

**File name:** WAA ep 5 V2  
**Audio Length:** 0:37:40  
**Date transcribed:** 10 January 2020

Erika: Hello and welcome to Words & Actions. In this podcast, we take a close look at language in professional and business contexts. We focus on language so we can demonstrate just how much it matters, how language shapes our perceptions and how language is used to do things like persuade you to buy stuff.

Last week, for example, we examined how organisations talk to their stakeholders and focused specifically on customer service and politeness. This week, we look at how customers talk back. We've enlisted the help of Professor Camilla Vasquez, who is an applied linguist and is world-renowned for her work on consumer reviews.

You will also have your three regular hosts: me, Erika Darics, my specialism is in applied linguistics and business communication and I'm calling in from Aston University, Birmingham; Veronika Koller, who is a Reader in discourse analysis and discourse studies at Lancaster University and who has just had a new book out on the discourses of Brexit.

Veronika: Hello.

Erika: And Bernard De Clerck, who specialises in corporate impression management and business communication online.

Bernard: Hello everyone.

Erika: As usual, our podcast has three parts. In part one, we discuss some of the issues that relate to language about the specific theme of the episode, in today's case, customers talking back. Then we talk to an expert in the second part and each episode is rounded off by analysing real-life examples.

Today, for example, we will look at a quirky social media exchange. We have a Twitter account where you can ask questions and sign up for updates. It's @\_WordsActions\_ and we have an accompanying

website, [wordsandactions.blog](http://wordsandactions.blog), where we publish a transcript of each episode, the references being mentioned and other interesting examples.

Veronika: Good! So, it's about customers talking back. So, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is customers filing a complaint with a company – we looked at one example in the previous episode – or reviews, customers making reviews of various things from restaurants to hotels and sure enough, we'll have a look at that as well later.

But it's more than that, actually. Customers talking back is more than complaints and reviews; it also has a political dimension. So, you can have customer activism, for instance, in reaction to campaigns that have gone wrong, for instance advertising campaigns that are perceived to be discriminatory in some way. And that can go all the way to customer boycotts.

One example in the United Kingdom, where Erika and I are, is indeed, the Stop Funding Hate campaign. That's like a grassroots campaign that encourages people to exert pressure on brands online, making them withdraw adverts from newspapers and news websites that are perceived to promote hate or division in society; hence the name, Stop Funding Hate.

Erika: Yes, and they're actually very successful. So, if you follow their Twitter account, look at the successes, they manage to get advertisements out of newspapers and broadsheets that are very divisive in the UK.

Veronika: Yeah, they have had successes, that's right, yeah.

Erika: But it's not all about politics. An interesting example comes to mind. This was a couple of years back when a pen manufacturer advertised pens for men and women, they started to market 'pens for her.' The reviews for the pens really became a kind of social criticism, they were really hilarious. There was one that said, "I bought this pen in error, evidently, to write my reports of each day's tree felling activities in my job as a lumber jack. It's no good. It slips from between my calloused, gnarly fingers."

Veronika: Yes, that was really hilarious, really, really satirised that. I mean, in a way that is political, of course, because I think the pens were even pink and blue, probably to sell twice the number of pens. But it completely backfired because people just thought that was completely useless gendering and relied on just completely outdated stereotypes and they really took the mickey out of that particular ad campaign.

Bernard: Yeah, absolutely. And it's a nice example of people talking back to companies so in this social criticism via, in a way, fake reviews, if you like.

There are, of course, other things that people do as well nowadays online. It's because it's become so easy to communicate. Where you used to have this kind of company-to-customer communication, now, of course, it's all dialogue. And because of that, people have also referred to this time that we live in as the age of complaining because it's so much easier to lodge a complaint now. You can have very serious complaints but you can also have very silly ones, let's say. And that's why in the bulk of complaints you find online, this is so high.

Veronika: Tell us a silly one, go on.

Bernard: So, here we are. Probably, it's a Friday night, someone has ordered pizza and there's a problem. And he sends a tweet to Domino's Pizza and he says, "Yo! I ordered a pizza and it came with no toppings on it or anything. It's just bread."

So, then we get a response from Domino's Pizza and they say, "We're sorry to hear about this," so a very official apology, as they should. "Please let our friends at Domino's UK know so they can help."

