Right now versus back then: Recency and remoteness as discursive resources in online reviews

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Sociolinguistic research on temporality in social media has tended to highlight an emphasis on spatio-temporal immediacy (i.e., the "here and now") in the narrative discourse of diverse media, such as email (Georgakopoulou, 2007), blogs and wikis (Myers, 2010), and social networking sites (Page, 2010). However, other forms of social media – such as user-generated online reviews – tend to be comparatively less "recency-focused" (Vásquez, 2013). This is somewhat predictable, given that reviews, by definition, are retrospective accounts. What is less predictable however, are references to the remote past that appear in online reviews. In this talk, I explore variation in temporal reference in a dataset of 1,000 online consumer reviews. Specifically, I address the following questions: What discursive work gets accomplished when reviewers refer to the remote past (i.e., 5, 10, 15 years ago), while discussing a more temporally proximal experience? How do review authors’ uses of the remote past contrast with their uses of the immediate present? How are these types of semiotic choices related to the constructions of individuals' identities, as well as assumptions about their audiences? Considering examples from five different review sites (TripAdvisor, Yelp, Amazon, Netflix, and Epicurious), I offer insights into how the remote past and the immediate present are variably deployed as discursive resources by the authors of these online texts.

Keywords: temporality, identity, online reviews.