	4	1		5	
Measure			5	5	
Hypothetical actions			5	5	
Wish	4			4	
Perception	3			3	
Emotional states		3		3	
Forum-related characteristics/Attitudes		2		2	
TOTAL	192	125	84	401	

Table 9.16: Functional profile of clauses and sentences formally related to NIs⁷⁸

Considering the results of the analyses of mental, relational and material processes together reveals that, whereas some categories are only relevant for a particular process type (for example, the category of (in)ability only includes material processes), others recur independent of the process type the sentences assigned to that category represent. For example, the category of “experience” is relevant for all three process types examined here. 9.50 (relational), 9.51 (material) and 9.52 (mental) all represent experiences according to my framework, despite constituting different processes from a transitivity perspective.

9.50. *I lost 3 kg*

9.51. *[I] have only completed one marathon*

9.52. *I have seen a lot of things said and written about "bioidentical/compounded" hormones*

This might, of course, be interpreted differently: the category could either be weak, allowing too much textual material in, the process type distinction might simply not be as relevant for analysing what speakers actually do with language or the category might be considered particularly relevant. I believe that there are arguments for all three interpretations. But that the third interpretation is not plausible, based on the assumption that even though categorisation and quantification by just one person is

⁷⁸ The grey shading indicates the four most frequently represented functional categories of co-text and, in the far-right column, the conceptual category of identifying NPs most often appearing in these types of co-text (in per cent of all instances of negative identifiers linked to these co-textual categories).

somewhat problematic for said reasons, reaching conclusions requires accepting – rather than deconstructing – the constructedness of linguistic analysis.

Disclaimers aside, these numbers still serve to indicate certain trends that can be observed in the data: negative self-identifiers are most often, namely in 93 of 401 sentences examined here, formally coordinated with sentences representing the speaker’s knowledge or opinion, and 66% of these knowledge/opinion-representing sentences are formally related with negative self-identifiers from the conceptual categories of expertise and professionalism. Considering that the category “knowledge/understanding reference” is very similar to “knowledge representation/opinion” in that it includes sentences in which speakers comment on what they think they know, have learned etc., the overall number of negative self-identifiers formally coordinated with knowledge-representing or -negotiating material is even larger. Negative self-identifiers classified as disclaimers of expertise correlate most strongly with all but one category of co-text, namely, what I referred to as “preferences/habits/principles” here, that is, speaker’s descriptions of what they routinely, normally or principally do or like. In these co-texts, it is preference disclaimers which dominate (in 59% of the cases examined here, a preference disclaimer occurs in such a context). This corroborates previous observations of preference disclaimers occurring in co-texts describing speakers’ tastes and routines, indicating that negatively identifying with particular preferences often serves to specify personal choices and preferences in the negative.

Functionally categorising the immediate co-texts of negative self-identifiers formally linked to the structure, making up 43% of the negative self-identifiers in my corpus, provided an overview of the types of discourse contexts in which variants of the structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP”, as used by people interacting on UK web forums, appear. Since structures like negative self-identifiers are multifunctional, indexing and reflecting various aspects of the textual and situational context in which they are used, determining precisely which functions are served by individual instances of particular types of negative self-identifiers in particular co-texts is only possible on a case-to-case basis. As the functional profile in table 9.16 above shows, however, it is still possible to identify a set of key functions that the structure serves. They are summarised with corpus examples in table 9.17 below:

Functional category	Corpus example
Descriptive positioning	
General	
Negative self-identification to provide details about situations speakers find themselves in, represented by co-texts classified as “situative anchor” and “possession & entitlement”	<i>I know I have two small children aged 3 and 7 but since dec I haven't been a proper mum</i>
Situational	
Negative self-identification to position speakers in relation to things they intend to do or want to happen (“intention”/“wish”)	<i>I want to go back to what I had before google chrome and I am not a computer boff, please help.</i>
Negative self-identification to position speakers in relation to decisions they are facing and problems they are confronted with (e.g. “decision-making”, “problems”, “hypothetical actions”)	<i>I'm pretty much not an early morning person so I might decide on a couple of nights to run during the week and go home early those nights</i>
Discursive positioning	
Attitudinal/preference-related	
Negative self-identification with preferences to position speakers more specifically in terms of personal choices	<i>I am not a vegetarian but I have never been a big meat/cheese eater, I would normally prefer grains, vegetables, fruits, etc.</i>

Epistemic/knowledge-related	
Negative self-identification with expertise to epistemically modify utterances describing speakers' knowledge and experience	<i>I'm no expert but i'm pretty sure you can.</i>
Interpersonal/metadiscursive	
Negative self-identification to modify the interpretation of co-texts explicitly addressing the interlocutor or metadiscursively commenting on the ongoing social interaction.	<i>I am no expert, but I am in the same boat as you. I should probably post this on a triathlon forum but as I'm not a member of any, I thought I'd ask here first.</i>

Table 9.17: Key functions of negative self-identifiers in the examined corpus

Parts B and C of RQ2 asked what the functions of co-texts with particular (experiential) meanings and particular formal links to the target structure were, and how frequently these functional categories were represented in the corpus. While this section focused on the functions of co-texts with particular functions formally coordinated with or super- or subordinated to negative self-identifiers, the next section explores a different type of co-text, namely textual material preceding the focus structure without being formally related to it. While in the analyses just presented, only clauses and sentences were considered, the analysis discussed in the second part of this chapter also takes into account textual units above sentence level.

9.2. Functional analysis of co-texts preceding negative self-identifiers

To provide an answer to parts A–C of RQ 2 that is based on analyses of more than just one formally defined linguistic paradigm (namely clauses and sentences formally linked to the structure in focus), this section reports the results of a functional analysis of textual material preceding negative self-identifiers. Declarative sentences constitute the structural element most frequently (namely 376 times) preceding negative self-identifiers in my corpus. My analysis here takes into consideration not only the declarative sentence immediately preceding the (sentence containing the) matrix clause, but also the communicative function of textual units above sentence level of which these sentences are part (see section 6.1, where I explained the criteria according to which I consider linguistic elements to jointly constitute a functional unit).

In the following, I first explain in more detail why it is important to consider units above sentence level to account for the functions of negative self-identifiers and what intricacies are involved in qualitatively distinguishing such categories of co-text. I then present and describe the superordinate communicative functions which can be identified in the examined data and go on to discuss the individual categories in greater detail, providing information about their respective frequencies of occurrence and their relations with the conceptual category of negative self-identifiers. The following extract from my corpus illustrates how negative self-identifiers may interact not only with the sentences immediately preceding them, but with entire functional units of text:

- 9.53. *Hi all
I have had a couple of Blackstar amps for gigging but this is my first practice amp from them
As standard pretty damn good
Played it for a couple of weeks and then thought this could be better
Contacted Watford valves in the UK and bought a Celestion Super 8 and their recommended valve kit, a
Harma ECC 83 retro and a Phillips 12ax7
What a difference
Cleaner at much higher volume and the drive channel is classic Brit Rock. **The fizz is gone**
I am no engineer but it only took me 20 mins to do.*

This is an instance of a negative self-identifier preceded by a declarative sentence stating the result of an entire story of what the speaker did to repair an amplifier: *the fizz is gone* (shaded in grey). While explaining the function of the negative identifier just in relation to this immediately preceding sentence would work (referring back to the functional framework introduced in section 9.3, this sentence could also be classified as “situative anchor”), the use of the negative self-identifier is much more interesting if one considers that it can also be interpreted as referring back to the entire short narrative, the result of which is stated by the sentence immediately preceding it. This narrative describes the speaker’s experience with an amplifier and what they did to improve it. By using an expertise disclaimer right after relating this experience story, the speaker undermines the expertise implied by their account (a conceptual strategy I refer to as de-expertisation, see section 7.3.2 and section 9.3.1), only to add that it only took 20 minutes to do, thus again highlighting their skills (I have called this re-expertisation). To learn more about the functions of negative self-identifiers in interaction with their wider discourse context, the analysis presented in this section considers as co-text not only the immediately preceding sentence, but the entire functional textual unit preceding the negative self-identifier. Through iterative data analysis, I established a set of functional categories appearing in the (formally unrelated) context preceding negative self-identifiers.

It should be mentioned that, again, the established categories are fuzzy, which means determining their respective frequencies of occurrence in the examined data reveals trends in people’s language use rather than definite numbers for clear-cut categories. For instance, both textual materials classified as “knowledge representation (self)” and “answer” in this analysis effectively serve to assert propositional content that the speaker believes to be true – more or less, since epistemic stance may vary. The only difference is that I counted as answers those utterances which contain linguistic elements whose referents have clearly been mentioned in another speaker’s utterance preceding it, such as personal pronouns as in *It has bluetooth built in*, the definite article ‘the’ as in *The sheep are safe, Geordie* or, simply, *yes* or *no* marking utterances like *yes you can definitely print FBA labels on the RM DMO compatible thermal printers*.

9.2.1. Functional categories of preceding co-texts

Table 9.18 below presents a functional profile of textual material preceding negative self-identifiers. It defines superordinate and subordinate functional categories and provides attested examples from the corpus for each of them. That some categories can be differentiated in the first place, and that some differentiable categories are related, pointing towards higher-order conceptual trends, gives an indication of prominent conceptualisations in the examined data, without even looking at frequencies.

Functional profile: co-texts preceding negative self-identifiers			
Situative anchoring	Functional subcategories		
Superordinate category description	Category	Definition	Example
Textual material ‘setting the scene’ for/creating situational context against which the use of the negative self-identifier functionally stands out	Background	Describing aspects of a situation currently faced by the speaker (present orientation) or anticipated by the speaker (future orientation)	<i>This was the first time I had left him since being diagnosed on Friday</i>
	Problem	Describing a problematic situation faced by the speaker at present or in the past	<i>I read and watched many tutorials but nothing helped.</i>

	Decision-making	Describing a situation in which the speaker is confronted with a decision	<i>I notice some dealers now have 5243 (R3126) in stock and I am thinking of getting one.</i>
	Intention/ Desire/Seeking	Saying that one is looking for something	<i>Does anyone have any suggestions about posting books not using the royal mail? Their prices are going up again in April, unbelievable after their crappy performance!</i>
Attitudinal positioning	Functional subcategories		
Superordinate category description	Category	Definition	Example
Textual material expressing the speaker's stance towards a particular subject, either their opinion on a given topic or their habits or habitual preferences in relation to a given subject	Opinion	Stating one's opinion on a subject (+ presence of evaluative elements)	<i>That, in itself, is quite an impressive feat</i>
	Habit/Preference	Reference to habits or habitual preferences	<i>I eat no red meat</i>
Experience sharing	Functional subcategories		
Superordinate category description	Category	Definition	Example
Speakers' representations of their experiences (telling) and display of items (showing)	Event story	Relating a sequence of 'tellable' events not involving the speaker	<i>here's one more- Pete lost in second round on 26th June 2002 and Roger on 26th June '13.</i>
	Experience story	Relating a personal experience (rather than an 'external' event)	<i>Needless to say, I removed all the embed code from the website and apologized.</i>
	Item-sharing	Referring to something one is about to show to other forum users	<i>Hello Mongs. In this thread i will show you my Mourinho-esque tactics i have tried to create.</i>
	Product experience story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relating one's experience with a particular product, service or entertainment (constituting the macro-theme of the account) Usually involves, and sometimes only consists of, some kind of assessment 	<i>missed it first time round but watched The Road to Coronation Street, last night on BBC 4 and thoroughly enjoyed it the woman playing Pat Phonex was a brilliant likeness.</i>
	Shared experience	Explicitly establishing a relation between one's own and another participant's experience	<i>I have noticed the same thing over the last 6 months or so.</i>
		Relating one's own experience to indirectly provide advice	<i>If I had decided to repair using MIG, I would have toiled for sure, my preference for O/A on these type of occasions made repairs far easier, one can dance the flame around, giving welder far more control on heat input, where with MIG, it's a quick burst and pray you don't burn through</i>

