Pragmalinguistic Variation in Electronic Personal Ads from Mexico City and London

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Abstract

The goal of the current study is to analyze variation in the description of one's desired partner in electronic personal advertisements across two varieties: Mexico City Spanish and London English. Variation in the "seeks" component of the typical schemata "X seeks Y for Z" (Shalom 1997, p. 190) is operationalized in terms of its lexico-grammatical variation. The distribution of the different constructions employed to express the "seeks" portion of the personal advertisement was then observed across the social variables of sex and orientation. Results indicate that despite overall linguistic similarities between the two languages, social patterning of variation differed. The canonical variant was employed more often in personal ads directed toward men in Mexico City Spanish, while it was used more frequently in ads directed toward women in London. Additionally, same sex orientations were more likely not to include the partner description in London ads, while this difference was not observed in Mexico City personals. These results indicate that the variants have acquired different social meanings in the two languages and cultures. Results are discussed in terms of cultural and functional differences in personal ads between the two communities.

Keywords: contrastive pragmatics, CMDA, pragmalinguistic variation, personal advertisements

1. Introduction

Speakers often use language to demonstrate membership in specific sociocultural groups by displaying behavior that is associated with a group identity (Elliot, 2010; Reid & Giles, 2005). These behaviors can include demonstrating group-specific discursive practices, and often involve differentiation from the norms of the dominant system (e.g. Harwood & Abhik, 2005). Online personal advertisements have been shown to be an excellent forum for the creation of such linguistic practices. Research into online personal advertisements and online dating chat rooms has indicated that speakers use specific linguistic practices both in partner selection strategies (e.g. Cicerello & Sheeham, 1995; Hatala & Prehodka, 1996; Sato, 2008), as well as in the construction of sociocultural identities demonstrating membership in specific gender or sexual groups (del Teso-Craviotto, 2008). Additionally, recent research has suggested that norms for social behaviors and practices are established by members of specific online dating communities (Groom & Pennebaker, 2005; Gudelanas, 2005; Hardey, 2004; Smith & Stillman, 2002; Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan & McCabe, 2005). Nevertheless, despite the importance of linguistic practices in the construction of sociocultural group membership, there is a relative paucity of sociolinguistic and pragmatic analysis of personal ads that examines variation across social groups (see Groom & Pennebaker, 2005; van Compernolle, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c for exceptions). Additionally, despite the importance of sociocultural identity in the construction of personal advertisements, there is no cross-cultural or cross-linguistic research comparing personal ads from two or more languages.

As such, the goal of this study is to examine the pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic variation in personal advertisements in English and Spanish with the goal of observing whether speakers display differing discursive practices, specifically with regard to the norm. To that end, lexico-semantic variation in the "seeks" component of the canonical schemata for personal ads "X seeks Y for Z" (Shalom, 1997, p. 190) was examined in advertisements from Mexico City and London. This variation was then observed across social groups by sex and sexual orientation with the aim of observing which groups diverge from the norm and if these groups are the same or different between Spanish and English.

The present study is organized as follows: first, the theoretical framework and previous research on personal ads are outlined. Subsequently, the methodology is described, followed by the results, a discussion of the results, and finally, a brief conclusion.

2. Framework

2.1 Theoretical and methodological approximations

This study is based on and guided by three methodological and theoretical frameworks: variational pragmatics (Schneider, 2010), contrastive pragmatics (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989) and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) (Herring, 2004; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). The first,

variational pragmatics, can be considered an intersection between pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Under this approach, pragmatic variation is examined across varieties of the same language. Schneider (2010) defines variational pragmatics more specifically as the juncture between pragmatics and dialectology, where a dialect is defined not just regionally, but also socially. As such, the influence of social variables such as region, gender, age and sexuality on pragmatic variation is examined. Consequently, the current study fits within the scope of variational pragmatics. Additionally, under this approach, pragmatic variation is defined as variation in "intentional behavior" (Schneider, 2010, p. 240). As will be shown in the following section, the fact that participants have been shown to establish, regulate, and display specific behavior in order to demonstrate and authenticate membership in particular social groups (e.g. Groom & Pennebaker, 2005; Gudelanas, 2005; Hardey, 2004; Smith & Stillman, 2002; del Teso-Craviotto, 2008; Yurchisin et al., 2005) and the fact that personal ads have a clear communicative purpose — the seeking of a response by an ideal partner — lends support to the conclusion that variation in personal advertisements can be considered a form of intentional behavior. Specifically, by employing discursive practices particular to a certain social group that differ from the practices of (an)other social group(s) in order to complete the same speech act or event and garner a response from the reader, speakers are demonstrating intentionality that results in variation at the pragmatic level of linguistic analysis.

The second approximation, contrastive pragmatics, is similar to variational pragmatics in that pragmatic variation is examined. However, this variation is compared across two languages and cultures (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Schneider, 2010). Previous studies in these two fields have revealed culture-specific features of discourse, lending support to the claim that speech communities tend to develop culturally distinct interactional styles (see Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, for an overview of such studies). One particularly salient theme is the difference between communities with regard to directness in speech act realization (Blum-Kulka, 1982, 1983; Tannen, 1981, etc.). Nevertheless, the issue of universality (Fraser, 1985) versus culture-specificity (Wierzbicka, 1985) is still highly debated with regard to performing specific speech acts, conveying politeness, and mitigating the force of utterances. Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project attempted to resolve this debate by comparing the realization of requests and apologies in seven different languages and language varieties, showing several pragmatic regularities underlying these two speech acts in all the languages examined. The current project hopes to provide further insight into the aforementioned debate, through examining the realization of a particular speech act in two different languages.

