



## **ONLINE ADVICE: GIVING ADVICE IN AN INTERNET TRAVEL FORUM**

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### **Abstract:**

This article aims at exploring the discourse moves of giving advice in the online context with an Internet travel forum as an example. The article first reviews relevant literature concerning advice and advice giving. Previous research on online advice giving is also reviewed in the following section. Then, the instrument for data collection of the present study is introduced and online messages, including problem messages and response messages are analyzed from different aspects, e.g. problem description, discursive moves in advice messages and how the initial problem writer responded to the advice-givers. The present study finally reaches to the conclusion that advice and assessment are the two most frequent advice moves in advice messages.

**Keywords:** online advice, travel forum, advice-giving

### **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, with the development of the Internet, seeking or giving advice is no longer restricted to traditional ways such as writing letters to the local newspaper, asking for suggestions from an acquaintance or calling the radio to seek encouragement from the moderator. Most people now turn to the Internet whenever they have a question or looking for a piece of possible advice to help them out of a dilemma. According to Locher (2006), the offers of advice on the Internet have stretched out to a variety of areas: psychological counseling; advice about relationships, dieting, improvement of one's sexual life, gardening, technological computer support; help on how to buy cars, support customers, selling products and etc. Briggs and Burford (2012) discovered that vertical portals were the most common place for people to seek advice online and quite a lot of users would also like to turn to university or government sites for help. They also found that 78% of the respondents declared that they would take the advice sought on the Internet.

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In the online context, people seek advice from not only experts but also peers and they would take the advice once they think the advice reasonable because the advice-seekers usually hold respect to expertise, experience, and authority of the advice-givers. As noted by Locher (2006), those who regard themselves as knowledgeable would express their opinions, and the advice seekers would take this as trusty and dependable.

There have been dozens of researches on online advice-giving in terms of health, romantic relationship among teenagers, divorce and etc. However, not too many studies have been conducted to investigate advice-giving in a traveling forum with China as the destination. The aim of this paper is to fill the gap and offer a snapshot of peer-to-peer advice giving from an online traveling forum, *TripAdvisor*. In this paper, I would highlight the stylistic features in the problem messages and advice messages in the current data. Then I would look at the advice messages in detail, focusing on the discursive moves in the advice messages. The following research questions would be answered in this paper:

- What are the discursive moves in the advice messages in the current data?
- Are there differences in terms of discursive moves in the current study compared to previous research? If differences are attested, what are the differences?

The hypothesis is that there will certainly be differences because the current data come from a traveling forum while previous research focuses on other aspects. The difference can be that advice as a discursive move would still be high on the top but other discursive moves such as general information are more important.

Based on the research questions, in this paper, I would first review relevant theories and literature on advice and advice-giving. Previously conducted research would also be reviewed as the basis and outset of my own study. Then I would explain my own study in detail, including the data collection procedure and the analysis method. Lastly, I would summarize my study and give an outlook for future research in this regard.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Advice and Advice-giving

To clearly understand advice-giving, the definition of advice has to be figured out. Oxford English Dictionary defines advice as "*an opinion that someone offers you about what you should do or how you should act in a particular situation*" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/advice>). According to Collins Dictionary, advice means "*recommendation as to appropriate choice of action; counsel*" (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/advice>). Hence, it can be inferred that to give advice means to give other people the opinion about what can be done to solve a problem or cope with a situation. Feng (2015) pointed out that focused on the problem, advice-giving is a support behavior based on approaches. As stated by Locher (2006), advice-giving is characterized by a combination of assessing, judging and directing. Here, to give advice does not simply mean to offer a possible solution, it also

requires the advice-giver to help the advice seeker judge and assess the situation, and then to give the advice seeker a direction in dealing with the problem.

According to Locher (2006), advice has been studied from different perspectives, for example, speech act studies, face-to-face advice in institutional contexts, peer- to- peer advice in medical contexts, counseling and advising in academic contexts, call-in-radio; computer- mediated advice and etc. Advice-giving, in general, has been investigated in a variety of areas. In pragmatics, as stated by Searle (1969: 67) (cited in Locher 2006: 3), "*Advising is more like telling you what is best for you*". With regard to speech acts, advice-giving recommends future action. In terms of the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson, giving advice is of great help because it "*can be a rapport-building strategy and a sign of solidarity or interest*" (Locher 2006: 4) in countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. However, in western countries, giving and seeking advice is generally considered to be face-threatening, for the reason that it challenges "*the hearer's identity as a competent and autonomous social actor*" (Goldsmith & MacGeorge 2000: 235) (cited in Locher 2006: 4). Hutchby (1995) (cited in Harrison and Barlow 2009: 96) stated that the potentially threatening nature of giving advice is in that "*it involves a speaker assuming some deficit in the knowledge state of a recipient*". Also, Locher and Hoffman (2006: 71) (cited in Harrison and Barlow 2009: 96) stressed that advice should also be looked at within a cultural environment, although it is seen as positive and encouraging in certain Eastern countries like China and Japan, it is regarded as face- threatening in Western cultures because "*it casts doubt upon the competence of the recipient*". A piece of advice can be formulated in various ways from the linguistic level. Locher (2006) listed the following forms: "should"- instructions; "I would do X" statements; indirect statements realizing suggestions; imperatives and questions inviting introspection and action. In terms of advice on the Internet, Locher (2006) summarized the three basic functions of information and advice sites from Griffith (2005: 556), namely, information dissemination, peer-delivered therapeutic/support/advice (such as self-help support group) and professionally delivered treatment.