	Experience/ Advice	Relating an experience story which contains advice-giving elements (e.g. verbs like <i>recommend, suggest</i> ; modals like <i>should</i> ; structures like <i>if I were you</i> etc.)	<i>One thing to mention is that when you have an issue with a command, aren't sure the method to something or have a suggestion, they are only a phone call or an email away. (..). They are always looking to improve the software and suggestions are discussed with the users. I highly recommend this software.</i>
Knowledge negotiation	Functional subcategories		
Superordinate category description	Category	Definition	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing and referring to information • Passing judgements based on personal knowledge and views 	Deictic assessment	Making an (evaluative) assessment of a textual or visual referent present for all participants in the ongoing communicative situation	<i>Water's really nice, the translucent blue effect looks almost jelly-like. Transparent is okay, the teeny bit of tongue/mouth showing looks out of place on this one.</i>
	Diagnosis	Diagnosing/identifying a textual or visual referent present for all participants in the ongoing communicative situation	<i>I wonder if the smell is actually sulphurous, suggesting a sulphide mineral. But the density is too low for pyrite/ iron/ many other metals or metallic minerals</i>
	Knowledge representation (self)	Presenting information on a particular subject as one's own knowledge	<i>ive read on the internet that it is not wise to take if you are asthmatic.</i>
	Knowledge representation (other)	Presenting information on a particular subject as knowledge obtained from sb. else	<i>I had schema therapy and that helped me a lot and my schema therapists really pushed the social side of things, and I think she has a point that there's something social.</i>
	Knowledge/ Understanding reference	Referring to knowledge and information on a meta-level (i.e. talking about, rather than presenting, knowledge)	<i>Making games though, so I am pretty neck deep in related fields. There is really only one person you can trust with your personal information and that is yourself.</i>
Interaction	Functional subcategories		
Superordinate category description	Category	Definition	Example
Textual material performing interactive functions within and indexing aspects of the ongoing communicative situation in which speakers find themselves	Advice	Providing advice, which is identified as such on the basis of the presence of certain linguistic elements (e.g. directives, verbs like <i>recommend, suggest</i> ; modals like <i>should</i> , structures like <i>if I were you</i> , etc.)	<i>you might as well do it without spiralling into too many addictions.</i>
	Metadiscursive (Various)	Commenting on the ongoing communicative situation	<i>I'm sorry, I'm going to avoid your game (or at least what it seems to me)</i>
	Request	Directly or indirectly asking other speakers to do something	<i>Any assistance would be greatly appreciated in combining these functions into 1 profile.</i>

	Question	Request for information	<i>I'm not really sure where to post this as it just concerns injecting in general but seeing as the drug injected was heroin this seemed appropriate. Can a mod move it to the appropriate place if need be. My question concerns the colour of arterial blood.</i>
	Answer	Answering a question by another speaker	<i>If by numbers you mean the 3 digit tactical marking you often (but not always) see on the tanks: No.</i>
	Agreement/ Disagreement	Expressing alignment or non-alignment with something another speaker has said	<i>I see your point (not literally you understand), or whoever made it originally.</i>
	Speech act index	Indexing the pragmatic function of the following text	<i>Why do I want this game:</i>

Table 9.18: Functional profile of co-texts preceding NIs

9.2.2. Results

Determining how frequently these functional categories are represented by co-texts preceding negative self-identifiers (criterion for inclusion: L1 = declarative sentence), yielded the results presented in table 9.19 below. In the following, I discuss these results in more detail, presenting and qualitatively analysing concrete examples from my corpus.

Conceptual category of preceding co-text (L1 = declarative sentence)	To.
Product experience	67
Advice	34
Experience story	29
Metadiscursive (various)	26
Situation: Problem	22
Situation: Background	21
Knowledge/Understanding reference	19
Knowledge representation (self)	19
Opinion	15
Diagnosis	15
Experience/Advice	15
Situation: Seeking	13
Question	11
Answer	10
Deictic assessment	10
Shared experience	10
Assessment	7
Knowledge representation (other)	6
Situation: Decision-making	5
Habit/Preference	5
Item sharing	5
Request	5
Agreeing/Disagreeing	2

Speech act-indicating	2
Event story	2
Self-assessment	1
TOTAL	376

Table 9.19: Overview of contextual categories preceding NIs (L1 = declarative sentence)

As can be seen from this functional profile, the co-texts examined can most often be categorised as experience accounts. The most prominent representatives of that category by far are product experience stories (67 instances). This means that negative self-identifiers are a linguistic choice that speakers frequently make after sharing their experience with, and evaluating, products and services (of course, this could also be because reviewing products is a prominent practice on forums and many discussions examined here were taken from product forums). The second most frequently appearing type of preceding co-text identified in the analysis is advice (34 instances), followed by what I labelled “experience stories” (29 instances). Another type of co-text frequently appearing before negative self-identifiers are situative anchorings of the types “problem” and “background”, i.e., speakers often use negative self-identifiers after describing the general situation in front of which they position themselves. Co-texts of the type “knowledge/understanding reference” and “knowledge representation: self” also appear frequently: in a total of 38 cases, negative self-identifiers are used after stating what one thinks and reflecting upon what one believes to know.

Regarding relations of co-occurrence between particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers and co-text types, table 9.20 below shows the conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers following the most frequently identified types of preceding co-text, namely “product experience”, “knowledge representation (self)” and “knowledge/understanding reference”, “advice”, “experience story”, “metadiscursive”, “situation: problem” and “experience/advice”. The most frequently occurring conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers following these co-texts are highlighted.

Conceptual category of identifying NP	Pr.Ex.	Krep/ Kref	Advice	Exp. Story	Meta- disc.	Situation: Problem	Exp./ Advice
Characteristics (various)	9	4	2	11	5	2	
Expertise/Professionalism	13	27	23	7	10	8	8
Habits (various)	3	1		2	3	1	1
Preference (- <i>fan</i>) (various)	8	1	1	1	1	2	
Preference (+ <i>fan</i>) (various)	26	2	6	5	1	3	5
Roles (various)	3	3	1	3	5	4	
Usage, consumption and ownership	5		1		1	1	
TOTAL	67	38	34	29	26	21	14
<i>Abbreviations:</i> Pr.Ex. = product experience; Krep = knowledge representation; Kref = knowledge/understanding reference; Metadisc. = metadiscursive; Exp. Story = experience story							

Table 9.20: Conceptual categories of NIs cross-classified with categories of preceding co-text

As can be seen, contexts in which speakers describe their experiences with particular products and services are most often followed by preference disclaimers featuring the lexeme *fan* (26 instances). An example of a negative self-identifier from this conceptual category being used after a product experience account is 9.54 below. Here, a negative self-identifier is used to specify the speaker’s desired appearance of a car just after extensively relating their experience with it.

- 9.54. *Anyway, this is my white 180k 106 from the start [...] It looks and sounds awesome! And in typical teenage/silly child fashion, I found out it pops, so I've been driving past people and making it pop to scare them. Easily the best way to get myself pulled over Anyway, more photos. I haven't done TOO much, mostly just cleaned the interior and fitted a parcel shelf etc. Tomorrow night I'm going to do a deep clean on the carpet (Not fitted) and try to get that fitted nicely, possibly stick the B and C pillar trims on and generally just get it washed etc for FCS, and try to figure out why the bloody demist doesn't work. And I really need to lose the Saxo mirrors, **I'm not a fan.***

That preference disclaimers tend to occur after such product experience accounts suggests that, while speakers are hesitant to represent what they know as unproblematic, formally coordinating epistemic disclaimers with what they say is true, the negative self-identifiers they use in product experience contexts are more self-confident: negating having a preference for something is a powerful way of indexing awareness and liberty of choice. Examining other instances of product experience stories followed by preference disclaimers suggests that being or not being a fan of something is also associated with expert knowledge. Consider, for example, the following product experience story, which incidentally is an instance of two negative self-identifiers occurring in one posting – the first one positions the speaker as a layperson (they negatively identify as a motoring journalist and, thus, as someone possessing the expertise to write about engines), and the second one serves to specify their engine preferences:

- 9.55. *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*

This product experience story – classified as such because of the metadiscursive comment by the speaker, who frames their story as “just a few thoughts from a couple of hundred mixed-use miles” – constructs the speaker as very knowledgeable about cars: they refer to a variety of specific car brands and identify themselves as “logical competition” of the specimen they are talking about, but the negative self-identifier they use after sharing this experience – *fan of diesels* – is also followed by a recommendation constructing the implied addressees as equally well-versed when it comes to cars and thus capable of interpreting the significance of the given values (e.g. “28 mpg overall” – despite “torque”). This means that negatively self-identifying as a fan of diesels here positions the speaker as an opinionated car expert, albeit not a professional one, as would be represented, e.g. by a motoring journalist.

As indicated in table 9.19 above, presenting or metadiscursively referring to one’s knowledge is most often followed by expertise disclaimers; the same applies to co-texts classified as advice in my functional profile. The following example is a case in point. Here, the negative self-identifier is used to mitigate the speaker’s recommendation and followed by metadiscursive comment on the advice just given, labelling it as opinion and inviting other speakers to express their views on the subject, too.

- 9.56. *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.*

Negative self-identification with particular characteristics (such as *hero*, *prude* or *bad person*) is, in 11 cases, preceded by co-texts classified as “experience”. This could indicate that when talking about personal experiences, self-description and thus characterisation in the negative is more relevant than

negative self-identification with, and thus reference to, expertise and professionalism. Take, for instance, the following examples:

- 9.57. *Needless to say, I removed all the embed code from the website and apologized. **I'm no prude** (65 year old hippie and ex Navy) and I'm sure some of my friends would find humor in the 'suggestions' but this particular friend was not amused.*
- 9.58. *Then the final nail in the coffin was when my son became old enough to [do?] things that i liked too, he became my best friend and the love of my life, different than my wife, i became someone he thought the world of and wanted to be just like me, i was his hero. **I have never been a hero to anyone** [..]*

In example 9.57, the speaker's account of what they have done is followed by a character disclaimer, serving to fend off possible implications of their story. In example 9.58, the negative identification with the evaluative concept of *hero* is used with a slightly different function, negating not the speaker's self-identification as a hero in its entirety, but limiting his⁷⁹ hero status to his relationship with his son as previously related, in which he thinks he served as a role model. Thus, the negative self-identifier on the one hand marks the related story as unique and on the other hand serves to make the experience account more modest. The comparatively higher frequency of negative identification with particular personal characteristics in experience contexts suggests that, when relating their own experiences, speakers are more concerned with discursively managing the interpretation of their personalities and personal features than in other contexts.