Pertinent for this study, variational pragmatics and contrastive pragmatics examine pragmatic variation at five levels of analysis (Schneider, 2010; Schneider & Barron, 2008). At the formal level, a linguistic structure is analyzed in order to determine the various communicative functions this form may have. The analysis at the actional level is defined by a specific speech act or speech event, i.e. a communicative function such as requests, apologies, etc., as well as a larger unit, such as a personal advertisement. Its variants are the possible linguistic

manifestations in discourse that can convey the same meaning, function or speech act. The interactional level can be summarized as the identification of patterns of sequential organization in spoken discourse, including identity construction, speech act sequences, conversational openings and closings, etc. Topic selection and management are attended to at the topic level, specifically with regard to the ways in which they are introduced, maintained, developed, etc. in discourse. Lastly, the organization level focuses on mechanisms of turn-taking in discourse. The personal ad can be considered an implicit request that is understood as part of the discursive and situational context or through shared knowledge between the interlocutors (Searle, 1976). As such, variation in the "seeks" component of the personal ad, that is, variation in the partner description, can be considered variation at the actional level of pragmatic analysis since it is in the realization of a specific speech act.

The third approach, Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), is the main methodological approach to investigating Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and can be broadly defined as empirically-grounded textual observations of online verbal interaction (Herring, 2004; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). There are two major theoretical assumptions to CMDA: first, that discourse exhibits recurrent patterns and secondly, that discourse involves speaker choices. As such, the core objective of CMDA is to analyze options that a speaker has, or rather, the variation that he/she exhibits and how this variation patterns among different groups of speakers. Therefore, the study at hand falls within the scope of CMDA since its goals directly align with the two main theoretical assumptions, and therefore the two main goals, of CMDA.

A third assumption of CMDA is related to the medium of communication: computer-mediated discourse may be shaped by the technological characteristics of computer-mediated communication systems (the medium) as well as the communicative purpose of the discourse (the genre). Consequently, though it is not always the case that a particular medium or genre affects Computer-Mediated Discourse effectively defining both of these concepts is central to CMDA methodologically, especially when comparing different varieties of the same language. Specifically, a genre can be defined as messages or behaviors with a shared communicative purpose (Swales, 1990) — a definition that encompasses personal ads whose main shared communicative purpose is to seek socio-sexual relationships with another person. Meanwhile, the medium-specific characteristics of personal advertisements must be thoroughly outlined and considered when presenting results from CMDA. The details of the data source for this study are thus described in detail in the section on methodology.

This study will employ a combined approach to the investigation of personal ads. First, it adheres to the basic tenets and methodology of CMDA by analyzing variation in computer-mediated discourse across different groups of speakers defined by social factors. However, the variation examined will be defined in terms of the different levels of analysis outlined in variational and contrastive pragmatic analysis given that the variation that is analyzed and observed in this study is within the context of a specific speech act, the request for a partner. Although these five levels of analysis are designed for oral discourse, they will be

adapted to the study of electronically written personal advertisements for the purpose of this investigation. Additionally, adhering to both pragmatic approaches, the results will be discussed in terms of speaker intentions. Lastly, in keeping with the tenets of CMDA, potential medium and genre effects were controlled for using personal ads from the same website when comparing the two languages.

2.2 The personal ad

Personal advertisements are individually constructed announcements that have as their overarching goal the solicitation of online and/or face-to-face interactions from an unknown audience for expected socio-sexual relationships of different types (Holden & Tsuruki, 2003; Vlčková, 1996). With regard to structure, personal advertisements typically have three main components: self-image or description, a description of the partner(s) the author seeks, and an overview of the intended collaborative relationship (Coupland, 1996; Marley, 2002; Montini & Ovrebro, 1990; Shalom, 1997; Thorne & Coupland, 1998). According to Shalom (1997), the "simplified typical schematic structure of the ad" is as follows: "X seeks Y for Z; where X is the desiring subject, Y the desire object, and Z the desired relationship" (p. 190).

Online personal advertisements differ from their antecedents, newspaper or print personals, in that there is no limit to their potential length. As such, speakers hypothetically are able to construct self-narratives and describe their ideal partner more freely, as well as include other elements, such as personal anecdotes, that are not typically present in length-constrained print advertisements (Hardey, 2004; van Compernolle, 2008b; Yurchisin et al., 2005), thus making online personal advertisements particularly amenable to pragmatic analysis and CMDA. Speakers may employ linguistic and discursive resources to perform or construct a group identity based on social variables such as sex and orientation. In fact, research into online personal advertisements and online dating chat rooms has indeed indicated that speakers use specific linguistic practices across gender and sexual orientations (e.g. Elliot, 2010; Groom & Pennebacker, 2005; van Compernolle 2008a, 2008b, 2008c), in partner selection strategies (e.g. Cicerello & Sheeham, 1995; Hatala & Prehodka, 1996; Sato, 2008), as well as in the construction of sociocultural identities in order to demonstrate and authenticate membership in specific gender or sexual groups (del Teso-Craviotto, 2008). Specifically, recent sociolinguistic research on numerous linguistic phenomena has observed variation in personal advertisements across gender and sexual orientations, providing pragmatic explanations for observed patterns. Structures and languages studied include second person pronoun use and variable *ne* deletion in Quebec French personal ads (van Compernolle 2008a, 2008b), and variation between 1st and 3rd person self-reference in English (Groom & Pennebaker, 2005). Similarly, Elliot (2010), in a study of personal advertisements from Craigslist, a website used primarily for advertisements involving the buying and selling of goods, found specific linguistic practices for particular gender and sexual orientation combinations. These

linguistic practices included differences in length, relationships desired, terminology, and topic selection.