And then you get the reply from the same customer again and he says, "Never mind, I opened the pizza upside down; false alarm."  
(Laughter)

But those are the kinds of things you have to deal with as a company but those are also the things that you read online. I saw that and many other people saw that. So, you have this interesting kind of collapse, don't you think?

Veronika: Yeah, it's known as context collapse in the literature, really, because, obviously, here you have one person or a company who is addressed directly, so Domino's Pizza, they address them directly. Then, of course, you have what in the literature is sometimes known as auditor. So, those are people who read this as well, they're not directly addressed but they may be known and the person who complained may know that they are there as well so other people, for instance, who work for the company or what have you.

But then, of course, you have eavesdroppers like, in this case, Bernard, really. So, the speaker is unaware of them, they don't know that Bernard is reading their complaint to Domino's as well. But they may be aware that there are so-called overhearers so everybody else on Twitter who may read that and who may make jokes at that person's expense, then, for a rather silly complaint.

And all these people are there at the same time, the addressee, other people who read this, everybody on Twitter and then eavesdroppers who that person who complained never even thought about.

Erika: So, it is not an easy task for companies to manoeuvre this collapsed context where they have to talk at the same time to the person who is complaining but also to all those other people, the overhearers and the eavesdroppers, the potential customers, past customers, everybody else and formulate their responses in a way that's good for everyone.

Bernard: Yeah, that's true but I do appreciate this customer's honesty. Option B would have been just to shut up but he was kind of honest about being a bit silly, let's say.

Veronika: Maybe, perhaps, even slightly self-ironic, saying, "Oh duh! I was just being an idiot." I mean, he doesn't say that but he sort of says that he made a rather silly mistake.

Bernard: He's just venting and just let it go, "It happened, there's nothing I can do about it."

Veronika: Yeah, "It's on Twitter now so..."

Bernard: But what you can actually see is that people vent, they have complaints, they write reviews online. Research has shown that people actually attach a lot of importance to eWOM.

Veronika: “eWOM” meaning electronic word of mouth.

Bernard: Yes, yes, sorry, electronic word of mouth. And studies have shown that about 80% of people trust electronic word of mouth as much as traditional word of mouth, the big difference being, however, that with normal traditional word of mouth you know the people and with electronic word of mouth you basically don't.

And still, you do have an impact on sales so people believe that and they base their sales on what people are saying online.

A couple of things that are worth mentioning, for instance, is that on social platforms, the impact of electronic word of mouth is higher when people see that the review, for instance, is written by someone who has a similar economic background or social background so someone who is similar to them.

Veronika: Or the same age kind of thing.

Bernard: Yes. What you can also see, for instance, is that it has a stronger effect – electronic word of mouth – on the sales of tangible goods so things that you can actually use, a phone for instance and less so for services, because that is more, how can I put it, it's more subjective. Wellness, for instance, that might be perceived differently by different people, depending on what you like.

Veronika: Whereas your microwave either works or it doesn't.

Bernard: Basically.

Veronika: Yeah, well it's true, isn't it?

Bernard: There was another study – this is the last thing I will say – on the movie industry. So, you have loads of movie reviews online and apparently, it's not the polarity that influences whether people want to see the film or not, so whether they found it good or bad but it's the

bulk. So, the more reviews you have on a film, the more people will want to see it.

Veronika: So, it's probably running with the crowd, isn't it?

Bernard: Yes, in a way.

Veronika: "So many people reviewed that, I need to be in the know about this."

Bernard: Yes, and they can also assess themselves whether they find it good or not and then they can join the crowd in writing another review.

Veronika: Interesting. Lots of studies there on electronic word of mouth because it has become so important, really.

One form of electronic word of mouth is, of course, those customer online reviews, be it Rotten Tomatoes on films or TripAdvisor or ecommerce platforms like Amazon ratings and what have you.

And, of course - and I have to bring this in now - you can also rate and review this podcast if you like. We have a function on our website. So, just saying. (Laughter)

But seriously now, one thing that is an issue with electronic word of mouth, as with electronic everything, is this done by an actual customer? Because the chances are it may be a bot that is supposed to churn out lots of positive reviews. Or it could be a paid writer, a so-called influencer who gets paid for saying positive things.

Bernard: Or negative things, absolutely.

Veronika: Yes, as some sort of corporate sabotage, if you will, indeed yes. So, how do you know that you're actually dealing with a genuine customer here and with a person to begin with?

One clue, for instance, is the level of detail or do they tell a story of why, for instance, they had dinner at a particular restaurant like it was a friend's birthday party.