When describing a problematic situation, speakers negatively identify as experts or professionals more often than they do with other conceptual categories, but since the sample of reference here is quite small, this relation of co-occurrence cannot safely be claimed to constitute a pattern. However, previous analyses presented in section 9.1 have shown that negative self-identifiers are often used in co-texts describing situations in which speakers are confronted with decisions, problems, intentions and wishes, which indicates that cases such as example 9.59 below are, indeed, a characteristic occurrence of the structure in focus. Here, an expertise disclaimer is used after presenting a problematic situation and is potentially relevant for its solution: if the speaker was a *programmer*, it would probably be easier for them to tackle the problem described.

- 9.59. *Hy. I got this generic TFT screen and I've been trying forever to get it working. I have no clue what to do anymore. I've followed this tutorial and I couldn't get it working because the X file isn't there to edit :P. **I'm no programmer** ... I would really appreciate some help*

Another potentially interesting – but, overall, not very frequent – co-occurrence of particular functional categories of co-text and conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers is between classified as metadiscursive contexts and negative self-identification with particular roles relevant in the situative discourse context. An example of such a situationally relevant role is *saint on this forum* in the negative self-identifier represented in 9.60 below. The reason why I consider this negative self-identifier situationally relevant is that being or not being a saint on a particular forum is a self-description that only matters on that forum (though, of course, it might be argued that if I identify as a well-behaving or ill-behaving person in the context of a forum, this has implications for my self-identity and -representation beyond the immediate discourse situation). The negative self-identifier in

⁷⁹ I am departing, in this case, from gender-neutral pronoun use, since I felt this utterance to strongly point towards a male speaker.

this example is used to modify the interpretation of a previously uttered critical comment about the addressee's behaviour on the forum. By negatively identifying with the category of forum saints, the speaker mitigates the face threat of their criticism (just to amplify it again in the subsequent sentence introduced by *but*).

9.60. *DF, you habitually go after people and habitually get disproved. I'm no saint on this forum, but your raison d'être here appears to be one of outsmarting, one which perpetually fails.*

Finally, another relation of co-occurrence between a functional category of preceding co-text and a particular type of negative self-identifiers is worth commenting on, namely that between contexts classified as metadiscursive and disclaimers of expertise. Regarding metadiscursive co-texts, it is possible to differentiate between intra-textual metadiscourse and extra-textual metadiscourse, i.e. metadiscourse commenting on the communication taking place on the forum, and metadiscourse referring to communication that took place prior to the forum discussion and between other participants than the speaker and addressee whose conversation I am studying. The following extract from my corpus is an example of intra-textual metadiscourse followed by a negative self-identifier:

9.61. *I will be very happy to share with everyone on this thread, I am not a doctor or anything but doing stats is not that that [sic] complicated.*

Here, a disclaimer of expertise is used after an utterance metadiscursively commenting on what the speaker is aiming or willing to do on the forum, namely, to share something, thus pre-emptively marking the content to be shared as lay content. This, once again, indicates that a key function of negative self-identifiers in the examined corpus is to epistemically mitigate what speakers believe, claim to know and exchange. Another example is 9.62, an instance of extra-textual metadiscourse which illustrates the tension between lay and expert identities in the data. Here, a negative self-identifier, used turn-medially by speaker B just before providing information they have researched, not only contrasts the speaker with the group of doctors in general, but also mockingly comments on the “helluva mouthful” of medical jargon which, it is implied, can only be understood by doctors (informally referred to as “discharge docs” by speaker A):

9.62 A: *The discharge docs say "ischemic stroke, mri showed right sided deep white matter and small cortical infarcts in a watershed distribution
CT angi and cartaroid artery showed no signs significant stenosis
I understand there are layers of brain that do different things, but my googlefu must be broken too.
If anyone can translate medical into english I would appreciate it.
Thanks*

B: *Hi
That's one helluva mouthful! The jargon must be useful to a medical professional, but it's just not English is it! I'm no doctor, so can't be authoritative I'm afraid. But here's a few definitions from the internet.*

Interestingly, both speakers agree that the cited diagnosis is “not English” and therefore needs to be translated. To help with the translation, speaker B, after using the negative self-identifier, presents speaker A with a list of definitions. When discussing the role of experts in affluent late modern societies initially, I referred to theories which see experts as mediators of knowledge, i.e. as persons who filter the abundance of available information, helping others assess the value and use of circulating

knowledge (Bauman 1987). In this exchange, B seems to be doing precisely that: they mediate between users of “medical” and users of “English”, drawing on information they have researched online. Hence, speaker B, while negatively identifying as a doctor and thus as someone possessing formal medical education necessary to understand the cited jargon, acts, *de facto*, as an expert.

9.2.3. Summary

The analysis presented in 9.2 examined the relations between negative self-identifiers and co-texts preceding them with no formal links to the structure in focus. By means of qualitative analysis of this textual material, functional categories were established and their frequency in this data subset was determined. Like the analyses presented in section 9.1, this analysis also sought to reveal if frequently represented categories of co-text co-occur with particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers in the examined data. The analysis revealed that sentences and short texts preceding negative self-identifiers often represent accounts of speakers’ experiences with particular products and services (67 of 376, i.e. 18% of examined contexts) and tend to be followed by preference disclaimers (38% of contexts in this category). Contexts representing or metadiscursively commenting on knowledge and information were also found to feature prominently (38 of 376, i.e. 10% of examined contexts) and are most often followed by disclaimers of expertise (71% of contexts in this category). Another context type that was found to appear often before negative self-identifiers serves to provide advice (34 of 376, i.e. 9% of examined contexts). 68% of the instances of this context type are followed by expertise disclaimers. These results support previous findings of this study (summarised in 9.4) which show that there is a strong tendency for negative self-identifiers from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism to occur in co-texts representing or commenting on knowledge and information, as well as a tendency for preference disclaimers to be used in contexts of speakers describing their consumption-related preferences.

9.3. Qualitatively studying negative self-identifiers in their contexts of use

9.3.1. Linking micro-pragmatic function and macro-conceptualisations

The present study has, so far, been concerned with studying fine-grained meaning differences between negative self-identifiers and exploring their relations with, and the functions of, their immediate textual surroundings in detail and across situations of usage. The analysis in Chapter 7 has shown that negative self-identifiers from two conceptual domains, viz. expertise and preference, feature particularly prominently in the examined corpus; the analyses in Chapter 8 and sections 9.1–9.2 of this chapter revealed that expertise disclaimers occur particularly often in co-texts representing mental and relational process types, expressing what speakers (believe to) know, and that preference disclaimers occur particularly often in co-texts describing speakers’ experiences with products. This, I argued, indicates that negative self-identifiers reflect speakers’ orientation to two related conceptual trends, which I referred to as *de-* and *re-*expertisation by informed choice.

De-expertisation is understood as the process by which the notion of formally accredited, ‘top-down’ expertise is simultaneously acknowledged (because it is made relevant) and undermined (as speakers negatively identify as experts and professionals) in online settings such as forums. Epistemic disclaimers are a micro-linguistic identification strategy by which speakers explicitly contrast their utterances or contributions with (what they consider to be perceived as) expertise in the situational context. This means that their use reflects speakers’ orientation to conceptualisations of (various forms and levels of) expertise in their linguistic self-representation on forums. The kinds of expertise circulating on online platforms such as forums, which connect people sharing particular interests, but potentially pertaining to superdiverse societies in a globalised world (Tagg & Lyons 2018), have been

the subject of recent scholarly debate. As discussed in section 4.2.1, the notion of expertise has been critically explored in terms of its role in interactions among experts and non-experts (Bigi 2011) and its reconceptualisation towards lay expertise (Williams 2014, Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020) in the context of a more democratic, participatory knowledge negotiation in digital discourse (KhosraviNik & Unger 2016). More specifically, studies have also looked at online communities creating collective expertise, for example in the field of IT (Coleman 2017). Research has also taken note of an ideological struggle around whose expertise is to be trusted in a risk society (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001), especially in a globally relevant political climate that has been discussed as one of anti-intellectualism (Merkley 2020) and with reference to antiauthoritarian online movements.

In online contexts, especially, which are marked by the absence of cues available in face-to-face interaction, trust is established through linguistically projecting particular identities (Seargeant & Tagg 2014). A crucial aspect of construing a credible identity online is authenticity, in the sense of a connection between the online and offline personae. According to Seargeant & Tagg (2014: 7–8), authenticity “acts as a baseline” for establishing trust in interaction with ultimately unpredictable, diverse and theoretically almost infinite audiences. On forums, where expertise based on various sources of knowledge (from formal education to personal experience) is being exchanged and re-negotiated in a general political climate of distrust, the importance of being honest and explicit about the epistemic status of one’s utterances is likely to be perceived as important. As my analyses have shown, epistemic management is one of the key functions of disclaimers of expertise. Beyond that, negatively identifying as an expert of some sort may also fulfil other functions on forums: not being an expert can serve to implicitly align with particular groups of non-experts, for whom other, more experiential and subjective forms of expertise may be of greater relevance.

Re-expertisation by informed choice refers to the conceptual strategy by which speakers establish themselves as authentic and, thus, credible, by drawing on other notions than that of formal expertise. As I have argued, lay expertise has become equally or even more important than formal expertise for advice- and support-seekers in online communicative settings, for example in the context of health (Taylor & Bury 2007, Barker & Galardi 2011), but also as consumers consult online reviews of products when faced with a buying decision (Vermeulen & Seegers 2008; Mackiewicz 2010a, b; Vásquez 2014). Against this background, negative self-identification as an expert can show speakers’ awareness of and affiliation with the lay audience they are addressing and create a sense of belonging to a group (of product reviewers, for example). Alternatively, the notion of expertise may not be explicitly referred to at all, as other attributes of identity could be increasingly important in the context of web forums. The discursive practices on web forums may follow their own interactional norms implicitly agreed on by the forum community and/or explicitly manifested by affordances of the site. For example, more experienced forum members might be accredited with more expertise than new posters, and the importance of individual posters’ status on a particular forum may be reflected by the very design of the site (for instance, forum members mostly have profiles indicating their status in terms of experience, popularity, etc.). Given that authenticity and, thus, trustworthiness, is seen as coherence between online and offline persona, the personal tastes and preferences of individuals interacting online may be more important for forum members’ authority. As the analyses of negative self-identifiers presented in the previous chapters suggest, negative self-identifiers are most often used to contrast speakers with particular preferences and, thus, manifest their awareness of the choices available in a particular situation (e.g., when making a purchasing decision). This means that making explicit what one does not like could serve to position speakers as authentic in the sense of having their own opinion that is based on personal experience. They could also interact in interesting ways

with other linguistic strategies of asserting expertise (as suggested, e.g., by Richardson 2003, Mackiewicz 2010a, Rudolf von Rohr et al. 2019). As the discussion below indicates, for example, self-representation as authentic and, thus, credible, can also involve using a playful, rhetorically self-conscious language style (de Lange et al. 2015), and thus entirely transcend the paradigm of traditional expertise as an indicator of trustworthiness.