Correspondingly, recent research has suggested that norms for social behaviors and practices are established by members of specific online dating communities (Groom & Pennebaker, 2005; Gudelanas, 2005; Hardey, 2004; Smith & Stillman, 2002; del Teso-Craviotto, 2008; Yurchisin et al., 2005). For example, del Teso-Craviotto (2008) found that discourse in gay chatrooms rarely consisted of conversations but rather short, highly conventionalized messages from people looking for sexual partners. These messages usually contained very particular information, including the participant's location, the type of sexual partner they desired, and the type of meeting they were seeking (e.g. online, on the phone, in person, etc.). Additionally, she found that in all the chatrooms, common linguistic practices, such as username type, the age/sex/location schema, emoticons, and specific terms were used to index and authenticate particular identities. Del Teso-Craviotto (2008) gives several examples of users who did not adhere to the criteria expected in the chatroom, either through their username or the way they introduced themselves upon entering the chatroom, consequently indicating that they did not belong there. In one such example, another user asked the non-group member to seek another chatroom. While online chatrooms are not the same genre as electronic personal advertisements, del Teso-Craviotto (2008) states that the users' messages in the chatrooms that she examined seemed to share many of the characteristics of online personal advertisements, in particular the conventionalized format. Shalom (1997) also notes the similarly between online dating chatrooms and personal ads.

In terms of research specifically examining Spanish personal advertisements, to the author's knowledge, only two previous studies have been conducted. These two studies investigated discursive strategies and content in print personal advertisements and did not analyze the variation in linguistic practices between sexes or sexual orientations. The first, Herrero Cecilia (2000) analyzed a corpus of French and Spanish print personal advertisements in terms of their comparison to epistolary discourse, in particular, historical love letters. He found that although the personal advertisements lacked the formal characteristics of epistolary discourse, the rhetorical and discursive strategies employed by authors of the personal advertisements were similar to those in historical love letters, given that the writer must present personal and private information to their addressee in a positive or convincing manner in order to establish a relationship with them. The second study, Gil-Burmann, Peláez and Sánchez (2002), examined 7,415 print personal advertisements in Spanish in order to determine mate choice preferences among men and women. The authors found that men and women displayed different mate preferences and that these preferences were mediated by age. Women under 40 years of age highlighted attractiveness as a key component in a partner while women over 40 emphasized socioeconomic status. On the other hand, men of all ages preferred physical attractiveness.

In all, this research demonstrates that in electronic personal advertisements and online dating chatrooms various linguistic structures are used to construct and authenticate sociocultural group membership and to differentiate one specific

group from other groups. However, variation at the actional level of pragmatics has not previously been examined for personal advertisements across sexes and sexual orientations. Additionally, the social patterning of variation in personal advertisements has not been compared across two languages. As such, this study addresses the aforementioned gaps in previous literature by examining the variation in the "seeks" component of the canonical schema "X seeks Y for Z" (Shalom, 1997, p. 190) across two languages, London English and Mexico City Spanish. The research questions are as follows:

(1) What are the variable lexico-grammatical items employed in the "seeks" component of the canonical personal ad schema "X seeks Y for Z"?

(2) How do these items pattern socially across sex and sexual orientation within Mexico City Spanish and London English?

(3) How does the social variation compare across the two languages?

3. Method

3.1 Dependent variable

As previously mentioned, the focus of the present study is the realization of a speech act: specifically, the description of what the speaker "seeks" in his/her partner. This type of speech act is a directive (Searle, 1976), which can be defined as when the speaker expects the listener to perform an action as a response. Examples of directive speech acts include asking a question (1a), making a request (1b), issuing an invitation (1c)[1] (Qadir & Riloff, 2011; Searle, 1976), or the variable under study (1d), which can be considered an implicit request. Implicit requests are those that do not directly ask the hearer to perform a task, yet the request is understood as part of the discursive or situational context or shared knowledge between the interlocutors (Searle, 1976). Since personal ads are directed to a potential reader who has the characteristics in real life outlined by the poster in a virtual context, there is an implicit request for the hearer to contact the speaker if he/she possesses these attributes.

(1) a. **Do you want me to cook dinner?**
    b. **Could I get a #5 meal with large fries?**
    c. **Would you like to join me for a movie?**
    d. **Ando en busca de una dama, chica o mujer, entre los 20 y 32 años, que sea del Estado de México o DF.**
       'I'm looking for a lady, girl or woman, between 20 and 32-years-old, who's from the State of Mexico or DF.' (DF.MSF.5)

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[1] Examples (1a-c) were fabricated by the author as examples of the directives described. Example (1d) is from the corpus used for this study. The first two letters indicate the place of origin of the speaker (DF= Mexico City; LN= London), the next 3 letters are the gender/orientation groups, and the number is the speaker number.

As Shalom (1997) points outs, the traditional schema for the personal ad is "X seeks Y for Z", wherein Y represents the desired partner and the verb 'seeks' represents the implicit request. The dependent variable for this study will be defined as variation in the request component, which is often a verbal construction, as in (2a-d)[2]. Here variation is seen in the lexical verbal item used, which ranges from the traditional verb meaning 'to seek', *buscar* in Spanish, to other verbs such as 'to like' and 'to wish' (*gustar* and *desear* in Spanish). For the purposes of this study, a verbal construction will be defined as the presence of a verb or a sequence of two verbs that are employed in the main clause of the directive. However, this definition does not encompass all possible realizations. Often, the verb is left out, which will be called ellipsis in this study (2e), or simply a preposition is used before the description of the desired partner. In some of these cases, there may be a verb present that is used to introduce the type of relationship desired, while simply a preposition is used later to introduce the type of partner desired. Thus, the preposition category refers to the form used directly before the partner description to introduce the description (2f). Lastly, some personal advertisements lack the speech act all together, such as (2g). This type of variation will be termed the lexico-grammatical variants of the partner description.