## 2.1 Previous Research

With regard to investigating the cultural variations with regard to advice-giving, Feng (2015) analyzed the cultural differences in advising between American and Chinese university students using the Theory of Reasoned Action. Both similarities and differences in terms of attitudes, subjective norms and intentions of giving advice in the two research groups were attested. A comparatively stronger prediction for giving advice for Chinese than for Americans was shown by the TRA model.

Babaie & Shahrokhi (2015) conducted a cross-cultural study of giving advice between Iranian EFL learners and native English speakers by using Discourse Completion Test. Generally, the Iranian EFL learners and the native English speakers adopted similar strategies in giving advice. They found that compared to native English speakers, the Iranian EFL learners were not as well capable in the indirect use of giving advice. Also, the Iranian EFL learners were found not competent enough to give native-like advice in terms of the interlocutors' social distance and power.

Apart from the traditional aspects of investigating advice, researchers have also looked into online advice giving in different contexts. The advice can be given by experts who are professionally qualified in a specific area. As the case in *Lucy Answers* (Locher 2006: 10), it is “*supported by a team of health educators and health care providers, along with information and research specialists from health-related organizations worldwide*”. Advice can also be given by peers who assume themselves to be experienced and have knowledge on a certain topic. These advice-givers, as noted by Placencia (2012: 287), “*perceive themselves as knowledgeable or competent enough to provide advice*”.

As mentioned in the introduction section, online advice covers a large variety of areas such as health, family relationship and so on. Placencia (2012) looked into online peer-to-peer advice in Spanish Yahoo. She focused on the discursive moves and affiliation strategies of the advice messages. It was found that giving guidance and assessing the problem situation ranked the first two among all discursive moves. Also, the advice-givers tended to use various strategies to seek closeness, convey warm feelings and empathy, offer reassurance and encouragement, and express their humor.

Kim, Weinstein & Selman (2015) investigated teenagers' online responses to peers' difficulty in romantic relationship from an online forum. 440 anonymous responses in terms of loyalty, controlling partners, breaking up with the partners and violence in the relationship were collected. Kim, Weinstein & Selman (2015) found that generally, the advice-givers, namely the adolescents, offer recommendations. They would judge and probe the questions and show their warmth in their answers. Also, they would give advice based on their own experience. It was discovered that when it comes to cruelty in the relationships, adolescents preferred their peers to seek help, instead of communicating or ending the relationship. But to the other three kinds of problems in the relationships, adolescents mostly would often suggest their peers end the relationships. Moreover, posts from different genders are responded differently. Female advice-seekers are more often recommended to seek help and break-up or move on.

Locher (2006) conducted a study of advice-giving in an internet health column. On the website, the advice seekers could send questions about health-related issues and receive a response in the form of a “letter” written by a team of health educators. Locher (2006) looked into the content structure of advice letters, aspects of relational work in advice letters, the personal and public dimension of advice-giving in the letters, construction of the identity of the advice-giver, and the problem letters by the advice-seekers.

The discursive moves Locher (2006) categorized include greeting, assessment, advice, explanation, own experience, general information, disclaimer, apology, question, referral, metacomment, open-category, and farewell. Locher (2006) found out that among all the discursive moves, advice form was the most frequent which accounted for 36%. Assessment, in which general information was followed by advice, was also a typical pattern. In terms of the syntactic structure of advice moves, 52% were declaratives, 36% imperatives, and 11% interrogatives. Locher (2006) also found out that instead of giving directives, the advice letter writers tended to offer the advice-seekers options. Three

kinds of advisory moves were categorized in Locher's (2006) research: declaratives took up 52%, imperatives 36% and interrogatives 11%.