In the following, I discuss two instances of negative self-identification in detail, one from the domain of expertise and one from the domain of preferences, to illustrate how these conceptual strategies can be accounted for when scrutinising language used in interactions on forums. This section bridges the gap between microlinguistic analyses and macrosocietal questions by providing an in-depth discussion of two instances of the focal structure that takes into account aspects of the online contexts in which they are used. It considers, for example, participants' roles and communication histories on the respective forums, their orientation towards norms of communication on the forum and potentially beyond, the goals of their postings and the beliefs potentially underlying the way they represent themselves in these discourse contexts (see section 3.2.6). The analyses also draw on literature on identity performance in the context of online forums (see sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2) and refer to the concepts of (lay) expertise and contemporary struggles around various systems of knowledge and sources of authority (as discussed in sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2).

9.3.2. Disclaiming expertise

In this section, I discuss an instance of a negative self-identifier being used by a speaker to epistemically frame the interpretation of their utterance, managing their identity in interaction with other forum users and orienting to particular conceptualisations about expertise relevant in this context. This exchange, dating from 2017, comes from the forum hosted by retropie.org.uk, a website that presents and offers a (donation-based) download of the software RetroPie, which “allows you to turn your Raspberry Pi, ODroid C1/C2, or PC into a retro-gaming machine” (retropie.org.uk). On this forum, registered users can have general discussions about gaming, “show off” their “custom builds, themes and splashscreens” (ibid.) and get help and support. This is thus a forum for people who engage in building and enhancing their own hardware and co-create, rather than merely consume, the games they play. RetroPie hence represents a highly specialised field of interest, and a quite advanced level of expertise in hard- and software is required to be able to even participate in the discourse on this forum. This impression is supported by the fact that the help and support forum asks users not to “post a support request without first reading and following the advice in <https://retropie.org.uk/forum/topic/3/read-this-first>”. The forum is a very lively one, with new postings appearing as I am writing this in December 2020. Users need to be registered to post, usernames do not generally reveal much – if anything – about users' offline identities (e.g. *gt700*, *DonkeyKong17*, *tsinapah*) and forum members use avatars, many of which are retro-looking, pixelated characters from games, such as the ones presented in figure 9.1 below:



Figure 9.1: Some retropie.org.uk users' profile pictures

Thus, the identities that users of this forum represent online show very little about (other aspects of) their offline identities. Rather, they linguistically and visually foreground those aspects that are relevant and community-building on retropie.org.uk: interest in gaming and programming (as well as

a ‘retro’ nostalgia for the latter). There is a contrast here with social networks such as Facebook, where, according to Page (2014: 48), it is likely that “interactions online influence the identities and interactions that spill over into offline contexts”, which is connected to a certain risk (of losing one’s reputation through a posting judged as problematic by one’s audience). However, in the context of forums such as the one provided by RetroPie, the focus is not on individuals and their real-life identities, but solely on gaming as an interest shared by forum participants (as I have argued in section 4.2.1.2, the notion of collective expertise is an important feature in ‘nerd’ discourses). At the same time, though, it should be mentioned that the shared interest of these users is one that requires a high level of expertise about gaming and programming gained through real-life practice and resulting craftiness (Coleman 2017: S92) – as the very fact that these avatars are mostly self-created indicates. Thus, while the risk of threatening one’s real-life reputation can be deemed low on a forum such as this one, the risk of losing face by coming across as an amateur in the forum community appears particularly high. This may be amplified by users’ awareness of the design of the forum: there are forum admins and moderators, who are likely to enjoy authority status, and the number of views is displayed for each posting.

Against this background, B’s use of two negative self-identifiers in example 9.63 below, at the beginning and again at the end of their response to A’s question posting, can be seen as disclaiming expertise at a very high level:

- 9.63 A: *Im running a raspberry pi 3 with Windows 10. I have retropie 4. I was trying to fumble my way around getting mames to work and in the heat of frustration I deleted my mame4all folder. How do i reinstall it?*
- B: ***I am no expert** but I didn't think the Windows 10 IoT core even had access to the GPU, so you cannot drive a display properly? I thought it just shared it's name and is not actually Windows at all. What are the benefits of trying to doing this anyway? I really don't understand why you would want this, with closed source software the learning stops at some point, you can't learn stuff about your Windows-Pi even though it was created for learning! Even the example code (read a temp sensor, display using webserver) they give on the home page starts with: "Copyright (c) Microsoft. All rights reserved." Intrnet of things on a Pi was sold to me once as a way to make it easier to connect things that are attached to the Pi (like sensors, motors, lights, etc) interact with a Windows 10 PC but not a way to run programs or apps. BUT, like I said, **I am no expert on this** and times may have changed, just thought this might save you time. Also, you really need to read this: <https://retropie.org.uk/forum/topic/3/read-this-first> before asking for help, especially with something odd like this.*
- A: *raspberry pi 3 has wifi and can be discovered on the network. I was moving roms to the rom folder on the SD card from my PC. I went to delete a rom and accidentally deleted the mame4 all entire folder. Could i just recreate a folder, because I dont think it would have deleted the entire emulator.*
- B: *Yes, I just don't get why you are using this IoT windows? It makes no sense to me and I would like to learn why you wouldn't just use the image provided. Do you think that without Windows, it can't be discovered on the network?*
- C: *@B no offence to OP but I'd be willing to bet that most people who are running Windows 10 iot on the pi would probably know the simple steps of recreating a folder if the got to the point of getting retropie functioning on iot ;)*

On the micro-level, the first negative self-identifier epistemically mitigates the coordinated clause introduced by *but*, which represents a mental process type and instantiates what I have referred to as knowledge representation/opinion in the analyses presented in this chapter so far. The speaker's claim is further marked as tentative by their use of a question mark at the end of the sentence. The second negative self-identifier at the end of their posting – introduced by an emphatically capitalised *BUT* – seems to serve as a final reminder to the audience of the low certainty of the claims the speaker is making in their relatively lengthy posting. B's second posting, too, represents this user as careful and modest towards their interlocutors. The user stresses that they “would like to learn” and comments on their lack of understanding (“it makes no sense to me”). The speaker is clearly aware of the epistemic delicacy of the question asked and their response, as they refer A to the manual intended, simply put, to avoid stupid questions being asked in the help thread – in a sort of post-script introduced as such by *also* after the epistemic disclaimer framing their main utterance.

The epistemic mitigation strategies used by B appear justified if we assume that B reflexively designed their utterance with the audience of other IT ‘nerds’, but also with the affordances of the forum *per se* in mind. As stated above, the fact that users need to be registered to contribute and have individualised profiles certainly puts a certain pressure on them in terms of their reputation among peers. Additionally, the user is probably aware of the relatively high number of views postings may get (this discussion, for example, was viewed 1,600 times; but there are also postings with 84,000 views). Looking at the language used in this discussion in more detail reveals that B's interlocutors linguistically represent themselves as experts by using a variety of strategies of asserting expertise (see section 4.2.1.3): the discourse is marked by the use of technical terms known to the community of Raspberry Pi users (e.g. *raspberry pi 3*, *retropie 4*, *mame4all folder*, *rom folder*). But there are also more self-conscious assertions of expertise in this discussion. C, a forum admin who apparently followed A and B's exchange, ridicules their assumption that a person capable of running Windows IoT on a Raspberry Pi might not be able to recreate a deleted folder. C linguistically expresses awareness of their utterance's potential to threaten the face of the original poster (“OP”) and B's advice, marking their utterance as “no offence”. At the same time, they position themselves as experts by referring to the steps of recreating a folder as “simple”, and, thus, judging A's question and B's answer as interaction among people with a lower level of expertise. Referring to the discussion of identity as contractual achievement (Lepänen et al. 2014: 112), this interaction shows that B's attempt of being helpful and, thus, representing themselves as more knowledgeable than A by referring them to the must-read-manual, is sanctioned by C, who does not accept this speaker as authoritative on the subject and implicitly confirms their non-alignment with the group of experts. The use of the negative self-identifier in this discussion thus suggests that all three interlocutors are aware of, and, in their self-representation, orient to, their perception of the generally high level of expertise marking the discourse on the forum. As B's careful epistemic framing of their posting and C's response suggests, asking the right questions and giving responses based on reasonable background assumptions about what levels of expertise can be expected of peers is important when performing identity on this forum. Theorising media ideologies, Gershon (2010: 284) argues that “[p]eople's understandings of both language and media will shape, although not determine, their communicative practices”. Referring to Silverstein (2001), she highlights that ideology underlies people's beliefs about what is effective communication. Against the background of a general sociopolitical climate marked by a heightened awareness of, and ideological struggle around, different forms and levels of expertise circulating online, it is particularly interesting that in online communities sharing a common interest and

concomitant expertise in a specific field, even minor knowledge differences⁸⁰ are linguistically recognised as such: it shows that these forums, representing communities of like-minded people seeking to jointly and democratically advance knowledge in a particular field, have their own standards of what represents expertise and authority of knowledge. These, at least in the case of the forum examined here, exert a key influence on what is perceived as appropriate communicative behaviour, with the must-read manual mentioned above formulating explicit guidelines on what questions to ask (and, in fact, even how to format and tag them). The use of the epistemic disclaimer discussed here can be considered a micro-pragmatic manifestation of users' orientation to these standards. As a patterned linguistic choice in similar discourse contexts, negative self-identifiers of this kind can thus be seen as highlighting developments in the social world at large, with supra-local, superdiverse communities of lay experts coming to represent key spaces for creating knowledge in ever more specific fields.

9.3.3. Disclaiming preference

The following exchange from AVforums (<https://www.avforums.com/>) features an instance of a negative self-identifier from the second main conceptual category the analyses presented in this thesis have identified, namely preference disclaimers. AVforums is a platform self-describing as “The No. 1 Home Entertainment Tech Community & Resource”, which means that it is a forum devoted to reviewing products online. As is the case on retropie.co.uk, forum users have to be registered to participate in discussions and have publicly visible user profiles, featuring their usernames (mostly aliases), providing information about when they joined the forum, how many postings they have contributed and how many reactions these obtained, as well as defining them according to their experience and authority as a poster by ranking them on a scale between “novice” and “distinguished member”. This already indicates that consumers' expertise is a defining feature of their identity as discursively construed and negotiated on this forum. At the same time, users also make use of signature lines to personalise their profiles, which indicates that they also exploit the affordances of the medium to represent themselves as individuals with their own preferences and beliefs. This, in turn, suggests that (at least longer-term) users care about their reputation among peers, and design their utterances in awareness of the rest of the forum community.