(2) a. **Busco cadete (hombre) del Heroico Colegio Militar para amistad y fines de noviazgo.**
'I'm looking for a cadet from the Heroic Military School for friendship and relationship purposes.' (DF.FSM4)

   b. **Deseo conocer hombre profesionista soltero y/o divorciado (NO SEPARADOS) de 40-42.**
'I want to meet a single or divorced professional man (NOT SEPARATED) from 40-42.' (DF.FSF.7)

   c. **Hola, me gustaria conocer un cadete del Heroico Colegio Militar, para amistad y posible noviazgo.**
'Hi, I would like to meet a cadet from the Heroic Military College for friendship and possible relationship.' (DF.FSM.3)

   d. **Soy una linda profesionista, de 34 años que busca a una persona para relación seria, quiera algo formal, no sexo, no juegos, primero amistad.**
'I'm a pretty professional, 34 years-old that is looking for a person for a serious relationship, who wants something formal, no sex, no games, first friendship.' (DF.FSF.13)

   e. **Un hombre alto mas de 1.75 robusto trabajador Fiel hogareño de carácter.**
'A tall man, taller than 1.75 [meters], hard worker, faithful, with a domestic character.' (DF.MSM.4)

   f. **Hombre soltero joven maduro de 30 años para mujer bonita simpatica y atractiva soltera.**

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[2] Spelling variations and grammar errors, as well as spacing, capitalization and punctuation were maintained in their original posted form in the examples throughout the paper.

'Single, mature, young man, 30 years old, for a lovely, sweet,
attractive, single women.' (DF.MSF.68)

g. **No te arrepentiras te lo aseguro se vale de todo.**
'You will not regret. I assure you it's worth it.' (DF.FSM.49)

Since this variable has not been examined in prior research, and since the goal of
the study is to examine the variation observed in the directive 'seeks', categories
for the dependent variable were not imposed before the study. Rather, the personal
ads were read and sorted into different categories based on the variants observed.
This approach was adapted from the bottom-up approach to Discourse Analysis,
which analyzes discourse first and categorizes it according to regularities or
patterns found in the discourse during the analysis (Biber, Connor, & Upton,
2007). The coding process was completed for both the London and Mexico City
data sets, resulting in ten final categories for verb lexical type. These categories
are displayed in Table 1 below with an example in each language. The English
example is provided in the first line of each cell, while a Spanish example is
provided in the second line.

Table 1. Coding for lexico-grammatical item in partner's description

Preposition + description	a) Accomodate in hackney for clean and discreet guys (LN.MSM.19) b) **Quiero entablar una bonita relación con un varón de 52 a 60 años** (DF.FSM.25) 'I would like to strike up a beautiful relationship with a man 52 to 60 years-old.'
'Want', 'desire', 'hope', 'wish', 'prefer', etc. (Sp. *Querer, desear, esperar, preferir*, etc.)	a) Hopeing to meet a slim attractive black female (LN.MSF.29) b) **Mi roll es pasivo espero en contrar un activo d 20 a37años para algo bien** (DF.MSM.1) 'My role is passive. I hope to find an active male that is 20 to 37 years-old for something good.'
'Look', 'seek' (Sp. *buscar*)	a) I am a professional men seeking a lady for serious relationship, white blue eyes, atletic, not a top model but with a big heart (LN.MSF.17) b) **Activo busco un chico pasivo para relacion formal** (DF.MSM.19) "Active male looking for a passive male for a formal relationship"
'Like', 'love' (Sp. *gustar, encantar*)	a) LIKE TO MEET A MATURE WHITE ENGLISH SINGLE MAN (LN.FSM.34) b) **ME ENCANTAN LAS MUJERES MAYORES** (DF.MSF.29) 'I love older women.'

'In search of' (Sp. *en busca de*)	a)	*Not found in London data.*
	b)	**Hola soy una mujer sencilla sin falsas poses, en busca de un hombre en toda la extencion de la palabra.** (DF.FSM.13) 'Hi, I am a simple women without any false airs, in search of a man in the complete sense of the word.'
'Must be' or a command (Sp. *tiene que ser*)	a)	You must be a good-looking lad, slim, clean and under 35. (LN.MSM.16)
	b)	*Not found in Mexican data.*
'If you' or a question (Sp. *Si tú*)	a)	Hey fellas, if ur a good looking fit st8 acting , European , middle eastern, or English only (LN.MSM.40)
	b)	**SOLO SI ERES SERIO VARONIL NO PASIVO,NI AMANERADO** (DF.MSM.36) 'Only if you are a serious, masculine, non-passive, non-effeminate man.'
Ellipsis	a)	Str8 clean DDF men who are aged 30-45 and discreet welcome (LN.MSM.57)
	b)	**Solo mujeres que sean buena onda no importa la edad.** (DF.MSF.53) 'Only chill girls, it doesn't matter what age [you are].'
Other	a)	A very nice single British man … dreams of meeting a very nice lady (LN.FSM.24)
	b)	**Hola, tengo la ilusión de conocer a mi Princesa de cuento de hadas.** (DF.MSF.76)
	c)	'Hi, I have this dream that I'll meet my fairy-tale princess.'
None	a)	Hi, I am a 30 years old single mum living in west London. Just trying my luck here, looking for friendship and more it worked out. XX (LN.FSM.18).
	b)	**Hola soy un chico muy discreto buena onda, divertido y jugueton. Espero te dejes conocer para pasar buenos momentos. soy del df espero te guste chaoo.** (DF.MSF.20) 'Hi, I am a chill discrete guy, fun and playful. I hope you let me get to know you in order to have fun. I'm from the DF. I hope you like me. Bye.'

The Other category was necessary since the nine main categories do not present all possible variants. Lastly, the None category is for those personal advertisements which did not include a description of the desired partner. These personal advertisements often include a description of the type of relationship

desired; however, they were included in this category if the desired partner was not described at all.