Bernard: You might think that it's not that important because you might think well, there are so many reviews out there so now and then there will be a fake one so it doesn't really matter. But still, estimates have

shown that 16%, for instance, of all reviews on Yelp are fake. And 33% of all TripAdvisor reviews. So, that's actually quite substantial.

Veronika: It's a third, yeah. So, every third review that you see might be a fake one.

Erika: And it's not just the existence of fake reviews but how the readers and potential customers read them or whether they notice them. And research shows, there is a very interesting study that was published on The Conversation, an online journal magazine, accessible to everyone, and this study looks at how confident people are when they judge their own ability to spot fake reviews. And the finding is that we tend to be overconfident.

Veronika: We think we're better at it than we are, really.

Erika: Yes. And if our listeners are interested, if they follow the link that we will post on our website, there is a little quiz where they can test themselves and see whether they can spot fake reviews.

Veronika: Go to our website, take the quiz; that might be fun, really.

Bernard: We'll also include software that you could use. There is software, Fakespot and ReviewMeta and if you have a suspicious review, you can just put it in there and they will tell you how authentic it is or how reliable it is, based on different parameters that they use.

Veronika: Interesting. One last thing we need to introduce before we turn to our interview guest is credibility, so when you know that you're dealing with a genuine customer. I mean, we'll discuss that with our interview guest but how do people make their review sound credible, what words do they use to present themselves as experts? How do they use language to come across as knowledgeable and credible?

Bernard: There are a couple of things I can say about this and this is interesting, not just for people who want to assess the credibility of reviews themselves but also when you want to write your own reviews, you want people to believe you and to follow your advice.

So, based on literature, here are a couple of things that you could do. First of all - and this might be a no-brainer but it's still important to mention -, language. Studies have shown that things like typos still have an influence on credibility, a negative one, of course. Informal language so, for instance, if you go for capitalisation, if you say something was very, very bad with capital letters, that decreases your credibility again, according to some studies.

And, of course, we have to be careful here because these were taken or contextualised on TripAdvisor and other social media might be more lenient, of course, towards the use of these netspeak features.

Now, something else that I wanted to share, just to underscore the superficiality of things as well, sometimes, is that profile pictures also have an impact on credibility. More specifically, attractive people tend to be more credible than, let's say, less attractive people.

Veronika: Oh yeah, beautiful people, the world's their oyster, isn't it, really. And say, Bernard, is that across genders, really? Does it matter if it's a woman who is seen to be attractive or a man?

Bernard: I'm glad to say, Veronika, that it had the same effect for both men and women.

Veronika: I guess that's some sort of equality, then.

Bernard: What was interesting as well was that you can only see that effect in positive reviews. In negative reviews, the effect was gone.

Veronika: Okay! Interesting.

Shall we move on to our interview guest? I think it's about time, isn't it?

Erika: Yes, I think she will be able to tell us a lot about authenticity and credibility.

Our guest today is Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of South Florida, Camilla Vasquez. Welcome, Camilla.

Camilla: Thanks, Erika, it's great to be here.

Erika: Camilla has just published a book on language creativity and humour online. She is really interested in linguistic creativity and language education. She's published widely on these subjects. But the reason why we have her is for her work on online consumer reviews. She's written about consumer reviews from food to tourism, from Amazon to TripAdvisor. She has researched how people sound authentic and how do they do expert identities. But she also looked at how companies respond to reviews.

Her work is often featured in the media and she often gives interviews. So, it's a true honour to have her here with us today.

Veronika: Yes, thank you, Camilla.

Camilla: Thank you.

Erika: Camilla, looking at all those reviews in your past work, what do people complain most about?

Camilla: That's a great question. Before I answer that, I think it's important to point out that in the last, I don't know, 15 or 20 years, we've suddenly entered a time in history where just about everything is rateable and reviewable online. So, for anybody who has an internet connection, we can have an opinion about literally everything. So, there are reviewing sites about, as you've mentioned, hotels and restaurants and consumer products. But also, we can rate our dentists, our professors, lawyers, even our churches.

I guess to answer the question, one would really have to know what domain we're talking about. So, people complain about whatever happens to matter to them regarding the type of product or service that they're talking about.

Veronika: Right. One thing we chatted a bit about in the introduction to this podcast is how do we even know that we're looking at a genuine review? How do we know that this is not a review that was produced by a bot or by a paid influencer? Are there any ways to spot these fake reviews by just reading them?