Morrow (2006) conducted a research in a similar setting as Locher (2006) by analyzing the problem description and advice giving about depression based on an Internet discussion forum. In contrast to Locher (2006)'s research that the advice was given by experts, in Morrow (2006)'s research, the advice is given by not only experts but also peers.

The messages include problem messages, advice messages, and thank messages. Morrow (2006) found out that stylistically, the problem message s and the advice messages were written informally. There is usually an opening, a symptom description and a closing in the problem message. In the advice messages, the informal use of language created a written conversation between the advice seeker and the advice giver. Most of the problem messages are not only to describe the symptoms, but also requiring for help. These contain advice to medication, especially the advice-givers' experiences with certain medications. This kind of request was formulated through 'or' type questions and yes/no questions. Also, short phrases such as "Any advice appreciated" (Morrow 2006: 541) were frequently seen. 'Please help' occurred with high frequency, according to Morrow (2006), this phrase could "*either precede or follow the description of the problem and sometimes occurred in both positions*" (Morrow 2006: 541).

Advice messages were written to answer the problem messages. Morrow (2006) found out that the advice messages were not solely advice. In many advice messages, the advice-givers tended to establish their solidarity and shorten the distance with the advice-seekers by taking different strategies: writing the advice in a rather casual and informal way; showing empathy and encouraging the advice-seeker; sharing own stories with similar symptoms; assuring the competence of the advice-seeker, telling them that they were not to blame for their situation and etc. In this way, the potential threat to the advice-seeker has been minimized and their self-image has been protected.

Harrison and Barlow (2009) went deeper into the relationship between politeness strategies and advice-giving in an online arthritis workshop. The participants of their study were asked to give each other feedback in terms of their weekly action plans online. Harrison and Barlow (2009) went through 455 messages during one month and found that the messages could be categorized under two main areas: encouragement and advice. There was a total of 229 advisory moves. Using Locher's (2006) three types of advisory moves as the classification, Harrison and Barlow (2009) found that more than 50% of the moves were declaratives, 21% were imperatives and 15% were interrogatives. This result is in line with Locher's (2006) finding that declaratives ranked the top in the advisory moves. What is more, Harrison and Barlow (2009) found that there were three distinct types of declaratives: general statements which are mostly non-agentive; agentive (usually second person) with modals; and agentive (first person) with a narrative.

Findings from Harrison and Barlow (2009)'s research was that by taking indirect strategies, in particular using personal narratives and showing shared concerns with the advice-seeker, the problem of face-threatening of advice giving could be coped with in

giving advice among peers. Because the use of personal narratives, according to Harrison and Barlow (2009: 108), “*serves both as an indirect strategy for giving advice, and a positive politeness strategy demonstrating shared concerns and experiences*”. This is in accordance with Morrow’s (2006) finding based on the online forum about depression. Also, Harrison and Barlow (2009) pointed out that as the feedback can be seen within the entire research group, the social distance has been reduced not only between the advice seeker and advice giver, but also the entire group due to the use of positive politeness strategies.

Morrow (2012) investigated advice-giving in a Japanese online divorce forum among peers. This research opens up the area of studying advice-giving in a non-Western culture from a linguistic and a cultural perspective. Morrow’s (2012) analysis contains two parts, the discursive moves of the advice messages and the relational aspect of advice-giving. The former includes the analysis of the content, form, and frequency of the moves and the latter deals with the self-presentation of the advice-givers and the relationship between the advice-givers and the advice-seekers.

The interaction on the Japanese internet forum is anonymous, which is different from other online advice forums where people seek advice from experts whose identities are known. Using the discursive moves developed by Locher (2006) with adaptation, Morrow (2012) looked into 26 problem messages, 53 advice messages and 28 response messages. He found that among all the 339 discursive moves in the advice messages, 137 were assessment moves, 81 were advice, 28 were explanation and 22 were own experience moves. Morrow (2012) classified questions suggesting action as advice moves, and others as assessment. 68% of the advice messages had an assessment as the initial discursive move (excluding greetings) and 21% had an assessment as the final discursive move (excluding farewells).

In terms of the relational strategies in advice messages, Morrow (2012) found that bonding, using interactional particles, interrogatives, empathizing and apologizing were the most frequent and characteristic strategies adopted to shorten the distance and avoid being face-threatening. This is similar with Morrow’s (2006) research on advice-giving in an online forum about depression that the advice-givers tended to show their concerns and empathy to the advice-seekers to build up a better relationship.