3.2 Independent variables

The sources from which the data were collected, www.vivastreet.co.uk and www.vivastreet.co.mx[3], allow for the coding of two social factors, sex and orientation. Specifically, speakers were divided into four groups within each city: men seeking men (MSM), men seeking women (MSF), women seeking men (FSM) and women seeking women (FSF). These categories allow the author to observe independently any effect of sex and orientation.

3.3 Data source

The data come from two different target locations from the same online personal ads platform. The first is www.vivastreet.co.uk, which allows singles from the United Kingdom to post personal ads based on region. The specific personal ads used in this study originate from the capital city, London. London is the largest city, urban zone and metropolitan area in the United Kingdom, with a population of 8.42 million in 2014 estimates (Office for National Statistics, 2014). The Spanish data originates from www.vivastreet.com.mx, the same website oriented towards Mexican singles. These personals are from the capital as well, Mexico City, which is the largest urban area in its country with a population of around 8.84 million in the 2009 census (National Population Council, 2009), similar to London. Consequently, the cities from which the data originate are comparable: they are both large, urban centers with populations between 8 and 9 million.

Since both websites are run by the same parent company, Vivastreet, their medium-specific characteristics were nearly identical at the time of data collection. As such, they are the ideal two websites to compare. Upon arriving at the website, the user is presented with a map of either the United Kingdom or Mexico, divided into regions. Once he/she clicks on his/her desired region the advertiser is led to a page of links to different types of classified ads. One section is called Free personals (Sp. *Anuncios personales*), under which there are several categories: Friendship-Friends (Sp. *Amistad-Amigos*); Straight Relationships (Sp. *Contactos Amor*); Gay and Lesbian (Sp. *Contactos Gay*); and Adult Personals 18+ (Sp. *Reservados Mayores de Edad*). The two categories that will be studied in this investigation are Straight Relationships, which the website subcategorized as Men >> Women (Sp. *Hombres >> Mujeres*) and Women >> Men (Sp. *Mujeres >> Hombres*); and Gay and Lesbian, which was subcategorized as Gay Dating (Sp. *Hombres >> Hombres*) and Lesbian Dating (Sp. *Mujeres >> Mujeres*). It was

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[3] Since the time of data collection (March-April, 2013), www.vivastreet.com.mx has been changed to http://www.vivanuncios.com.mx/, which no longer contains personal advertisements. However, the personal ads used in this study were independently stored. Information about the site change can be found at: http://www.vivastreet.org.mx/vivastreet-es-ahora-vivanuncios/.

crucial that the categories used arrows (Men >> Men) instead of lexical items (Men seeking Men) to name the categories in order not to influence speaker lexical choice.

Once the potential advertiser decides the category in which he/she wishes to post, he/she must click on a button that says *Post your free ad*, after which the user is led to a page in which he/she is required to supply specific information: category of the personal ad, postcode (region and city name in the Mexican version), ad title, description (where the main body of the personal ad is written), age, a link to post a photo (optional), email (which remains private in the classified ad), a password, and an optional phone number, which is displayed if it is provided. There is also the opportunity to make one's personal ad more visible by one of three options of varying prices: the ad will become a featured ad in its category, the ad will have a colored background for the duration of the plan chosen, or the ad will be automatically reposted at the top of that category. The ads are then placed into the correct category, such as Men >> Men, with the most recent postings at the top and the oldest further back, except for the enhanced ads. The title, date of posting, age of the advertiser, region/city and the first two lines of his/her advertisement are displayed on this page. If a potential reader is interested in the ad, he/she can click on the title of the ad and will be led to its individual page, which will include the poster's username.

It is on the individual ad's page that the reader can view the full description that the advertiser posted. If he/she is interested, then the reader has the option to click on a button titled "Send a message". This link will lead the reader to a webpage in which he/she enters his/her email address, phone number, an optional attachment and a message before clicking send. This message is then sent to the advertiser who has the option to contact the reader. Additionally, if the original advertiser entered his/her phone number, the reader has the option to click on a link that will reveal the number and he/she can consequently directly contact the advertiser. Thus, the two websites are essentially identical, which makes it possible to allocate differences between the two languages to the actual languages or cultures and not to medium-specific characteristics or requirements, thus adhering to the main principles of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis and contrastive pragmatics.

3.4 Data collection

The researcher aimed to collect one hundred ads from each sex and orientation combination (4 possible groupings: women seeking women, women seeking men, men seeking men and men seeking women) per language (Spanish and English) for a proposed total of 800 personal advertisements. One hundred advertisements each were gathered from men seeking men and men seeking women in both London and Mexico City, and from women seeking women in Mexico City. However, there were fewer than 100 ads in the category of women seeking men for both languages as well as from women seeking women in Mexico City. Thus, all available personal ads for these three categories were collected. However, certain ads were subsequently excluded from the analysis. First, repetitions were

not included. For example, in the Mexican City Spanish data, one woman in the women seeking men category posted her ad 3 times. Additionally, advertisements for dating services and other products were not included (n=2). There was also an ad created for an alien in the London men looking for women category, which was interpreted as a joke and subsequently excluded. Finally, posts written by couples or seeking couples were excluded so as to not mix posts seeking polyamorous relationships with those seeking monogamous relationships. As such, in the London data, one post in the men seeking men category and three in the women seeking women category were excluded. In the Mexico data, two were excluded from the women seeking men category and one from the women seeking women category. This resulted in 315 final tokens for the London data, and 322 for the Mexico City data, distributed as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of personal ads across sex, orientation and language

	London British English	Mexico City Spanish	Total
Men seeking men	99	100	199
Men seeking women	99	100	199
Women seeking men	20	52	72
Women seeking women	97	70	167
Total	315	322	637

Specifically, the advertisements were chosen depending on the intended addressee. As such, although it is not clear whether a specific ad was written by someone who has been a member of the Mexican City community or the London community their whole life or they moved there during any point of their life, no attempt was made to determine origin of the poster.