In exchange 9.64, speaker A negatively identifies as “fan of the Home Max Speaker”, a product which they report to have been looking forward to.

9.64. A: *I'm very much into Google and Smart home stuff, have a LOT of various Google/Next Smart speakers, Hubs, Smoke detectors and doorbells. Was looking forward to 'finally' a redesign of the standard Google Home speaker, and looks like we've just seen it. [personal opinion]*

I'd sad, as I don't like it. Looks like something with zero design, zero character, bland bland bland.

A band across it, a stripe, a groove, something, ANYTHING might have helped, but this just looks like nothing. Perhaps a bar of soap or the box something comes in? :(

I'm 100% sure it will sound better, but am sad if this is actually it. :(

Is this just me feeling this way?

⁸⁰ At least from a lay perspective – I am not an expert in [retropie4](http://retropie4.com) matters.

B: *I personally think it looks better than the previous Google home. It's not supposed to stand out and that's the point. It's supposed to be subtle and blend in rather than look like a "Smart Speaker".*

It's all personal opinion though.

A: *Yes, I can see that, it certainly does not stand out.*

In that photo, it almost looks like it's a box which might have some headphones inside. ;)

Honestly I'm not after much.

Perhaps just a little metallic band across it, in a similar tone to the fabric.

Just some small element of design that takes the edge of the fabric box look.

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 :)

Oddly enough that rippled dark matt blue wall behind it, looks almost exactly the same as the colour scheme in my back bedroom!

Speaker A is a “distinguished member” on AVforums, has published more than 12,000 postings since they joined in 2002 and received over 9,000 reactions. A is thus a long-standing member on AVforums, and they seem to place importance on their image on this forum, using a profile picture as well as a signature line, namely “Time Flies like the Wind, but Fruit Flies like a Banana!” – perhaps, as the pun suggests, to represent themselves as humorous. Providing cues about one’s social identity has, indeed, been found to be an important factor in creating an authentic and hence credible reviewer persona on online forums (Vásquez & China 2019: 193, Vermeulen & Seegers 2009). A’s use of the preference disclaimer is hedged by an introductory “to be totally honest”, and generally, both A and B use several linguistic devices of marking their reviews as personal opinion: explicitly, through using the metadiscursive labels [*personal opinion*] and *all personal opinion of course* :), in which the smiling emoji appears to serve as additional hedge, but also more implicitly through a number of verbs and adjectives referring to emotions, e.g. *look forward, feel, be sad*. Besides framing their own evaluation as subjective, speaker A also addresses the forum community, asking for their feelings about the product in question, designing a context in which reviewing products is a matter of opinion, rather than expertise. This is also supported by the epistemic mitigation expressed by “I’m not a 100% sure”. Mackiewicz (2010a), drawing on Beason (1991), argues that construing expertise is based not only on displaying knowledge, but also on self-representation as ethical in the sense of having “good intentions”. By rendering their evaluation of the Google home speaker as very tentative and emotional and showing interest in the feelings of forum peers, speaker A projects a modest, non-imposing image of themselves.

Interestingly, though, despite being explicit about the subjective character of their evaluation – which microlinguistically crystallises in their use of the negative self-identifier “I’m not a fan” – this speaker rhetorically stylises their utterance in a way that makes them appear as very self-assured about their subjective product assessment. The speaker, for example, uses a list of three (Henriksen 2019: 48) (“zero design, zero character, bland, bland, bland”) for their evaluation of the product. They also

employ a longer list with an end-climax (“A band across it, a stripe, a groove, something, ANYTHING”), which enumerates suggestions for improving the design of the product and is thus implicitly addressed at Google, as the producer of the speakers being discussed. Through stating that “anything might have helped” to improve the design, the speaker construes the task of product design as an easy one. Thus, they imply, on the one hand, that Google failed at even a basic job and, on the other, that they know better. Speaker A also makes reference to their familiarity with products from the same brand (“I’m very much into Google and Smart home stuff, have a LOT of various Google/Next Smart speakers”), which, according to Mackiewicz (2010a: 12), is another strategy of linguistically construing expertise in online product reviews. This suggests that in the context of reviewing products, negative self-identification with preferences is used to linguistically index the subjectivity of product assessments.

These assessments, however, construe speakers as experts. Judging from the exchange discussed here, not identifying as fan can therefore be considered to interact (a) with speakers’ discursive construal as likeable fellows and lay consumers ‘just’ representing an account of their personal (non-)preferences (orientating towards and seeking to manage their face in front of the ‘in-group’ of peers on the forum) and (b) with speakers’ self-representation as expert consumers acting as quite self-assured ‘product jury’ (orientating towards and thereby construing an ‘out-group’ of sellers of the products under scrutiny). As I argued in section 4.3.2, negative self-identification can both index speakers’ orientation to the forum community, serving to establish themselves as credible and likeable, and their awareness of the wider digitally mediated social context in which not being a fan of particular product features may index identification as an opinionated expert customer. The example just discussed, I think, displays both functions of the structure, thus showing how micro-linguistically stylising one’s identity can be related to awareness of categories of identification structuring meaning-making across web forum communicative settings.

9.4. Summary and implications

Chapter 9 presented functional analyses of two formally and functionally defined types of co-text: 401 sentences formally linked to negative self-identifiers (section 9.1) and 376 instances of sentences and textual units above sentence level immediately preceding negative self-identifiers without being formally linked to the structure of interest (section 9.2). These analyses showed that co-texts asserting or commenting on information and knowledge are the most frequent type of sentences and clauses formally coordinated with or super- or subordinated to negative self-identifiers, and that disclaimers of expertise and professionalism are the conceptual category of negative self-identifiers most frequently used in these contexts. In contexts describing speakers’ preferences, habits and principles, on the other hand, preference disclaimers are the most prominent type of negative self-identifier. The analysis of co-texts preceding the structure showed similar results. The most frequent pattern of co-occurrence of a conceptual category of negative self-identifiers and a particular type of co-text preceding the structure is between preference disclaimers and product experience stories; the second pattern identified is the co-occurrence of expertise disclaimers and co-texts asserting or commenting on information and knowledge as well as textual units serving to provide advice.

In section 9.3, I qualitatively analysed an instance of an epistemic disclaimer used on a programming forum and one instance of a preference disclaimer used on a product forum. The analysis of the former revealed that negative self-identification as expert not only epistemically mitigates the immediate co-text, but also indicates speakers’ awareness of the general level of expertise assumed to be held by members of the forum community, against the background of which it is important for speakers to carefully manage their self-representation in relation to expertise in order to maintain a positive

reputation on the forum. The analysis of the latter showed that negative self-identification as a fan can both serve as an index of expertise, constructing speakers as opinionated judges of product quality, and also function to align them with the forum community of laypeople exchanging their subjective experiences and (non-)preferences. Thus, the use of preference disclaimers, too, can be argued to point to speakers' awareness and discursive foregrounding of aspects of their identity relevant in the context of product forums. Expertise also appears to play an important role in contexts such as the product forum examined here, but its construal seems to be based on authenticity – in the sense of being a unique and likeable person with strong views – perhaps more than on other sources of credibility. In the next, final chapter, I critically discuss the results of this study as a whole in relation to the broader societal context and reflect on this research project and the insights it has yielded.

10. Discussion and conclusion

This chapter summarises and interprets the results of this study, critically discussing them in light of the wider social context. Thus, it answers Research Question 3:

If there are patterned relations between certain conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers and particular types of discourse contexts, what do these reveal about conceptualisations potentially structuring speakers' self-representation in web forums?

This study examined the functions of a formally defined expression with a variable, namely variants of the structure "I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP", as used by speakers on UK web forums. The idea was to microlinguistically examine a structure selected on the basis of observations about macrosocietal developments and thus to attempt to close the gap between analysing how variants of one particular utterance are used in local discourse contexts and addressing social research questions about identity and identification in a late modern societal context, in which beliefs about what it means to belong to a particular social group and to have a particular identity are assumed to be undergoing a transformation.

After formally and functionally theorising negatives and negative self-identifiers and carrying out an exploratory pilot survey to find if said structure was suited to examining negative self-identification, a corpus of 936 instances of this structure in their co-texts of usage was created, annotated and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively with the help of the concordancing software WordSmith 5. The analysis

(1) established a conceptual profile of identifying NPs in the examined instances of the structure (Chapter 7) (RQ 1),

(2) studied the formal appearance of negative self-identifiers in the corpus and qualitatively differentiate between, and quantify the occurrence of, the proximate co-texts in which they are used, seeking to identify patterns of co-occurrence of particular conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers and co-texts with particular meanings and functions (Chapters 8 and 9) (RQ 2) and

(3) critically evaluated the results of these analyses in terms of their implications for conceptualisations about the social world structuring speakers' self-representation on web forums. This critical evaluation is presented in this final chapter, after a short summary of the most important findings of the study as a whole.

10.1. Summary of results

To sum up the most important findings of this study and reiterate the answers to RQs 1 and 2, the conceptual profile presented in Chapter 7 revealed that two conceptual categories are particularly prominently represented in negative identifiers in my corpus, namely the category of preferences on the one hand and that of expertise and professionalism on the other. Most instances of negative self-identifiers assigned to these superordinate conceptual categories are constructions with the nouns *fan* (200 instances of negative self-identification) and *expert* (192 negative self-identifiers). The prominence of these two lexemes in the examined data, appearing as pre- and postmodified head nouns in a large variety of nominal phrases, was interpreted as pointing to two conceptualisations assumed to underlie the functions routinely served by the structure in the examined data, viz. de-expertisation and re-expertisation by informed choice. There is also a tendency for the conceptual

category of negative self-identifiers to thematically align with the topic category to which the respective forum was assigned. For instance, health expertise disclaimers were found to often occur in health forums, and many preference disclaimers were taken from product, leisure and gaming forums. This was interpreted to indicate that negative self-identifiers are highly situation-dependent utterances, indexing which categories speakers consider relevant in a particular discourse context.

Chapter 8 presented analyses of the formal relations of instances of the matrix structure and their co-texts of usage as well as the meanings and functions of certain co-texts (namely those with frequently appearing formal relations with negative self-identifiers). These analyses showed that negative self-identifiers are most frequently followed by co-texts representing a contrast to the matrix clause (397 instances). The structure was also found to be frequently added to its proximate co-text (162 instances) and marked as cause or consequence of sentences and clauses it is formally related to (158 instances). Transitivity analyses of these co-texts revealed that mental processes with / in the senser role are the most frequent participant-process configuration in all three examined context types (overall 192 co-texts formally related to a negative self-identifier). This means that in the examined corpus, the overall most frequent pattern of co-occurrence is between mental processes with / in the role of senser and disclaimers of expertise and professionalism (104 negative self-identifiers from these conceptual domains occurred in co-texts representing mental process types, i.e. they were found to be used in 54% of mental process type co-texts). Relational and material process contexts with a first-person Role-1 participant are formally related to negative self-identifiers in 125 and, respectively, 84 instances of the structure in use.