### 3. Data

#### 3.1 Instrument

The well-known traveling website, *TripAdvisor* is chosen as the instrument in the current study. Here is the brief introduction to the website:

As one of the largest travel websites in the world, *TripAdvisor* gives the travelers a chance to extend the potentials of their traveling experience. Users can select worldwide travelling lists by reading more than 760 million reviews on the websites. There are approximately 8.3 million reviews and opinions about accommodations, airlines, experiences, restaurants, and cruises. Travelers can turn to *TripAdvisor* for help whenever he or she has a problem with travel, for example, what to eat, where to go and etc. What is more, on *TripAdvisor*, travelers can find suitable hotels for them because the website

offers a service of comparing the prices from over 200 hotel booking sites. According to the official introduction, *TripAdvisor*- branded sites are available in 49 markets. Users can set the homepage language into their mother tongue when they want to search for information.

There is also an online travel forum on the website for travelers to interact with each other and share their traveling experience. Questions and responses from the travel forum will be the database of the current study. The travel forum on *TripAdvisor* can be regarded as a peer- to-peer advice forum because no expert or celebrity offers advice, while in other websites such as *Lucy Answers* (Locher, 2006), it is clear that advice is given by professionals.

Travelers who are seeking advice about their travel can post their questions on the forum and wait for the advice from others, who assume themselves to be knowledgeable in the specific area. Also, the users would offer advice based on their own experience. To post on the forum, the advice-seekers need to follow the forum guidelines: original, non-commercial and easy to read. What is more, instead of finding a piece of advice by raising a question, advice-seekers can also turn to the articles available on the website for help. In *TripAdvisor*, ordinary users are often under a nickname or pseudonym. They can also add a self-portrait and other information for example where they come from in their personal profile, but they do not have to do this.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

Morrow (2006 : 535) noted that “*advice-giving occurs as the second part of an interaction sequence in which the first part involves as the statement of a problem*”, therefore, the problem messages usually initiate a discussion and advice would be part of the discussion. Normally, in an online discussion forum, the text messages can be categorized into three kinds: problem messages, advice messages and response messages. Problem messages, as the name implies, refers to the questions raised by the advice-seeker. A problem message is usually followed by advice given by other users on the forum. As there are recommendations for numerous destinations all over the world on the forum, I chose questions about traveling to destination *China* as the focus of the present study. Questions are chosen randomly and they are raised by users to seek advice in terms of visa, plan for a one-day trip, airport regulations and etc. They are categorized under question messages. The advice given by other users is categorized under advice messages. What is more, there are responses to the problem messages and also to advice messages. Sometimes, the initial problem message writer would respond to other users for thank or adding some necessary information. These would be categorized under response message. Some users might ask a question or reply to another user’s answer under a certain thread, these kinds of messages are also categorized under response message. There are questions that receive no replies. These kinds of questions are excluded from the current data.

Hence, in total, the data in the current study consist of 86 messages including 11 question messages, 58 advice messages, and 17 response messages. Table 1 shows the information of the messages. What is more, there are 39 users in the current study. The

majority of them used clearly pseudonyms, e.g.: *JPDM*, *alwayschasingsunsets*. One exception was the username *ChinaTrain12306*, which is assumed to be the official account of the Department of Railway in China. Nine of the message writers wrote more than two messages, one wrote fourteen, two wrote five, six wrote three.

**Table 1:** The Three Kinds of Message Texts

Messages	N
Question messages	11
Advice messages	58
Response messages	17
Total	86

Each message is assigned a unique identifier. For example, Q1 stands for the first question message. A1-Q1 identifies the first advice message to the first question message, A1-Q2 stands for the first advice message to the second question message. R1-Q1 refers to the first response message to the first question message. What also worth noting is that for a certain question, users could not only give advice to the advice seeker, they could also discuss and communicate with each other in the thread.

The messages range in length from a few words to several paragraphs. The shortest message in the data was 10 words, and the longest message was more than 600 words. The majority of the messages were about 60 words to 250 words in length.

## 4. Analysis of the messages

### 4.1. Sample Message Texts

Here are certain message texts that could exemplify the data. The message texts are of their original spelling, punctuation, grammar, and etc. without any kind of reproduction. The name of the message writers, however, would be omitted.

(1) Q3

Headline: What is the best area to stay in Beijing?

From: name omitted

Hi-My family is making its first trip to Asia and I am a bit confused as to what the best area to stay in Beijing would be. My kids are 6 & 11. We want to be close to the action. Any other tips would be great!

(2) A1-Q3

From: name omitted

Hi, I recommend you stay in hu tong hotel will be more interesting and explore the real beijing life. But if you want stay i ciy center ,Novotel Xinqiao Beijing hotel is quite nice with very good location.

Hope your family have a good trip:)

(3) R1-Q3

From: name omitted (the initial writer of the problem message)

Thanks for the suggestions. By best I mean walking distance to restaurants, shopping and a site or two.