3.4 Data analysis

The data were coded as previously outlined for both the dependent and independent variables. The percentages of each lexico-grammatical category of the dependent variable were determined for each social group (sex and orientation combinations) within each language. After calculating the different proportions of each variant for each of the three classifications, the four main variants were identified and the data were submitted to statistical analysis using Goldvarb X (Sankoff, Tagliamonte, & Smith, 2005). This program allows the researcher to determine which social factors significantly correlate to the use of any of the variants. The four main variants were verbs meaning 'to seek', verbs meaning 'to want', verbs meaning 'to like', and the lack of the speech act. Four regression analyses were performed for each language, with the dependent variable defined in four different manners: verbs meaning 'to seek' v. all other variants; verbs meaning 'to want' v. all other variants; verbs meaning 'to like' v. all other

variants; and lack of speech act v. all other variants. Sex and sexual orientation groupings were the independent variable. A significant result means that sex/sexual orientation predicts or significantly constrains the use of a particular variant.

4. Results

First, the overall distribution of variants of the dependent variable in each language is presented. Subsequently, the distribution of the four main variants will be presented according to social categories within each language. Specifically, the regression analyses for each language will be presented in order to determine if the independent variables significantly predict the use of any of the specific lexico-grammatical variants.

4.1 Overall distribution of variants

In Table 3 below, the distribution of the categories of the dependent variable within each language is presented.

Table 3. Distribution of lexico-grammatical items in Mexico City Spanish and London English

	Mexico City Spanish		**London English**	
Lexical verb category	**Number**	**%Total**	**Number**	**%Total**
'Seek' *buscar*	142	44.1%	150	47.6%
'Like' *gustar*	43	13.4%	25	7.9%
No description	40	12.4%	37	11.7%
'Want/wish/desire' *Querer, desear*	32	9.9%	21	6.7%
Preposition + description	22	6.8%	24	7.6%
'In search of ' *en busca de*	16	5.0%	0	0.0%
Ellipsis of verb	13	4.0%	13	4.1%
'If you' *si tú* or question	8	2.5%	19	6.0%
Other	6	1.9%	19	6.0%
'You must be' *tienes que* or command	0	0.0%	7	2.2%
Total	**322**	**100%**	**315**	**99.8%***

*Due to rounding

As can be seen in the table, verbs meaning 'to seek' or 'to look for' represent the most common variant in each language, constituting nearly 50% of all tokens. Similarly, other evidence of the conventionalization of personal ads is shown, such as the ellipsis of the entire verbal phrase, where the poster simply states characteristics of the person that they desire (e.g. 3a), or through the ellipsis of the verb and the retention of only the preposition before the description (i.e. 'for', 3b). These shortened verbs of personal ads indicate that it is already clear what the

poster is stating, without needing the verbal phrase. While this result indicates that online personal ads are highly conventionalized in Mexico City Spanish and London English, a sizeable portion of the data is, nevertheless, represented by less canonical variants. Specifically, in each language over 10 per cent of the personal ads do not contain the canonical 'seeks' statement or any description of the desired partner or relationship at all (12.4% for Mexico City Spanish and 11.7% for London English). Similarly, verbs other than those meaning 'to seek' or 'look for' are used, such as verbs of volition (e.g. 3c), or verbs meaning 'to like' (e.g. 3d). These two other verb categories are used between 6.7% and 13.4% of the time. Lastly, other methods of describing the desired partner or relationship are used by the posters, such as 'if you' statements (e.g. 3e), commands (e.g. 3f) or verb phrases that do not fit into any of the other categories.

(3)   a. White man only. None smoker & no criminal record. Someone who is well mannered, gental & polite. (LN.FSM.8)
b. Accomodate in hackney for clean and discreet guys (LN.MSM.19)
c. I want a mature man with a mature attitude. (LN.FSM. 11)
d. Like to meet a loving caring white English man. (LN.FSM.5)
e. If you are nice and friendly female… (LN.MSF.20)
f. He must be tall (atleast 5ft11), good looking, aged between 27-48 English Caucasian, intelligent, with a professional job, he should be willing to go for a health check, have his own home with no children living at home. (LN.FSM.7)

In general, the two languages are highly similar. The five main variants for both languages, that is the first five rows in the table, are the same variants, although there were more advertisements classified as 'none' than 'to like' and more in the 'preposition' than 'to want' category in London English . Additionally, in both languages the ellipsis of the verb and the simple preposition + description constructions are used at similar rates. However, in London English, there are more other types of structures beyond the five principle ones that are used. For example, in London English, more 'if you' statements, questions and commands are used, and there is a higher use of variants that do not fit into any of the categories; that is, the rate of the 'other' category is higher in London English. As such, it appears that a wider range of constructions are used in London English.

4.2 Sociolinguistic distribution of variants

In Table 4 below, the distribution of verb lexical type according to sex and sexual orientation is presented for Mexican Spanish and London English. The four main variants were examined: verbs meaning 'to want', verbs meaning 'to seek/look for', verbs meaning 'to like', and speech act not present. These four variants represent 80% of the total personal ads for Mexico City and 74.9% for London.