Chapter 9, then, examined these co-texts (mental, relational and material processes with / in Role 1, formally related to negative self-identifiers; 401 instances overall) in more detail to find which meanings these sentences and clauses create and, thus, which functions they serve (sections 9.1). The results of these analyses are that co-texts representing or metadiscursively commenting on the speaker's knowledge (overall 155 instances) and representing their experience (61 instances) are the most frequent type of co-text formally related to the structure of interest, and that in these co-texts, it is expertise disclaimers which are used most often compared to the other conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers identified. The analyses also revealed that when speakers talk about their preferences and habits or their emotive responses to persons, things and events, preference disclaimers dominate.

A different subset of data was then examined in section 9.2 to find if similar trends could be observed when considering more co-texts of negative self-identifiers. The analysis of 376 co-texts preceding instances of the structure of interest showed that if negative self-identifiers are preceded by a declarative sentence, this sentence or the textual unit it is part of can most often (in 67 cases) be classified as product experience story, and that preference disclaimers are the conceptual category of negative self-identifiers appearing most often after these stories (26 of 67 instances). Together, co-texts representing or metadiscursively commenting on knowledge and information represent the second most frequent category of co-text identified in this analysis (38 instances); they were found to be most often (namely in 27 cases) followed by disclaimers of expertise. The third most frequent category of co-text identified in this analysis is advice (34 co-texts) and in co-texts of this type, it is also negative self-identifiers from the conceptual domains of expertise and professionalism which dominate (23 NIs from these categories).

Finally, in section 9.3, I analysed two instances of negative self-identification in their situational contexts of use to bridge the gap between micro-linguistic analyses of the pragmatic functions of negative self-identifiers in their immediate co-texts and questions on the level of the wider social context. This analysis took into account elements of these online contexts of potential relevance for the interpretation of these instances of negative self-identifiers. It was found that in the context of a gaming and programming forum, negatively identifying as an expert can point to the speakers' awareness of, and orientation to, the generally high level of expertise of forum peers. With a view to an audience of fellow experts in a very technical field of shared interest, epistemic disclaimers can be used by speakers to carefully position their identity in relation to the kind of expertise important for their self-concept and reputation on the forum. The analysis also revealed that in the context of a product forum, negative self-identification as a fan functions as one of several strategies of construing expertise – a kind of expertise which, as the literature suggests (e.g. Seargeant & Tagg 2014: 7–8) and as this analysis also seems indicate, is closely related to self-representation as an authentic individual, who is self-conscious about their tastes and preferences. These results support my assumptions about negative self-identifiers being micro-linguistic expressions of forum users' orientation to expertise when interacting online. The form of expertise relevant in the discourse context of the forum they use appears to be both shaping their discursive self-representation and indexed by their use of negative self-identifiers.

10.2. Interpretation of results: the functions of negative self-identifiers

From a pragmatic viewpoint, it can be concluded that certain types of negative self-identifiers are used like stance markers, routinely serving the same or very similar functions as they interact with particular textual and situational contexts. As the analyses have shown, there is a tendency for certain thematically defined forum types to co-occur with certain conceptual categories of negative self-identifiers. For example, negative identification with lifestyle categories (e.g. as a *smoker*, *morning person* etc.) frequently occurs in the context of health forums, which indicates that speakers deem these categories relevant when talking about health issues and, thus, that they share particular background assumptions about the topics discussed on these forums. Self-representation in web forum discourse, it seems, is highly situation-dependent – what speakers choose to say about themselves appears to primarily depend on what they are talking about, and with whom, and different discourse contexts appear to make them linguistically index different aspects of their (situationally and discursively relevant or more permanent) identity. As argued before, referring to Vásquez (2014), this can be considered to manifest speakers' underlying assumptions about how to best represent themselves in the context of online forums. Some categories people contrast themselves with, however, appear to stand out transtextually, serving the same functions irrespective of the kind of forum or topic of the discussion, notably negative self-identifiers from the conceptual domain of expertise/professionalism and that of preferences. From a discourse-analytical perspective, it is these routinely used, pragmatized uses of negative self-identifiers which appear most interesting, as they point to socially shared conceptualisations which may have become so naturalised that they inform how people talk on a day-to-day basis, on forums and possibly in other discourse contexts as well.

As for disclaimers of expertise, they were found to be frequently used across forums to serve essentially the same function in similar co-texts. Notably, they are frequently used by speakers to epistemically mitigate information they provide and comment on, to reduce the hierarchy of authority to knowledge implied by advice-giving and to epistemically modify the interpretation of experience stories they relate on forums. Thus, they seem to function to create common ground among forum

participants, framing personal opinions and experiences as non-authoritative and thus helping to represent speakers as modest and polite. By routinely contrasting themselves with experts and professionals while discussing topics that would traditionally be associated with high levels of expertise, forum participants – if their utterances across texts are considered as a whole – represent themselves in contrast to what they perceive as ‘experts’. Thus, they create a sense of pertaining to a group of lay experts, holding other forms of expertise (Vermeulen & Seegers 2008, Williams 2014, Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020). If statements can be rendered more modest by negatively self-identifying as expert, this suggests that identifying as an expert could potentially be considered immodest and, thus, that the group of experts and professionals is discursively construed as superior (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1992: 57, Williams 2014: 1). This superiority, however, is undermined at the same time as negative self-identifiers are used in co-texts presenting knowledge, opinions and advice. This probably fulfils local discourse management functions – in-group solidarity is possibly felt to be stronger against the background of an implicit ‘other’ perceived as somewhat ‘out of reach’. This resonates with findings of research into lay expertise, according to which forum users tend to perceive the advice by their peers as very useful, considering it to facilitate interaction with actual professionals or even finding it more beneficial than counselling by accredited experts (e.g. Mattson & Hall 2011, Rupert et al. 2014). This means that my findings on the use of negative self-identifiers might also have implications beyond the immediate communicative situations in which they were used, on which I will elaborate in section 10.3 below.

The second conceptual category of negative self-identifiers that stood out in all analyses not only because it is frequently instantiated by the same lexeme, viz. *fan*, but also because it is used in similar co-texts across texts to serve similar functions, is that of preferences. While the functions of preference disclaimers of the type *I’m not a fan of Diesels* are not as easy to pinpoint as those of disclaimers of expertise, they were found to perform interesting functions across forum discussions examined: not being a fan of – notably – particular products appears to be a prominent strategy of conveying taste and the ability to make informed choices. It was found that preference disclaimers sometimes appear in highly technical co-texts, where they seem to act as indices of authority. I have argued that this, viewed in relation to the prominence of expertise disclaimers in the examined data, could indicate that in the context of web forums, self-representation in terms of non-preferences is a popular strategy of establishing credibility. In other words, while speakers apparently feel the need to epistemically mitigate their utterances (which, as we have seen, are often already framed as their opinion by virtue of being projected by mental processes with the speaker in the sender role), they do not hesitate to say what they do not like.

This, on the one hand, can be interpreted as reflecting the nature and purpose of forums, which prototypically constitute sites for discussing opinions among like-minded laypeople rather than sharing information from a position of authority (cf. Vásquez 2014: 66 on novel forms of expertise in online contexts). On the other hand, the analysis has shown that speakers in my corpus often negatively self-identify as experts or professionals in contexts of linguistically acting like experts and use preference disclaimers to establish authority of a different kind. This, I think, points to a more permanent, culturally conditioned, underlying conceptual struggle around knowledge, opinion and choice, and authority. More specifically, I think that the use of negative self-identifiers examined here can be considered to indicate a reconceptualisation of what constitutes reliable knowledge, with the boundaries between personal experience and choice and authorised information becoming simultaneously more pronounced (non-experts vs. experts) and increasingly blurred (if nobody is an

expert, what remains are experience and opinion) (cf. Seargeant & Tagg 2014: 3 on previous dichotomies of amateur and professional potentially becoming obsolete). In the following, I will elaborate on what I think is the key ideological issue at stake here.

10.3. Critical evaluation of results

The results of this study indicate that being or not being an authority on a particular subject appears to be a question implicitly present on numerous occasions, informing our conversational style insofar as we deem necessary to explicitly address it. This can be illustrated easily by informally consulting the web and googling the phrase “I’m not an expert”. The results point towards an awareness among the web community of the frequent usage of this phrase, mocking it in countless memes, some of which are shown below:

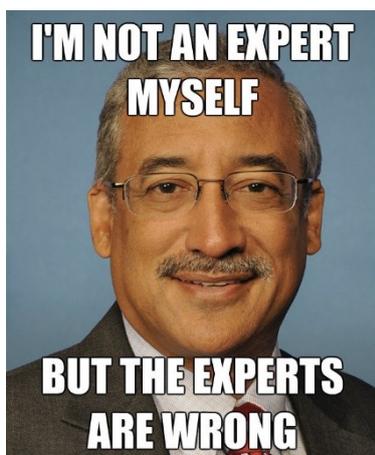


Image 10.1: Expert meme 1⁸¹

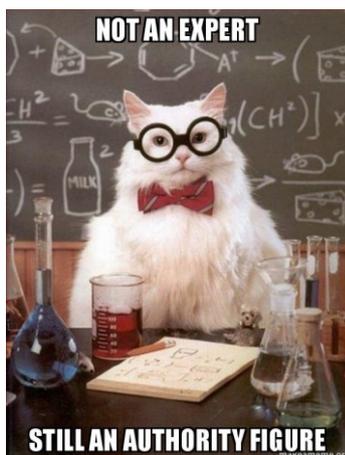


Image 10.2: Expert meme 2⁸²

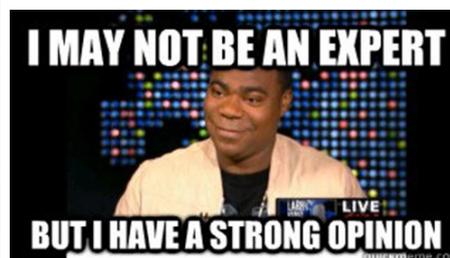


Image 10.3: Expert meme 3⁸³

All three memes ridicule people who, despite not being experts, “have a strong opinion”, consider themselves as an “authority figure” or reject expert opinions. This appears to reflect a conceptual struggle around authority and the question of what aspects of people’s identities can be regarded to substantiate views they share online: the issue, it seems, is a perceived conceptual contrast between authority based on opinion and authority based on expertise. However, the results of this study suggest that the line between these two notions is becoming increasingly difficult to draw in the context of online forums. It was found that while negative self-identifiers are mainly used as epistemic mitigators, indicating that speakers’ perceive a difference between expert and lay knowledge, negative self-identification as an expert or professional does not necessarily preclude acting like an expert: the study revealed, firstly, that epistemic disclaimers are used in co-texts representing speakers’ knowledge, hedging information nevertheless shared, and, secondly, that preference disclaimers are used by speakers to index awareness of options and thus expertise, especially when it comes to making consumption choices.