As can be seen here, Text (1) is a problem message with a greeting at the beginning. Then, the writer explained his basic situation with details of his travel plan. The first sentence contains an indirect request of advice (*I am a bit confused as to what the best area to stay in Beijing would be*). At the end of the problem message, the writer asked for advice directly (*Any other tips would be great!*). Compared to most other problem messages, Text (1)-Q3 is shorter in length but it included a greeting and a farewell, also, a quite direct request for advice and suggestions.

Text (2) is an example of an advice message with a greeting at the beginning and a farewell at the end. The writer gave advice by using *I recommend you*. Hotels with specific names were referred to in this advice message. One notable feature is that there are grammar and spelling mistakes in this message. Instead of *in city center*, the writer typed *i ciy center*. However, these kinds of mistakes will not cause misunderstanding.

Text (3) was posted by the initial writer of the problem message as a response to replies from other advice-givers. In this response message, the writer first expressed his thanks and then added some information for further advice.

As noted above, there are typographical errors in the messages. Due to the reason that the current traveling online forum is open to the worldwide public and the advice-seekers can get advice from the peers, the language used in the posts are rather informal and casual, which is demonstrated not only in terms of grammar, punctuation and other aspects. This is also noted by Morrow (2006) that in the online forum about depression where the writers described their problems and give advice quite informally. The informal and casual use of language includes the misuses of punctuation marks and space, the misuse of capitalized letters, typographical errors, creating icons and emojis by using punctuation mark, the use of number or letters instead of words, subject ellipsis, and etc.

For example, in Text (2), the :) at the end of the message is a smiley face created by punctuation marks that can help express the writer's friendliness. Here I would list some other examples to briefly demonstrate this point:

(4) R1-Q1.

From: name omitted

Thanks very much will research these.

(5) A5-Q3

From: name omitted

Wangfujing is probably the best bet, walking distance to Tiananmen/Forbidden City, it's a massive shopping street with a lot to offer, but if you plan on taking taxis, this area can be nearly impossible to find cabs, especially during the week.

(6) A7-Q3

From: name omitted

I second Xidan. The Grand Mercure is pretty decent.

In Text (4), instead of writing *I will research these*, the writer omitted the subject. In Text (5), the writer missed punctuation and wrote *it's* into *its*. Text (6) illustrates a typographical error that the writer typed *second* rather than *recommend*.

However, instead of making the message texts hard to understand, these errors create a rather relaxing reading environment and according to Morrow (2006: 537), "*contributed to a conversational tone*".

#### 4.2. Problem messages

As noted by Morrow (2006) that on the forum about depression, problem messages usually contain three parts: an opening, descriptions of symptoms and a closing. In the current data, there are also three parts in most problem messages: an opening, a description of the problem such as having no idea about where to accommodate or what to do in a one-day trip, and a closing. But not all problem messages had all three parts. Typical examples of problem messages that have these three parts can be seen in Text (1) (see section 4.1 Sample Message Texts) and (7):

(7) Q6.

Headline: 7 day itinerary for Beijing

From: name omitted

Hi all,

Myself and my gf are heading to Beijing for a week in Sept. can anyone point us in the right direction to get a detailed itinerary for 5 days or so? I've had a lengthy look online, but all seem to be quite dated - 10 years old etc.

Can anyone advise? Thanks a mil, Kally

In Text (7), the writer started a salutation to greet the users, followed is the description of their basic travel information and question. The writer then sought for advice directly by asking the question *Can anyone advise?*. After this, the writer expressed his appreciation as the closing and put a signature at the end of the problem message. This is the only case in the 11 question messages in the current data, because not all problem messages had all the three parts like shown in Text (7). While most of the problem messages end with a question mark for seeking advice, 4 problem messages end with expressions of appreciation, for example, *Thanks for any help, thanks* or *Thanks in advance*. 7 of the 11 question messages had a greeting such as *hello* or *hi* as the opening. There is one special case of problem message:

(8) Q1.

Headline: Must see places

From: name omitted

Any places I must see whilst in China so I can plan our trip.

Text (8) has neither an opening nor a closing. The writer asked for advice without any explicit expressions such as *Can anyone advise* or *I need help* and the writer also did not provide extra information, for example, how long he plans to stay in China or with how many people he/she is traveling together. Hence, when other users wrote their advice messages, they asked for further information. For example: *How many days are you planning for?*

What worth noting is that in one problem message about mandarin studying, the writer left his email address at the end of the message because he expressed in the message that he wanted to learn Chinese online. This is the only case in all 11 questions messages that the advice-seeker left his/her contact information in seeking advice.

