Editorial

Introduction to section on dementia

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The articles in this section of the issue are as follows:

- Boyd H. Davis, Margaret Maclagan, and Charlene Pope: Digital outreach in online dementia discourse: A preliminary introduction
- Birte Bös and Carolin Schneider: ‘Typing with Dementia’: Online self-positioning of people living with dementia
- Sonja Kleinke: Constructing dementia in discourse: Family caregivers’ participatory online talk in public advice fora

Given the increasing number of persons living with dementia worldwide, and the impact of this disease both at an individual and at a societal level, it is hardly surprising that discourses centering around dementia also feature prominently in the digital realm. However, research regarding the pragmatic online practices of people living with dementia and their care partners has so far remained rather scarce.

The three articles at hand are the outcome of a panel on ‘Dimensions of dementia in digital discourse,’ held at the Second International Conference on Internet Pragmatics (October 22–24, 2020, Helsinki), which addressed this nexus of dementia and the digital sphere. The studies presented here share their interest in the linguistic construction and negotiation of identities in online discourses involving persons living with dementia and/or their care partners.
Boyd H. Davis, Charlene Pope, and Margaret Maclagan examine two multimodal sites created by caregivers for other caregivers, and one created by persons living with dementia for their peers. They find that advice offered online to caregivers differs from the interests expressed by caregivers themselves, and that persons living with dementia emphasize that the disease does not define them, but that they are still ‘real people’ with lively interests. Birte Bös and Carolin Schneider investigate processes of self-positioning on a public message board for persons living with dementia. They find that participants often reject the categories, characteristics, and activities conventionally ascribed to persons living with dementia, thus challenging dementia-related stereotypes and debunking the popular myth of ‘loss of self’ in dementia. Sonja Kleinke analyzes family care partners’ forum interaction in Talking Point, a public support platform managed by the Alzheimer’s Society (UK). Their description of persons living with dementia and their own care work contest problematic and reductive dominating mainstream discourses by exploiting a range of lifeward-oriented alternative discourses highlighting the complexities of their respective needs, achievements, and personalities.

The three articles from this conference focus on different aspects of life for people with dementia and their care partners. However, there are commonalities in all three studies. Although much of society, including some care partners, continues to position people with dementia negatively, people with dementia themselves often reveal more positive attitudes. There is an emphasis on living with dementia rather than suffering from it and indications of their ongoing creativity. Similarly, care partners emphasize the way that they continue to learn from people with dementia and from other care partners. Together, the three studies demonstrate how digital discourses by persons living with dementia and their care partners contribute to a more multifaceted picture of living with dementia.