Beyond the data examined here, these findings can be related to a controversy about the notion of experts in the wider social context: on the one hand, even very small-scale decisions have become highly significant for people’s reflexively constituted self-identity and the amount and accessibility of information has exponentially increased, which is why seeking help from information mediators has

⁸¹ Source: MEME. Search all the funny memes and meme generator (n.d.).

⁸² Source: Make a Meme.org (n.d.).

⁸³ Source: Quickmeme.com (n.d.).

become more and more important. On the other hand, in the words of Jensen, Lahn and Nerland (2012: 2), “expert knowledge is generally contested and branded with uncertainty” because to be an expert does not necessarily mean to have formal qualifications – on the contrary, the emphasis on the practical relevance of knowledge for decision-making, the focus on action rather than contemplation, is what characterises the notion of expert in the first place. This, according to Grundmann (2017), has led to a paradox of reliance on and scepticism towards experts:

The emergence of the knowledge society has led to a proliferation of, and dependence on expertise. It has led to a loss of trust in scientific experts while at the same time generating forms of expertise that are not based on professional accreditation or scientific reputation.

Put more simply, given that there is so much to know and so much information that needs to be consolidated to create knowledge, being an expert in more than a tiny fragment of a subject is hardly possible, which could explain that people interacting online deem it necessary to highlight that they are not experts, but sharing informed opinions. At the same time, becoming an expert in a particular field does not necessarily require formal education, which could explain why negative self-identification as fan features often in discussions on particular products, serving to highlight speakers’ knowledge of, and experience with the items they are reviewing.

It also appears worth mentioning that this reconceptualisation of expertise in online communicative contexts seems to be prone to creating unease and controversy. For instance, the following extract from a digital agency’s blog indicates struggle around the criteria for knowledge to be considered valid and trustworthy:

My problem with user-generated content is that it gives the impression that everyone’s opinion is equal, and that’s simply not true. My wife is a highly trained ICU nurse, meaning that while I may think that the bone sticking out of my leg is nothing to worry about; I need to listen to her and go to the hospital. After all, she’s the expert. Our digital culture has given us all a platform where we can express our opinions to the entire world, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we should listen. In a world where everyone is an expert, nobody is an expert. (wedü: online)

As van Dijk (2002) explains, societies are based on shared sociocultural knowledge, i.e. common ground, which includes not only knowledge, but also evaluative elements as well as beliefs about knowledge criteria. This presupposed knowledge becomes empirically observable in the form of presuppositions in discourse, i.e. in the things we need to know to understand a text. Language users verbally indicate the status of their knowledge: as we have seen, negative self-identifiers in this study were found to often occur before sentences starting with such epistemic markers, e.g. *I know*. Thus, the most frequently observable function of negative self-identifiers in the examined data is to epistemically modify an epistemic index – people not only mark their opinions as such, but additionally index the authority status of their opinion. The kind of knowledge normally of interest in CDA is group knowledge, with a focus on group ideologies. This study examined a phrase used by people pertaining to various online groups, so the results can provide insights into conceptualisations structuring people’s self-representation across forum communities. That being or not being an expert is presupposed as a quality criterion for people’s opinions irrespective of their group membership or the topic discussed indicates that this structure has become normal to use, functioning like a pragmatic marker. This is interesting insofar as it suggests that expertise is implicitly acknowledged as relevant notion in various online groups, which could be seen as reflecting developments in the social world at large.

If we believe theories of populism (e.g. Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012, Montgomery 2017) society today is experiencing more than a mere opposition between groups with different views – we appear to be facing a more fundamental issue of distrust, blurring the boundaries between what is considered knowledge and what mere opinion, the effect of which might be an increasing deconstruction of groups jointly agreeing on and thus legitimising knowledge and a tendency towards individuals becoming their own source of knowledge and opinion. This can have both democratising and anti-democratic effects (Riedel 2017). In online contexts such as forums, individuals can unite to freely share and negotiate expertise that is “geographically dispersed, and interpersonally removed” (Vásquez 2014: 66). This knowledge can represent a contrast to traditional expertise (a notion which, as has been discussed, has been referred to as lay expertise, e.g. Williams 2014), which may contribute to the wellbeing of people interacting online, as shown by the example of lay expertise in the field of health (Barker & Galardi 2011). The views shared within these communities may also undermine those held by what is considered the ‘elite’, and this may have problematic implications, as shown for instance by what has been referred to as right-wing populist “echo chambers” (KhosravNik 2017).

The discursive foregrounding of non-expertise construes a difference not only between the online community, exchanging lay expertise, and the group of experts, but also fulfils face management functions within the forum community. Thus, using expertise disclaimers can serve to construe forum participants as modest lay experts, who carefully mitigate their views, and ignorant non-experts, who – as one of the memes above puts it – have no idea, but strong opinions. Regardless of which actual ideological backgrounds these language users may come from, the discursive perpetuation of a *mélange* of scepticism, modesty, and claims to truth can be conducive to a friendly and constructive atmosphere on a web forum. However, other corners of the online world not explored here, as well as recent political events, marked by distrust towards and instability of even the traditionally most authoritative political and legal institutions, suggest that a gradual loss of trust among and between members of society, manifesting itself in even the most mundane discourse becoming an epistemological tightrope walk, might not be supportive of a peaceful, democratic and constructive societal discourse (but see more on this question below).

But language is changing constantly, and language users appear quick to discursively respond to, and keep negotiating and restructuring, the norms of social interaction. As I have argued, the results of this study do not only point towards a struggle around expertise, but also indicate that other concepts might be becoming a more effective and less problematic strategy of face management in discourse. While self-representation in terms of authority might be increasingly perceived as skating on thin epistemological ice (and, thus, invite criticism by others – something web users might be increasingly afraid of in times of ‘shitstorms’ and the like), other strategies of discursively establishing trust in discourse might figure as the less problematic, and thus more effective choice. This, I have argued, is supported by research such as Mackiewicz (2010a), who claims that ethical soundness, in the sense of meaning well, is a key strategy for creating a credible online persona online. Indeed, as has been shown, negatively identifying as *fan* in often highly technical discourse contexts can be a powerful means of communicating authority – without having to take the risk of epistemological commitment. Anyone can be a fan, and anyone can be a follower – without having to justify that by reference to legitimised expertise, since the main criterion for legitimate identification as fan is the consumption choices one makes and communicates about.

According to Fellner (2016: online), “[t]hrough the building of communities, enthusiastic consumers of a certain piece of media have become much more than a passive audience”. She identifies active, rather than passive, consumerism as the first pillar of fandom, and community as the second. Both aspects seem to be reflected in the language data examined here: not only has it been shown that non-preference is a key identification concept in the online discussions examined, but the study also revealed that negative self-identifiers frequently modify metadiscursive comments, being used by speakers to index communicative self-awareness and strategically represent themselves as conscious of how their identity is reflected in, but also actively construed by, the language they use when interacting with other forum participants. The empowerment of fans, as ‘enlightened consumers’, can be evaluated from mainly two perspectives, I think; on the one hand, the fact that it has never been so easy to access, generate, spread, challenge and update information has enormous emancipatory potential and is mostly – and rightly – associated with the democratisation of knowledge and subpoliticisation. For example, dissatisfied online consumer communities have become the spectre of marketers, with NWOM – negative word of mouth – representing a popular research topic in the discipline (e.g. Kim et al. 2016). Also, studies on consumption communities such as the music file-sharing service Napster have shown that consumers can unite to cause major damage to firms, in this case the entertainment industry (Giesler & Pohlmann 2003).

At the same time, however, what appears as emancipation eventually operates under the same socio-political conditions that confine, namely, consumerism: Marketers have long recognised the potential of exploiting the content generated by online communities for strategic marketing measures (e.g. Wagner et al. 2017). According to Giesler and Pohlmann’s (2003) discussion of online communities like Napster, the emancipatory potential of such online consumer communities is paradoxical, because what makes it possible – communication about consumption – is also an act of “autopoiesis of the social form of emancipation”. As they put it, “you have to chase the king to ensure your status; likewise, chasing the king, you ensure his status”.

As already indicated above, undermining expertise and formal knowledge by contrasting them with personal opinion and experience could also be seen as problematic insofar as the mere reliance on emotionalised ‘fandom’ can have very real consequences: 2016 became known as the year of “post-truth politics”, which appears to rest on the assumption that “emotional truth does not need evidence of a scientific kind; a feeling is true, if someone truly feels it”. It explains, for example, why, according to Crouch (2017), “the advocates of Brexit in the UK could use ‘expert’ as a term of abuse”. Or, as Suiter (2016: 25) argues, in post-truth discourse,

appeals to emotion are dominant and factual rebuttals or fact checks are ignored on the basis that they are mere assertions. This combination arguably results in the emergence of swathes of expressive voters moved by dangerous rhetoric and nativism. The swirling impact of these variables has helped undermine the legitimacy of the liberal order, opening the door to illiberal forces and increasing the potency of populist and nationalist appeals.

The frequency of negative identification with expertise and professionalism on the one hand and with preferences on the other, and the functions thereof, is of course only one microlinguistic pragmatic phenomenon which can be interpreted in relation to these larger societal trends. However, because of the micro-linguistic focus of this study, the evaluation of its results in terms of their socio-political significance must remain tentative. Still, I hope to have demonstrated that examining how people use negative self-identifiers when routinely and informally interacting online can be an interesting starting

point, or important part, of studies in CDA. What people say they are not, it has been shown, can indeed say something about how they see the world, and exploring what many people, in similar discourse contexts and situations, claim not to be can contribute valuable insights into how discursive representation of self-identity relates to conceptualisations structuring socially shared beliefs about what can be said, by whom, in which situations. In the next, final section, I will critically reflect on this study as a whole, pointing out its contributions and limitations as well as potential for further research yet unexploited.