#### 4.3. Discursive moves in advice messages

The coding system of discursive moves in the advice messages is based on Morrow's (2012) category adapted from Locher's (2006) discursive moves coding category. As Locher's (2006) category was used to analyze the advice messages in an online medical context and Morrow's (2012) system was employed to look into the advice messages in a Japanese divorce forum, certain adaptations have been made to make the coding system applicable for the current study. Discursive moves with detailed explanation in the current study can be seen in Table 2. Locher's (2006) original coding system can be seen in the appendix.

**Table 2:** Discursive moves in advice messages

Discursive moves	Explanation
Greeting	Greeting, salutation
Advice	Telling someone what they should do or think
Assessment	Assessment and/or evaluation of problem writer's situation
Disclaimer/Question	A special kind of assessment, in which it is pointed out that the information given is incomplete or cannot match expectations due to the sites limitations
Explanation	Explanation of a point just made
General information	General information
Metacomment	Text-structuring comments
Own experience	Personal experience of advice-giver
Open-category	Category for moves that do not fit any other category
Referral	'referral' can be considered a special kind of advice, in that it infers the questioner to professional, personal help as well as phone numbers, addresses, books, etc; as for 'advice', three different syntactic types are distinguished and the list option is available.
Farewell	Good-bye, closing

Adapted from Morrow (2012: 263) and Locher (2006: 62).

According to Locher (2006) and Morrow (2012), there are a variety of discursive moves in advice messages in an online context. Namely, greeting, advice, assessment, disclaimer, question, explanation, generation, own experience and etc. Also, sometimes the advice-giver would not only describe his or her own experience as a piece of advice but his or her relatives' and acquaintances' experience. In this case, this would be categorized under own experience. Here is an example of advising on mandarin learning:

(9) A2-Q2:

My son took the opportunity to teach English in an area of China that is not so over run with expat westerners. He then set out \*when not teaching\* to ONLY socialize with local Chinese and to try and only communicate what he needed in Mandarin wherever possible. He is living with a Chinese family. He's been there twice. About eight months each visit. He can converse in Mandarin fairly fluently but, has a long way to go as far as reading or writing in that language. <Own experience>

I think it all depends on how dedicated you are to learning Mandarin and how far you want to go with it. <Advice> In his case he plans to major at a Chinese university in Mandarin language and culture and wishes to study ALL his university subjects in Mandarin, therefore he needs a certain level HSK certificate. <Own experience>

I think going to China for a six-month teaching stint is an excellent way to learn some good basic Mandarin conversational skills provided you do not fall into the "only hanging out with westerners trap" It is very hard at first but, it's a much faster way to learn than any other way I can think of. <Assessment>

There are online programs you can use and books you can get to study. <Advice> Using those in conjunction with being there is a great way to do it. <Advice> I would not count on learning much on your own online however. <Assessment>

Good luck! <Farewell> I admire anyone who takes on learning Mandarin. It is a difficult language for most Westerners but, a VERY rewarding one! <Assessment>

In Text (9), the most frequent discursive moves are assessment and advice. This is the same in most of the other advice messages. What is more, many advice messages contain more than one discursive moves that the writers not only relate the question to their own experience, but also to general information.

There are cases when the information provided by the advice-seeker is insufficient for the advice-giver to give a recommendation, thus the advice-giver would ask a question for further information. For example:

(10) A2-Q3

From: name omitted

What does best mean to you?

Close to what action? Bars? Shopping? A specific attraction?

In Text (10), the writer pointed out that the information in the question message is incomplete and thus it is necessary to ask the advice-seeker whether he or she has specific needs. Messages like Text (10) would be categorized under question/disclaimer.

In the current study, there are a total number of 159 discursive moves in the 58 advice messages. Hence there are 2.7 discursive moves per advice message on average. The discursive move advice is high on the top of the list with more than 25%. The second most frequent move is general information with approximately 18%. General information refers to the kind of discursive move when the advice-givers offer basic information for a certain tourist attraction, the location of a restaurant and etc. The discursive move assessment ranks third, occupying about 14%. Compared to the situation that 7 out of 11 question messages start from a greeting, there are only 2 occurrences of this kind in the advice messages. In terms of the initial move and final move, same as the calculation method in Morrow (2012), when the message only has one move, the move would be counted as an initial move. Greetings and farewells are excluded in counting the frequency of initial and final moves. Advice ranks the top whether it is in the initial or the final position of an advice message. Assessment takes the second place as an initial move and general information the third.