Table 4. Distribution of verb lexical type according to sex and orientation

	Verbs meaning 'to want'		Verbs meaning 'to seek/look for'		Verbs meaning 'to like'		Speech act not present	
Mexico City	#	%	#	% (weight)**	#	%	#	%
MSM[t]	9/80	[11.2]*	49/80	**61.2 (.60)**	10/80	[12.5]	12/80	[15.0]
MSF	14/71	[19.7]	34/71	**47.9 (.43)**	12/71	[16.9]	11/71	[15.5]
FSM	4/44	[9.1]	30/44	**68.2 (.63)**	7/44	[15.9]	3/44	[6.8]
FSF	5/62	[8.1]	29/62	**46.8 (.41)**	14/62	[16.7]	14/62	[22.6]
Total	34/260	13.1%	143/260	**55.0%**	43/260	16.5%	40/260	15.4%
London	#	%	#	% (weight)	#	%	#	% (weight)
MSM	5/63	[7.9]	34/63	**54.0 (.39)**	7/63	[11.1]	17/63	**27.0 (.71)**
MSF	5/86	[5.8]	67/86	**77.9 (.65)**	9/86	[10.5]	5/86	**5.8 (.29)**
FSM	2/15	[13.3]	8/15	**53.3 (.38)**	4/15	[26.7]	1/15	**6.7 (.32)**
FSF	9/69	[13.0]	41/69	**59.4 (.44)**	5/69	[7.2]	14/69	**20.3 (.62)**
TOTAL	21/233	9.0%	150/233	**64.4%**	25/233	10.7%	37/233	**15.9%**

[t] MSM = Men seeking men; MSF = Men seeking women; FSM = Women seeking men; FSF = Women seeking women

*Numbers between [] are not statistically significant

** Factor weights are provided for significant distributions in parentheses ( )

In Mexico City Spanish, sex and sexual orientation combinations only significantly predicted the use of one of the four main variants, that of verbs meaning to 'seek/look for'. Recall that this variant, 'to seek', is considered the canonical variant (Shalom, 1997). Women seeking men was the group that used the highest rate of the 'to seek' variant, at 68.2%, followed by men seeking men at 61.2%. Men seeking women and women seeking women were the groups that used the canonical variant the least and at approximately the same rate, 47.9% and 46.8%, respectively. Overall, it seems that 'seeks' is more highly employed in

personal ads directed toward men, no matter the sexual orientation of the poster, while it was used least in personal ads directed toward women.

In London English, two variants are significantly constrained by sex/sexual orientation groupings. The first is the canonical *to seek* variant, which is used most by men seeking women. This group uses the 'to seek' form 13.5% more than the average, approximately 77.9% of the time. Women seeking women use the 'to seek' variant somewhat less than average, at 59.4%, while both groups directing their posts toward men use it between 53.3% and 54.0% of the time. Overall, it seems that in London English, the posts that are directed toward women use the canonical variant more while those directed toward men use it less. This result is the opposite of that found for Mexico City Spanish. The second variant that is constrained by the sex/sexual orientation pairings is the lack of the speech act. These are personal ads that do not contain the indirect request for a partner/relationship. These ads generally contain simply self-descriptions of the poster and a request to contact. Men seeking men and women seeking women are the two groups that most often do not include the speech act examined, at 27.0% and 20.3% of the time, respectively. On the other hand men seeking women and women seeking men almost always include the speech act under study in their personal ads.

Overall, the regression analysis of lexical variants used in partner descriptions demonstrates that although the same four variants are found in roughly the same proportions in both Mexico City and London personal ads, their distribution or use by different social groups within these populations is not the same. This result will be further considered in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

When considering the research questions of this study, several interesting conclusions emerge. The first research question concerned the different lexico-grammatical items employed in the "seeks" component of personal ads. As seen in the results, verbs meaning 'to seek' or 'to look for' constituted 44% of the total personal ads in Mexico City and 47.6% in London, far surpassing all other variants. Thus, it appears that the conventional format of personal ads proposed by Shalom (1997) is still followed in nearly 50% of personal ads. Nevertheless, the remaining 50+% was distributed across numerous other options, including verbs meaning 'to like' and 'to want', preposition + description, verb ellipsis, 'if you' statements, questions, commands and other options. Interestingly, over 10% of personal ads in each city did not contain the speech act under study. This result coincides with van Compernolle (2008c) who found that, the partner description was less frequent than the self-description and description of the relationship desired and posters often did not include it. As such, it appears that, in fact, despite the conventionalized nature of traditional print personal ads, online personal ads, at least in these two communities, display a lot of variation and often deviate from the norm. This result is in line with previous research which claims that online personal advertisements, which can be written more freely than traditional paid print ads, may include non-traditional elements (Hardey, 2004;

Yurchisin et al., 2005; van Compernolle, 2008b). A logical result would also be that with more freedom of expression, posters may also not include traditional elements. Future research into personal advertisements should examine print and online personal advertisements to determine whether online personal advertisements are more or less conventionalized than their print counterparts.

The second research question asked how the variation observed in the "seeks" component of personal ads is distributed across the social groups of sex and orientation. What we see is that in Mexico City, personal ads directed to women, by both male and female posters, were less likely to contain the canonical 'seeks' variant (verbs meanings 'to seek' or 'to look for') and were more likely to contain other forms. In London, the trend is the opposite. Posts directed toward men were less likely to contain the canonical variant but rather other forms. These distributions were statistically significant according to regression analyses, and as such, demonstrate that for the 'to seek/to look for' variant, there is a social distribution in both languages, although this distribution is not the same in the two languages. The reasons for this social distribution are likely culture-specific and are not discernable from the methodology of this study alone nor is the reason obvious from the personal ads themselves.