10.4. Contribution of this study

My study has contributed to the research of negatives in their actual textual surroundings (as demanded, e.g. by Jordan 1998: 706, cf. also Roitman 2017), providing insights into the pragmatic functions of the micro-linguistic performance of the structure under scrutiny. By framing this pragmatic study as a research project interested in the relations between local language in use and questions of interest in (critical) discourse studies (van Dijk 2009), my study has highlighted that discourse is not “outside the scope of pragmatics as a discipline, but rather [...] an integral part of it”, and that a discourse-pragmatic study can therefore be a fruitful starting point for learning about discourse. It has, thus, shown that “the pragmatics of discourse and the pragmatics of utterances are two complementary levels of analysis, respectively highlighting more global and more local aspects of human communication” (Barron & Schneider 2014: 1). By exploring the local functions of negative self-identifiers in detail, my study has kept a linguistic focus in the tradition of, e.g. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), whose “primary concern is [...] linguistic” in that they “are concerned to relate grammatical forms and discourse functions as explicitly as possible” (Edmondson 2014: 76). Thus, my study has addressed the demand for studies “employ[ing] micro-level methods to shed light on macro-level phenomena” to analyse online communicative practices in an “empirically grounded”, rather than “anecdotal and speculative” way, as voiced by Herring (2004b: 338). Indeed, the corpus-based approach adopted in this study has allowed me to identify patterns of using negative self-identifiers by means of a potentially replicable analysis (Adolphs 2006: 7–8). The analysis of corpora, according to Knight (2015: 20), is a particularly valuable method to learn about language used in digital contexts. My study has provided insights into utterance design strategies served by negative self-identifiers in online contexts and, thus, contributed to literature on identity work in digital discourse (Page 2012, Androutsopoulos 2014, Deumert 2014, Lepännen et al. 2014, Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017, Tagg et al. 2017, Bou-Franch & Blitvich 2018). The results of the study were discussed in terms of their implications for more global conceptual struggles around the question of whose, and what kinds of, expertise are to be trusted. Thus, the study has also contributed to research on the discursive construction of expertise in online communicative practices, which are embedded in the social world at large (Mackiewicz 2010a, b; Vásquez 2014; von Rohr, Thurnher & Locher 2018; Rueger, Dolfsma & Aalbers 2020). As, for example, Durán’s (2018) study on the discursive functions of negation in political speeches shows, negatives perform interesting functions not only in the context of online forums explored here, but their communicative effects can also be fruitfully examined in other genres, drawing on SFL and taking a corpus-based approach. The analysis of negative self-identifiers presented here has shown how this could be done, and thus could be a starting point for further research on the role of negation for identity performance in discourse.

10.5. Critical reflection on the study and outlook

While this study has answered several questions about negative self-identifiers as used by people informally interacting on UK web forums, it has also raised new questions potentially worth addressing

and demonstrated problematic aspects of and intricacies involved in exploring variants of a pre-defined expression in their immediate contexts of usage and interpreting the results in light of considerations on the level of the wider socio-political context. In this final section, I would like to briefly address some of them.

First of all, studying the functions of variants of just one sentence in use initially appeared relatively straightforward; so straightforward, in fact, that doubts were raised in the initial stages of this project whether a study of negative self-identifiers would even make for a whole thesis. Now, having worked with instances of the structure “I + copula + NOT + identifying NPs” for years, I can safely say that these doubts were not only unjustified, but that studying negative self-identification raises enough theoretical, methodological and social research questions to write several theses of this scope.

One of the most intricate issues that arose and has not stopped bothering me is the question of how a context-dependent linguistic structure (and in fact, any linguistic item as used in authentic discourse contexts) can be explicated by reference to, and argued to index aspects of, the immediate and wider textual and non-co-text, not to mention the question of how language relates to identity, and whether identity is a discursive phenomenon or pre-exists language in use, which, it has been shown, evades simple explanations. As I have pointed out in Chapter 3, the relation between language and (whatever is considered to constitute) ‘the context’ is differently answered by different approaches in linguistics, discourse analysis and the social sciences. For this project, however, practically deciding on how much textual and non-co-text to consider, based on which considerations, was crucial. Eventually, the analyses presented in this thesis only took into account a small proportion of co-texts of negative self-identifiers and non-textual aspects that matter for their functions. Even if this means that I have, by far, not analysed everything I could have, I hope to have shown that these questions – even if constituting Pandora’s boxes one might rather not want to open – need not be ignored. In relation to this, what my study has also shown is that an exhaustive account of all the functions of a form with a variable across a large number of texts is an impossible mission: because of the multi-indexical nature of context-dependent structures like negative identifiers, it is not really possible to conclusively say precisely which aspects of the textual and non-co-text of use they interact with – except, perhaps, if studied on a case-by-case basis, but not if a corpus-pragmatic perspective is adopted.

Using corpus-linguistic methods to study negative self-identifiers in use eventually meant setting up categories of negative self-identifiers and categories of context and cross-categorizing them. This is problematic insofar as setting up categories is an endeavour involving a plethora of theoretical and methodological problems. Categories are fuzzy, and putting natural language in use into categorical boxes always means taking analytical decisions and these, especially if taken by just one (human) researcher, are never entirely unbiased. I have tried to reduce my own bias by setting up extensive frameworks specifying many, possibly too many, criteria for categorisation and by discussing these frameworks at length, perhaps at the expense of including more analyses in this thesis. Establishing functional categories of co-text means assuming particular functions to be important rather than qualitatively exploring all functions that the structure may fulfil in interaction with various elements of the textual and non-co-text. Thus, pragmaticists who expected this thesis to explicate in detail the functions of negative self-identifiers in 936 cases, finishing on a resume about the most frequent functions, will be disappointed – I generalised, simplified, and what the analysis reveals are tendencies of particular conceptualisations to co-occur, i.e., it represents a conceptual profile interpreted functionally rather than a comprehensive, in-depth pragmatic analysis of all instances in the corpus.

On the other hand, it might be objected in my favour that corpus analysis always involves decontextualisation and simplification – and I have tried to reduce the simplification involved in categorisation and quantification by discussing several instances of the structure in detail throughout this thesis.

As this study does not represent a replication of any specific examples of previous research, it does not sit centrally within any one set of concepts, theories or approaches to linguistics or discourse analysis. This meant that I was confronted with the challenge of having to identify, from a range of sources, the most relevant material to support my analysis of the focal structure “I + copula + NOT + indefinite NP”. After reviewing a range of theories on pragmatics and discourse, I eventually chose a problem-oriented approach, “sit[ing] down with a piece of data” in the sense of Sack’s *Conversation Analysis* (1984a: 27), and trying to find ways of systematically analysing it. This, I realise, risks various pitfalls: not subscribing to one particular approach and theoretically and methodologically following through with it can mean departing from, and reducing the actual complexities of, elaborate frameworks. Thus, for example, Systemic Functional Linguistics is more complex than applied here, and transitivity analysis could be taken to greater heights; likewise, established CDA approaches usually come with methodological frameworks, often involving step-by-step guidelines on which analytical categories to examine in which order, none of which I have consistently used in this study; corpus linguists, too, might feel offended by the size and old-fashioned manual annotation of the corpus I have created and the lack of statistical methods used for quantification; CMC scholars might have looked for a more comprehensive characterisation of online forum interaction in vain. Among the points of criticism that could be raised are the following:

Regarding the data used for this study, a shortcoming of this study is that the data is already slightly dated by the time of submission – three to four years have passed since the postings were retrieved from the web. Online discussion forums are considered by many to be a dying medium, and if I were to start this research over, I might decide to use a currently more relevant medium and, possibly, an existing corpus of CMC as data for my study – not only because this would offer a range of convenient features, like existing annotation, control of contextual variables etc., but also because it would make it easier to position my research within the research landscape of applied linguistics, as other researchers could more easily relate to the data I have examined. On the other hand, the fact that the corpus for this study is self-compiled and -annotated can, I think, also be considered a strength: as I hope to have demonstrated, the very question of which data to use and how much of it to include to allow for adequate study of a context-dependent linguistic structure is interesting, and this thesis exemplifies one way of doing it. The annotation of co-text, too, is a much-debated issue in corpus-pragmatic research, because of the struggle between corpus linguistics’ reliance on form and pragmatics’ orientation towards function and, thus, ‘horizontal’ context. Arguing, eventually, for a functional view of language, according to which postulating a form–function divide is, in itself, problematic, I have tried to rely on formal aspects to make the analysis as systematic as possible, but considered larger textual units in terms of their overall discourse functions and looked at individual examples in detail to get a fuller picture of what negative self-identifiers do in real interaction.

A key question that arose when analysing the relations between negative self-identifiers and their co-text was which criteria could be used to establish maximally consistent, transparent categories of sentences, clauses, or even units above sentence-level. Using the transitivity framework provided by SFL to differentiate between sentence meanings appeared to be the most systematic approach to me,

but turned out very time-intensive, as the linguistic material I encountered did not always allow easy and straightforward categorisation. It was only after manually analysing the data in terms of processes and participants that I discovered some existing software for automatically tagging corpora for these features, namely the UAM corpus tool, which I would probably use were I to do this analysis again.

As already indicated above, another limitation, relating again to the way I handled the data, is that the results presented here by no means represent everything that could have been analysed about this corpus. Among the questions I consider worth exploring, but decided not to address in this thesis, is, for example, the relation between negative self-identifiers and turns by previous speakers: as explained, the structure was found to often appear turn-initially, responding to turns by previous speakers. It would be interesting to examine whether negative self-identifiers take up identifying categories mentioned by other participants, and if so, how often, and if there are patterns of uptake. Also, one question that might justly be raised in relation to my relatively detailed annotation scheme presented in section 6.2.2 is: why the detailed annotation and then hardly use the tags for the analysis? Admittedly, the corpus for this study is annotated more than would have been necessary to answer the research questions addressed here. Then again, I hope to have demonstrated that analysing a structure in its co-text with corpus-linguistic methods requires engaging in great detail with the data if the goal is to systematically explain it.

Another question left unexplored, but worth studying, is how precisely speakers represent themselves as knowledgeable in postings featuring a negative self-identifier: the results of my analyses have shown that speakers often say what they know right after using a disclaimer of expertise, but qualitative analyses of individual instances of this kind also indicate that disclaimers of expertise, as well as preference disclaimers, often occur in relatively technical co-texts. It would thus be interesting to complement the findings of this study by a more detailed analysis of particular contexts in which certain types of negative self-identifiers are used in order to get a fuller picture of how people explicitly and implicitly represent themselves online. The corpus could also be used as a starting point for studies intended to explore the use of negative self-identifiers on particular forums – as mentioned, many of the examined postings were taken from health forums, so someone interested in (negative) self-identification in online communities on health might find the corpus created for this study useful.

While the evaluation of the socio-political significance of my results is consciously kept tentative in this thesis, I do think that the study presented here opens up questions that could be addressed in future research: I have indicated earlier that I suspect that the use of negative self-identifiers examined in this study reflects more general conceptual struggles playing an important role in current socio-political developments, such as the tension between formal authority and what could be called consumer authority and, connected to this, a tension between traditional politics and alternative, populist, subpolitical movements, for the development of which online interaction is crucial. Understanding the relations between self-representation of individual social agents and larger societal trends by studying ‘unproblematic’, everyday language in use, appears an important addition to studies focusing on representations of and by explicitly political groups and actors – it might not always be useful to (just) look to politics to understand what moves society: examining the banal, mundane conversations of our daily lives might also be of important explanatory value, and as has been demonstrated, there is a lot more to a simple phrase than one might assume. For my part, I'm not really an expert on negative self-identification. As a matter of fact, I'm not even an expert on language or linguistics. But then again, as the title says: I am what I'm not.

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Appendix

The following appendices are, for reasons of space, provided online at

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kt7XuMbfbn7iWqavFf-vVsixXkF6axAX/view?usp=sharing>

Appendix 1: Thematic categorisation of data sources

Appendix 2: Functional analysis of co-texts of negative self-identifiers

- A. Mental process analysis
- B. Relational process analysis
- C. Material process analysis

Appendix 3: Results of pilot survey