Camilla: That's like the \$5 million question, Veronika. I think if we figured out the answer to detecting fake reviews, we could find ourselves as millionaires.

Clearly, there must be some methods for detecting what is known as opinion spam or fraudulent reviews and so some of the larger platforms have dedicated a lot of resources to identifying those things. And, of course, their interests are in keeping that information proprietary. So, for instance, TripAdvisor has a fraud detection team of people who sort and filter through reviews, working to identify ones that they suspect are fraudulent, which they'll then pull. Of course, they're not going to tell you or me what exactly goes into the process of identifying them, right, because then it would just make it easier for others to game the system.

Veronika: True.

Camilla: Similarly, Yelp has what they call a filter and they filter any suspicious material and they put it in a sort of quarantine. So, it's possible as a user to access those reviews that have been filtered and that the algorithm has identified as suspect. Apparently, Yelp filters somewhere between 20% to 25% of the content that's posted on their platform. So, when you think about it, it's really kind of remarkable if 25% of the reviews that we're dealing with are potentially fraudulent.

From the research that I've read, some of those red flags, let's say, seem to be kind of obvious. So, if somebody's only written one post, one review on that site, that's automatically suspicious. Typically, also reviews that are very, very brief or those that are categorically positive or categorically negative and have nothing in between.

Veronika: So, not really differentiated, yeah.

Camilla: Yeah, and I think it's very hard, in fact, to spot a fake review for most of us.

Erika: Do you think there are more positive or negative fake reviews? I'm going back to my complaint question.

Camilla: Yeah, that's a good question. So actually, we can probably determine that sort of empirically by going into the Yelp filter, looking at those reviews and seeing whether there are more positive ones than there are negative ones in there. I can tell you in general, on all of the reviewing platforms, the tendency, there is a strong positivity bias. So, there is always more four and five star reviews than one and two star reviews.

It would be interesting to see if that trend mirrors parallel in the reviews that have been flagged as suspicious. That's a great question.

Veronika: Yeah, so that's proportionate, are there proportionately more positive fakes?

Camilla: Right, right.

Veronika: That's interesting, yeah.

Bernard: So, authenticity is one aspect that is important when talking about reviews. In the introduction, we also talked about credibility. So, what makes a review more credible than another? And research has shown that, for instance, profile pictures play a role. Beautiful people, apparently, tend to be more credible than...

Veronika: *Seen* as more credible. (Laughter)

Bernard: ...than the other category. But based on your research and now, perhaps, focusing on the content and the linguistic features of what people do with their reviews, what do you think people actually do to portray themselves as the expert? Of course, you can say that you're a frequent flyer and things like that and you do a lot of travelling but what do they do in the reviews themselves, do you think?

Camilla: That's an excellent point. There are, as you mentioned, let's say, platform features that can mark somebody as more credible. Like you said, including a profile photo shows that there's a real person behind, as Veronika mentioned, that it's not a bot. Or some review sites like Amazon, for instance, give people like verified user badges or proof of purchase kinds of things so indicating that this is a legitimate consumer.

But in terms of what reviewers do in the texts themselves, they can either themselves give off explicit cues, as you said. So, in my original data looking at hotel reviews, I had claims like, “I’ve stayed in nearly every inn all of southern Ireland and I can tell you that this inn is the very best one of all the ones that I’ve been in my 20 years of travel.” So, very explicit claims and delimiting the scope of one’s expertise.

Another area where I did research on was looking at consumer products on Amazon and one of the categories of products that I looked at were yoga mats. Authors talking about yoga mats would say, “I’ve been a yoga teacher for 10 years. I’ve tried five different mats on the market, the top sellers and of those, this one is the one that’s lasted the longest.” So, giving you a little bit of personal information about who the reviewer is, their history with the product or the product category.

But then, there are also like implicit cues that people use. It’s unclear whether they’re even aware of doing this or not. So, in the yoga mat category, for instance, there were some folks who would use Sanskrit terms for the yoga postures. So again, that positions you as a certain type of user.

Veronika: Ah, expert knowledge, in a way.

Camilla: Yeah, yeah, right. Or people reviewing films talking about camera angles or the cinematographer’s larger body of work.

So, it shows that you know a little bit more than just that one thing. You’re not a novice person dabbling in this genre for the first time.