What worth noting is that referral as a discursive move ranks the fourth. The possible reason can be that after the advice-seeker describes a problem, the advice-givers think that a website link with detailed introduction about transportation or accommodation can provide the advice-seeker with more information. For example, when answering a question about necessary Chinese phrases for a trip to Beijing, one writer gave the advice by simply putting a website link in the answer:

(11) A1-Q2

From: name omitted [www.bbc.co.uk/languages/chinese/real\\_chinese/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/chinese/real_chinese/)

This kind of advice is categorized under referral. The frequency of different discursive moves in advice messages and the frequency of moves in initial and final positions in the present study can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3:** The distribution of 159 discursive moves in 58 advice messages

Discursive moves	N	%	As Initial Move	As Final Move
Advice	43	27%	17	8
General information	28	17.6%	8	6
Assessment	22	13.8%	10	3
Referral	17	10.7%	5	6
Own experience	12	7.5%	2	2
Explanation	12	7.5%	5	2
Disclaimer/question	11	6.9%	8	1
Open-category	6	3.8%	0	3
Metacomment	3	1.9%	1	1
Farewell	3	1.9%	/	/
Greeting	2	1.2%	/	/
Total	159	100%	56	32

Moreover, the advice-givers tend to provide the advice-seekers with general information. A possible reason would be that general information about a tourist destination, for

example, the local population or the number of tourist attractions can help the advice seeker better make their traveling schedule.

In the 58 advice messages in this study, I found a total of 43 advisory moves made by the advice-givers. Harrison and Barlow (2009) classified the advisory moves in their research into three categories: declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives. This classification is also used to categorize the advisory moves in the current study. It was found by Harrison and Barlow (2009) that declaratives took up 64%, imperatives 21% and interrogatives 15% in all advisory moves. In the current study, declaratives and imperatives are still the first two types, occupying 74.4% and 25.6% respectively. However, there is surprisingly no interrogative as an advisory move in the selected data of the current study.

**Table 4:** Three types of advisory moves

	N	%
Declaratives	32	74.4%
Interrogatives	0	0
Imperatives	11	25.6%
Total	43	100

The examples below illustrate each type of advisory moves:

(12) A3-Q3:

From: name omitted

The sights and places to see are almost always far apart but staying in the city center will definitely help.

(13) A1-Q10

From: name omitted

Either take a taxi all the way or continue by metro line 2 after maglev.

As shown above, Text (12) is a declarative and (13) is imperative.

In the current study, the discursive move assessment refers to advice messages evaluating the problem message writer's situation. In Text (9), the advice-giver assessed the advice-seeker's difficulty in learning Chinese when he gave the advice. Assessment as a discursive move can also be seen in other cases. For example:

(14) A7-Q6

From: name omitted

That's too bad. I feel your pain. I'd be pissed too.

Text (14) is extracted from an advice message in responding to an advice-seeker who was denied a 24-hour visa-free transit at Beijing International Airport. The message writer of Text (14) first assessed the situation and expressed his understanding and

empathy. Then the advice-giver offered the advice-seeker some general information about airport regulation and advised him at the end of the message.

Referral, as shown in Text (11), is a kind of advice that the advice-giver refers to professional help like a book, a website and etc. Text (11) is an advice message that contains only a website link for the advice-seeker to check on. In more cases, a website link would be given along with the advice-giver's explanation. For example:

(15) A2-Q6:

From: name omitted

An interactive map that will give you how long to allow for travel, where to change lines & cost: <https://explorebj.com/subway/>

Text (15) is extracted from an advice message answering how to plan for a seven-day trip in Beijing. In the original advice message, the writer listed all possibilities for the advice-seeker with detailed information for certain tourist attractions and suggestions for accommodation, food and etc.

#### 4.4. Response Messages

As mentioned above, response messages in the current study include responses from the initial problem writers' messages of thank or the extra information he or she later added and the replies of one advice-giver to another under a certain thread. The following examples would illustrate this category:

(16) R2-Q4

From: name omitted awesome thank you!

(17) R3-Q9

From: name omitted

Hi, as much as I see they're most private transfer. Instead, I'm looking for small group tours (I'm a lone traveller).

(18) R2-Q8

From: name omitted

Did you find out what you would be doing during your layover? I have a 7.5 hr layover on Thursday 18 April (daytime) and need some ideas too.