Additionally, in London English, personal ads written by posters in the same-sex categories were more often classified in the None category (see Table 1). That is, personal advertisements written by men seeking men or women seeking women were less likely to contain a description of their desired partner. This distribution was not observed in Mexico City Spanish and there was no significant correlation between sex/orientation and the lack of the implicit request. In contrast to the distribution for the 'to seek/look' for variant, the reason for the distribution of the lack of the request according to sex/orientation may be easier to discern. Based on the researcher's observation, the women-seeking-women and men-seeking-men personal ads were frequently looking for sexual encounters, while opposite-sex personals were more often looking for dating or long-term relationships. A coding and count of the type of relationship desired in the personal ads verified this observation. For the same sex posts, 87% of men seeking men and 80% of women seeking women were looking for a sexual encounter. On the other hand, 64.3% of men seeking women and 80% of women seeking men were looking for relationships or dating. This difference in distribution across sex/sexual orientation groups was not observed for the Mexico City data. The type of relationship desired was consistent across gender/sexual orientation groups: in general, posters from all four sex/sexual orientation groupings were looking for relationships, dating or friends to hang out with on a consistent basis, rather than an individual sexual encounter.

Additionally, the personal advertisements in which sex or physical encounters were desired tended to have a highly stylized format that differed from the canonical personal ad schema, as in (4) below. These ads tended to include a self-description, the type of sexual relationship desired, a statement as to whether or not they could accommodate the sexual encounter, and the area within London where they are located, often in that order.

(4) I'm a 29yrs Indian lad, smooth, clean discreet, looking for safe clean fun… I can accom in the NW London area, I can't travel… (LN.MSM.26)

As such, it appears that personal ads for same-sex posters have a function that is different than those for opposite-sex groups, and consequently have developed their own stylized or canonical schema. Further research into the structure of personal ads and their distribution according to the type of relationship desired would shed light into whether or not this difference in goal explains why personal ads by same-sex posters in London English are more likely to not include a description of their desired partner.

Interestingly, the highly stylized discourse in same-sex personal advertisements is similar to the short, highly conventionalized messages that del Teso-Craviotto (2008) found in gay chatrooms from people looking for sexual partners. These messages had similar content to the same-sex personal advertisements, such as the participant's location, the type of sexual partner they desired and the type of meeting they were seeking. This result seems to support the claim that online personal advertisements and online dating chatrooms share many characteristics (Shalom, 1997; del Teso-Craviotto, 2008).

The third research question asked how the social variation of personal ads compares in London English and Mexico City Spanish. Overall, it seems that in Mexico City and London, the same main variants are used. Similar rates of verbs meaning 'to seek', preposition + description, ellipsis of verb and lack of partner description are observed. However, it also seems that personal ads from London contain more non-traditional variants such as 'if you' questions, commands, and other forms, while they contained less of two main variants, verbs meaning 'to want' and verbs meaning 'to like'. Thus, it seems that there is somewhat more variation in personal ads in London English and more divergence from the norm. This observation is supported by the fact that two variants are conditioned by social factors in London English: verbs meaning 'to seek/look for' and the lack of any description. This tendency to vary more from the main variants or to not include a description may stem from the fact that London personal ads seem to have acquired a specific role in same sex orientations — that of seeking a specifically sexual relationship, as previously mentioned. This additional function was not observed in the Mexico City ads.

Moreover, London English and Mexico City Spanish differ more when the distribution of variants across sex and sexual orientation is compared between the two varieties. Despite similar rates of use of the traditional 'to seek' variant, advertisements directed toward men in the Mexican data more often contained 'to seek', while those directed toward women in the London data were more likely to have the traditional variant. Although the culture-specific reason for why certain social groups use this particular variant more or less than other social groups is not completely clear without further research, it is evident that these forms have different social meanings attached to them in each language or are associated with different social groups. This difference in social evaluation or use of variants, which is not surprising given previous research (e.g. Elliot, 2010; Groom &

Pennebacker, 2005; van Compernolle 2008a, 2008b, 2008c), is only observable when the use of forms across diverse social groups is analyzed. These differences arise despite the fact that, overall, in Mexico City Spanish and London English, the distribution of different variants is quite similar when considering the aggregate population. Nevertheless, social and cultural factors lead to individual differences in use that are not perceivable when looking at the entire population.

This difference in social patterning between the two languages and cultures raises the important issue of universality (Fraser, 1985) versus culture-specificity (Wierzbicka, 1985) of speech acts — a common debate in contrastive pragmatics. Several questions remain to be resolved in this debate. Are pragmalinguistic variations of a speech act universal if they are not used in the same way by the same speakers in two varieties or languages? How important is sociolinguistic patterning or social evaluation in determining the universality of speech acts as well as in establishing pragmatic similarity between two languages? Research should incorporate social variation into the study of pragmatic variation and contrastive pragmatics. Although it is not necessarily being argued that personal ads are universal across languages, the results of the current study demonstrate that the differences between the languages were not clear until variation across social groups was taken into account. Thus, personal ads in each community are more different than they initially appeared.

6. Conclusion

The current study contributes to the study of personal advertisements and pragmatic variation in several ways. First, it supports previous research that social groups, determined by variables such as sex and sexual orientation, employ differing linguistic practices in online discourse, and in particular personal advertisements. Additionally, the results demonstrate that even across languages with very similar linguistic devices available to the speaker, speaker groups defined by the same characteristics may employ those linguistic devices differently. This study highlights the importance of considering social factors when comparing pragmatic variation across languages. Other previously attested similarities across languages may, in fact, be more complex than initially thought. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, speaker motivation or purpose needs to be taken into account when analyzing pragmatic variation. Pragmatic variation in personal ads is a type of intentional behavior, whose goal is to make the poster appear desirable to the type of partner that they desire. As such, the linguistic practices that a poster demonstrates allow their ideal partner to identify with them. Furthermore, this intentionality would not have been observable without considering the social factors of sex and orientation. As such, given the results of the current study, future research on personal advertisements and pragmatic variation should consider social variables and speaker intent.

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