Veronika: Yeah, that’s interesting. One area that you’ve also studied is you’ve looked at the reviews that hosts and guests leave on Airbnb, right? I think that you did fairly recently. And you found, as you mentioned before, that the reviews are overwhelmingly positive, I mean really, to the tune of 97% or something like that, right?

Camilla: Yeah, off the charts positive.

Veronika: But also that they’re extremely formulaic so people use the same chunks of language over and over again. In that sort of communicative

marketplace, if you will, what can you do to make a difference? How can you make your review matter?

Camilla: I think that the reviews on Airbnb, as you said specifically, the more detailed the better. One of the things that you noted is the formulaic nature of those reviews and so, actually, with my co-author, Judith Bridges, I remember when we first collected our data and we made a point to sample reviews from both hosts and guest, from four different regionally distinct markets in the US. And we were struck by kind of how boring these data were.

Veronika: It's always the same, yeah.

Camilla: Yeah, kind of the same things repeated, "Great host, lovely place, nice decoration," whatever, "excellent location." And it was these kinds of things being repeated over and over again. But when people were much more specific about something, it was more telling and more helpful.

Now, as you mentioned, Airbnb reviews are kind of off the charts positive and a lot of that has to do, I think, with the fact that people are linked to the profile so there's no way of being anonymous or pseudo anonymous on Airbnb...

Veronika: Can't hide, yeah.

Camilla: Exactly! And then that becomes part of your record. And so people are, I think, very afraid to say anything negative, either about the guest or the host because then others will not want to work with them. So, they sort of show themselves in a favourable light as reviewers and that creates this intense positivity.

And so, when people are negative, they do it in like the most subtle ways. So, they say, "Yeah, the stay was okay." That's like the most damning criticism on Airbnb but you have to be familiar with that...

Veronika: Yeah, compared to the benchmark on Airbnb or what they may post about other stays that can be read as negative then. And, of course, also, people on Airbnb, it's a bit like Couchsurfing except money is involved. They will have, in all likelihood, met each other so you're

reviewing somebody who you've actually met in person. And I guess that drives up the stakes too, that you really want to be courteous.

Camilla: Sure, it's hard to say something negative about somebody who has maybe gone out of their way for you, who you've met face-to-face.

Even, we found in our data that there were folks who had not met the hosts but who had like intensive, let's say, interactions using online communication and they felt like they knew them. So they said really positive things, personalised things about the host, even though they hadn't met face-to-face. But still they didn't want to say anything negative about this person with whom they had formed at least some kind of relationship, whether real or virtual.

Erika: So, linking your recent book to your work on online reviews, which are the most creative in terms of online reviews when it comes to writing? We've talked a little bit about how it's not a very good idea to use very quirky writing style, apparently, because then your review doesn't sound very credible, for, example, all caps and all netspeak features. So, what's your observation in that regard?

Veronika: How creative should you be? What's the right amount?

Camilla: I think that's such a fine line there because you won't want to sound generic. If you sound like all the other reviews then your review is not going to maybe stand out. And if you go too kind of wild and wacky, then you position yourself as somebody, maybe, who is not as trustworthy.

But there are some reviewers who seem to walk the fine line very well, where they have crafted a text, maybe, where they kind of tell a story, they interject some humour. Some of the reviews that I've looked at have almost literary characteristics, like they report dialogue from their service encounters.

And actually, I think in the extreme, extreme case we then have people – this gets into the most extreme kinds of creativity – we have people using the review space, perhaps, to do things other than review the product, maybe to critique a social issue, maybe to perform

a parody of something. And so that's really intriguing to me as well, so how people sort of stretch the boundaries of the genre and maybe even turn it into something else.

Bernard: Yeah, we actually had an example of that in the introduction with the pen for women which they advertised, of course, a necessity; it was bound to happen.

I've got another question for you. How weird is it for you to write a review or do you just not bother anymore?

Camilla: I have to tell you I'm really fascinated by these things as a reader. I don't feel compelled, after reading thousands of reviews, to write any myself.

Bernard: I can imagine.

Veronika: There's enough out there as it is.

Camilla: Following up on the previous question, somebody sent me a link the other day from the *Daily Mail*, I think, from your context there in the UK about, you know, the whole Prince Andrew scandal recently and how folks were leaving reviews on the Pizza Hut website where he claimed that he had been 18 years ago or something. [Note: The restaurant chain in question is Pizza Express.] And so, these were sort of making fun of comments and saying, "This is a great place to come if you need a pizza or an alibi," and those kinds of things.