Text (16) is a response from the initial problem message writer who expressed his or her gratitude to other advice-givers that have generously offered him useful suggestions. Text (17) is a response message written by the initial problem message writer. He added more information here *I'm looking for small group tours* so that other users would understand his needs and provide more suitable suggestions. Text (18) is a response message written by one traveler under an existed problem message. This traveler had similar problems with the initial problem message writer, thus he wrote his

problem under the thread for discussion, expecting advice from other users. There is one case that one advice-seeker shared his experience after taking the suggestions under the initial problem message he wrote. In that message, he explained his travel experience in detail and expressed his thanks to those who advised him. Moreover, he offered some advice in his response message for future travelers to the same destination.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current paper first reviews relevant literature in terms of advice and advice-giving. Then the paper focuses on reviewing previous research that has been done on advice-giving in an online context. The paper then highlights the data and the analysis of the present study. Data were collected from a travel forum and the messages were analyzed from different aspects, including problem description, discursive moves in advice messages and how the initial problem writer responded to the advice-givers.

The present study shows that in the online travel forum, there are different discursive moves in the advice messages. Advice, assessment, and general information rank the top three moves. This is in line with results yielded from previous research done by Locher (2006) and Morrow (2012). Locher (2006) found that advice and assessment were the two most frequent discursive moves from a medical forum where the advice was given by experts and Morrow (2012) had a similar finding that advice-givers advise and assess most frequently in their advice messages on a Japanese divorce forum where peers offered advice. Thus, it can be concluded that in online forums, whether the advice is given by experts or by peers, advice and assessment would be the most frequent discursive moves in advice messages. In terms of the advisory moves, namely declaratives, imperatives and interrogatives, the current research is in accordance with the one done by Harrison and Barlow (2009) and the one done by Locher (2006) that declaratives and imperatives appeared with higher frequency. In the present study, however, there is no interrogative as an advisory move.

Another point worth noting is the casual and informal use of language. The analysis in section 4 has demonstrated that there are typographical errors, misuse of punctuations, grammatical mistakes and etc in the messages. As explained by Morrow (2006), these kinds of linguistic phenomena are common in the online context. The errors would not disturb understanding but create a rather natural and conversational language setting.

Findings from previous research (Locher (2006); Morrow (2006); Harrison and Barlow (2009); Morrow (2012); Placencia (2012); Kim, Weinstein & Selman (2015)) show that the advice messages not only contain advice, but also encouragement and concerns to the advice-seeker. In the current study, however, expressions of empathy are rarely seen. A possible reason can be that the current study is based on a traveling forum, thus compassion seems not necessary for the advice-seekers.

There is a notable limitation in the current study. The 11 randomly chosen problem messages in the current data were written by travelers who plan to travel to China. Thus the results from advice messages and response messages under the problem messages

cannot be generalized due to the lack of a large database. But concerning previous research reviewed in section 2 are mostly about health or relationship, the results of this study extend our knowledge in how people raise questions and require advice, how people give advice and how people respond to others' messages in an online travel forum. For further research, the dataset should definitely be enlarged to reach to a more generalized conclusion. What is more, as the current study concentrates on discursive moves in advice messages, other analysis can be done based on the current dataset in future studies. For example, the messages can be used to analyze the politeness theory and face-threatening acts in a virtual environment. Also, analysis in relational strategies, as done by Morrow (2012), can also be considered.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

I declare that I do not have any commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in connection with the work submitted.

### **About the Author**

The author finishes her master degree at the University of Bayreuth, Germany and now works as a lecturer at a college in China. Her main research interests include second language acquisition, foreign language education, pragmatics.

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## Appendix

<b>Discursive moves</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
advice	Three different syntactic types of advice are distinguished with type-tags: - declaratives (,decl') - interrogatives (,int-a': inviting an action) (,int-l': inviting introspection) - imperatives (,imp-a': inviting an action) (,imp-l': inviting introspection)
list	If there is more than one piece of 'advice' of the same syntactic form, this is indicated by adding the attribute 'list'
assessment	Assessment and/or evaluation of the questioner's situation; an uptake of the questioner's narrative; support of the reader
disclaimer	A special kind of assessment, in which it is pointed out that the information given is incomplete or cannot match expectations due to the sites limitations
explanation	An explanation of a point just made; a type-tag indicates which element is being further explained, namely, 'advice', 'assessment', 'disclaimer', 'farewell', 'general information', 'metacomment', 'open category', 'own experience', 'referral'
farewell	Farewell, good-bye
general information	General information (however, if there is a personal link to the questioner's situation, then it should be labeled as 'assessment')
metacomment	Text-structuring comments (e.g., <i>as to your second question</i> )
open category	A category for moves that do not fit any other category
own experience	<i>Lucy</i> offers a 'personal' anecdote, despite the fact that <i>Lucy</i> is no real person
referral	'referral' can be considered a special kind of advice, in that it infers the questioner to professional, personal help as well as phone numbers, addresses, books, etc; as for 'advice', three different syntactic types are distinguished and the list option is available.

Extracted from Locher (2006: 62).

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