And so, TripAdvisor actually had to stop posting those kinds of reviews because they were saying, "These are not legitimate reviews. They're not actually about people's experiences at the business." But people were using the site then as a forum for making some kind of social commentary.

Veronika: Oh yeah, I think we need to follow that up, thanks for the hint.

Bernard: I have another nice example from Belgium. Animal activists are now posting on Facebook pages of restaurants giving very negative reviews because they serve foie gras.

Camilla: Oh wow!

- Veronika: Because of animal cruelty, yeah.
- Bernard: So, it's that time of year again and that's their strategy now. So, they're just throwing negative reviews on the Facebook pages of these restaurants. It's very effective because people tend not to show up anymore.
- Veronika: So, we're back to what we started this episode with about consumer activism and boycotts, etc. Fascinating.
- Erika: Perhaps that's a nice point to ask you whether you can advise these restaurants? How do they have to respond? Would you tell them to respond to these negative reviews and if so, how?
- Camilla: That's an excellent question because I think it's a challenge for a lot of businesses. I think if businesses have a lot of resources, maybe if we're talking about large international chains, they probably have a big PR department and they have individuals who are dedicated to handling their business' online social media presence and certainly responding to reviews falls under that scope of activity.
- But for smaller businesses, maybe, they employ a small staff, they don't have the resources to dedicate. So, to what extent does it make sense to engage with positive or negative reviews online? And I would say that it's important for businesses to have some kind of strategy, to think about this and to decide what is worthwhile to engage with and then have a, I guess, a well-informed set of practices that go into it.
- Because I think we've all seen cases in the media too where business owners feel very passionate about something, they get involved and then it kind of blows up and explodes and then it starts some kind of back and forth conflict and what was originally a complaint that probably would have gone unnoticed then escalates and becomes something that's reported by the media, even. And sometimes, actually, that works sort of in unpredictable ways and it brings more people to the business, depending on what the issue is.
- But I think that restaurants can use responses to negative reviews as a form of not just fixing a problem but doing some kind of positive

marketing. So, there's some marketing research that shows that if you have a client where there's a problem and the problem has been handled to their satisfaction, that actually increases customer loyalty more so than if the problem hadn't existed in the first place.

So, a careful handling of issues can be an extremely effective marketing tool. So, it's something that businesses should certainly think about, probably not responding to every single review because then folks would never get any sleep or have time to do anything else but, maybe, carefully selecting those reviews that seem most problematic and where the business has an opportunity to show themselves in a favourable light.

Erika: I think that's excellent advice. Thank you so much for being here with us, Camilla and we hope to read your new book very soon.

Veronika: Thanks a lot.

Bernard: Thanks a lot.

Camilla: Thank you so much, thank you for having me.

Erika: Right. So, that was very interesting chatting to Camilla about her work and there is actually a book that she's recently published called *Language, Creativity and Humour Online*. And the reason why I think it's quite relevant to what we're going to do is because the data sample that we brought today is as creative and as humorous as it can be.

Veronika: Okay, so what is it?

Bernard: I found something and it's related to Skyscanner so it's a kind of app that you can use to look for cheap flights online. And they have a Twitter account as well.

And here we have a customer and he has a question for Skyscanner because he found something, he was looking for flights to go from Australia to London, I think it was, with a layover in Bangkok. And this is what he says, so this is his request, his remark, "Hi Skyscanner.

Just wondering what you'd recommend I do during the 47 year layover your website has suggested."

So, obviously, there was a bug in the system which meant that he had to stay at Bangkok airport for 47 years.

Veronika: And he gives us a screenshot; we'll put it on our website. But he gives us a screenshot of his itinerary there.

Bernard: And the question then is what do you do with that as a company because you know that this is not a genuine complaint, is it? He's using the style, he's using the register as if it were a general problem or a genuine problem or a complaint.

Veronika: It pretends to be serious, right, serious enquiry so he does politeness, "Oh, I'm just wondering... and here's the evidence." But, obviously, this is not entirely serious because it's clear that it must be a bug on the website.

Erika: Actually, the response is really witty. So, Skyscanner says, "Unless you're a huge fan of The Terminal, I'd probably recommend spending those years outside of the airport so here are a few suggestions," and they go on to list a couple of places in Bangkok. And then the comment is signed by Jen and then in brackets comes what I consider is the serious bit where they go, "P.S. Thanks for letting me know about this. I'll get some folk to look into it."

Veronika: And that's really interesting because they do give a serious response, although in informal terms, which is entirely appropriate on Twitter, but she makes a reference to pop culture knowledge so she refers to the film The Terminal where somebody – I think it's Tom Hanks, isn't it – gets stuck in an airport for various complicated reasons and basically lives at an airport terminal.

And, of course, always making these allusions to films and other things is, of course, always a way to build rapport, isn't it? So, we all know which film we're talking about and we're in the know, as it were.

Bernard: That's true, yes. So, the creation of a community is what they're doing there with these shared cultural references. And there are some more later on that we will see.

Veronika: But first of all, the conversation then really broadens because we have this context collapse, because we have all sorts of people just overhearing this who also happen to be on Twitter. And they really start praising this one employee, Jen. They first start addressing her not personally but addressing the company. So, one person early on says, "Honestly, Skyscanner, you win at customer replies on the internet for at least the next 47 years." And then Jen comes back, "Does that mean I can just go home, then? Jen."

And then what happens is that it gets more and more personal so it's less addressing Skyscanner but more addressing this particular employee who signs off with her name but from the Skyscanner account.

Erika: Yes, and talking about community, there is an interesting linguistic or communicative strategy here when people start to say, "You win the internet," these kind of almost formulaic expressions now bring us together because we all know this is the way to talk on social media, this is the way to praise on social media. So, this is a strategy where we demonstrate or the people who are engaged in this conversation demonstrated their awareness of how things should be done when people are having a little bit of creative interactional play online.

Veronika: But also what happens when this person then gets praised, not Skyscanner so much but this Jen employee. She's still a representative of the company but she also starts, in a way, orienting to being an employee of the company. So, when that praise comes in, she, for instance, just this little narrative thing, where she puts an asterisk, \*Takes screen shot, sends to boss.\* So, she's making jokes about, "Perhaps I can get a promotion out of this interaction."

Bernard: That's true. And she was actually on a roll that day because to start with, her initial reply got 8,000 likes and more, which is very impressive. And it tells us how important creativity is in these

circumstances. And later on, there's another interesting cultural reference for which she got 546 likes just like that within the stretch of a couple of minutes, I would say.

And there's someone who says, "There's a huge amount of people who want to know your last name, Jen." She replies with, "A girl has no (last) name."

Veronika: Do we know that one, a girl has no name? Do we know that one? Where's that from?

Bernard: Well, I'll quote; later on, someone says, "Holy crap! She's quoting Game of Thrones too! This woman has it all."

Veronika: So, she makes another pop cultural reference, really. And then the praise gets even reinforced. So, that goes down really well with her audience on Twitter, "Love her even more now, how intriguing." And then you have various multiple exclamation marks, etc.

Erika: Yeah, and as this love pours out, this, of course, reflects back very positively on Skyscanner to the point where somebody says, "I've never used Skyscanner before but after reading this thread, I'm so there."

Veronika: Free publicity and it actually has an effect now.

Bernard: At the very end of that conversation, you can see that the people are rounding off, right? So, there is a time that it has to stop eventually. And someone says, "James, it's been a wonderful six days so here's a few bits and bobs on their way to you." So again, this person who initiated the tweet gets a reward, "hopefully, they'll come in useful during the next 47 years in Bangkok," which is the last kind of wink to the initial problem. And his reply at the end is, "Thank you for being wonderful sports," plural, "and feel free to come and visit anytime in the next half century." So, look at that.

Veronika: Yeah, you have very conventional greeting exchanges here so a little reward and thank you for that and oh, you've been great, thank you but they tie these conventional bye-byes in with referencing that joke that it all started with, really, you know, the 47 year layover.

Bernard: And if you think about the afterlife of this particular example, look at us and what we're doing, we're actually sharing this example again with people who are listening to the podcast so it goes on and on and on. And again, this is publicity, if you want, for Skyscanner so you're welcome, Skyscanner.

Veronika: We're waiting for our reward! (Laughter)

Right, okay, so that gives a bit of an insight, we hope.

Erika: Yes, we hope you enjoyed the podcast and you've picked up a few good tips for sounding more credible, being authentic or how to respond to customer reviews online.

Veronika: Okay, thanks everybody, bye, bye and until next month.

Bernard: Thank you, bye, bye.

END OF AUDIO