Chapter 9
"I fully agree with you☺": Graphic and lexical boosters and attitude markers on discussion forums

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Abstract

Discussion forums present a new form of academic discourse. E-learning and learning platforms such as Moodle offer new possibilities in teaching and learning, with students actively using Netspeak in teacher-student communication. The aim of this paper is to provide a cross-cultural analysis of posts published on discussion forums, with an emphasis on the boosters and attitude markers used. Three Moodle courses from a higher education institution, two in Serbian and one in English, were included in the analysis. Students with Serbian as L1 and English as L2 were encouraged to post on forums after every lecture; for the analysis, a corpus of 166 posts in Serbian and 200 posts in English was collected. Posts were written for academic purposes, yet as informal texts, without any training in academic writing. This paper will analyse the use of boosters and attitude markers as lexical elements and the use of emoticons and images as graphical elements that are not to be regularly found in academic contexts, while recurrently present in Netspeak and students' idiolects. The

cross-cultural analysis will demonstrate whether these elements are to be found in one language only, or in both L1 and L2, and whether transfer is common in their use.

Keywords: boosters, attitude markers, Moodle, discussion forums, emoticons

Izvleček

Forumi predstavljajo novo obliko akademskega diskurza. E-učenje in spletna učna okolja, kakršen je Moodle, ponujajo nove možnosti za poučevanje in učenje, pri katerih študentje aktivno uporabljajo jezik interneta za komunikacijo.. Namen pričujočega prispevka je predstaviti medkulturno analizo objav na spletnih forumih s poudarkom na ojačevalcih in označevalcih odnosa do okolja. V analizo so bili vključeni trije visokošolski predmeti v učnem okolju Moodle, dva predmeta sta potekala v srbščini, tretji pa v angleščini. Študente, katerih prvi jezik je bila srbščina, angleščina pa je bil njihov drugi jezik, so spodbudili, da objavljajo na spletnem forumu po vsakem predavanju. Za analizo je bil zgrajen korpus 166 objav v srbščini in 200 v angleščini. Objave sodijo v okvir akademskega diskurza, vendar so besedila neformalna in so nastala brez posebnega pouka akademskega pisanja. V prispevku bo analizirana raba ojačevalcev in označevalcev odnosa do vsebine in raba emotikonov in slik kot grafičnih elementov, ki niso del običajne akademske komunikacije, so pa pogosto prisotni v jeziku interneta in študentskih idiolektih. Medkulturna analiza bo pokazala, ali se ti elementi pojavljajo le v enem jeziku ali v obeh, prav tako bo pokazala, ali pri njihovi uporabi pogosto pride do transferja.

Ključne besede: ojačevalci, označevalci odnosa do vsebine, Moodle, spletni forum, emotikoni

1   INTRODUCTION

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to human communication that occurs through the use of computers (McQuail 2005, 552). This type of communication is a blend of spoken and written language and can be synchronous or asynchronous (Crystal 2001). Synchronous communication occurs in real-time when the users are engaged in communication simultaneously (e.g. video calls, online video conferencing). On the other hand, asynchronous communication is communication with a time lag, where users do not have to communicate at the same time; they can read the message, do research, if needed, and finally write a reply. When used correctly, this can be as effective as discussions in the classroom. Its benefits include flexibility, quality and quantity in participation, communication openness and post-participation review (Morse 2003).

The type of language people use depends on the situation they are in. Academic communication demands formal vocabulary, complex sentence structures, as well as the use of participles and linking expressions in order to express one's ideas clearly and concise. On the other hand, CMC establishes new variety of written language with the elements of spoken communication. Crystal (2001) calls this type of language Netspeak, which is "identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both" (Crystal 2001, 47). Some of its distinctive features include the use of abbreviations (LOL – laugh out loud), emoticons (☹, ☺), repeated letters (waay), capital letters (WOW), repeated punctuation marks (!!!!!), and the like (Crystal 2001; Herring 2001). It is to be expected that Netspeak is infiltrating discussion forums on learning platforms, thus introducing typically non-academic language features into academic communication among students and professors.

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, it is to provide a cross-cultural analysis of the posts written by students in Serbian as L1 and in English as L2 and posted on discussion forums. The analysis will emphasize the similarities and differences when students write in different languages. However, since the analysis of such corpora may require more detail, it had to be narrowed down to two metadiscourse elements as indicators of the transition and alterations present in CMC in academic setting. Hence, the second goal of the paper is to analyse the use of boosters and attitude markers as lexical elements and the use of emoticons and images as graphical elements in students' posts published on discussion forums on the learning platform Moodle.

The study has been guided by several research questions:

1. Do students use boosters and attitude markers differently when they write in L1 (Serbian) and in L2 (English)?

2. How frequently do they use boosters and attitude markers when they write on discussion forums?

3. How often do they use graphic features to complement the linguistic ones?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Metadiscourse features

Metadiscourse refers to expressions of social engagement used in academic context as a way for writers to project themselves into the discourse and signal their understanding of the content and the audience (Hyland 2010). It is a widely used term, with a number of diverse interpretations (Ädel 2006; Crismore 1989; Hyland 2005a; Mauranen 1993, 2010). Hyland (2005a, 37) defines metadiscourse as the cover term for all self-reflecting expressions used in a text to negotiate meanings, assisting the writer to express certain viewpoints and simultaneously engaging the reader into those viewpoints. Interactive metadiscourse helps in guiding the reader through the text. It is concerned with the writer's awareness of a reader; hence, it includes expressions of text shape and organization. Interactive metadiscourse expressions are a consequence of the assessment by the author on the assumed comprehension of the reader and their need for guidance (Hyland 2005a, 50). Interactional metadiscourse, on the other hand, presents writer's attitudes, constraints, and opinions, involving the reader into the writer's vision presented in the text. These expressions act to anticipate, acknowledge, suppress or challenge alternative and opposite positions by expanding or restricting opportunities for a certain view (White 2003). Though a number of writers do not regard metadiscourse in the interactional approach (Adel 2006; Mauranen 1993, 2010), this aspect is crucial in conceptualizing communication as a form of social engagement, where the writer has the possibility of clearly signalling their attitudes towards the content as well as the audience (Hyland and Tse 2004).

An important feature in academic discourse is to modify assertions, emphasizing what one believes to be correct and conveying appropriately collegial attitudes to readers. These expressions of certainty and the author's attitude are known as metadiscourse features, boosters and attitude markers (Hyland 2005a). Boosters present the author's confident voice, since they emphasize certainty and mark both personal involvement with the topic and solidarity with the audience (Hyland 1999a), stressing shared information, group membership, and direct engagement with an audience (Hyland 1998a). Boosters also convey commitment to the content of the text and respect for readers, aiming to persuade them of the

correctness of the claims it contains. In contrast, instead of being committed to the status of information, attitude markers allow the author to convey surprise, agreement, importance, obligation, frustration, etc (Hyland 2005a, 53). Attitude markers may appear with positive meaning (*fortunately, outstanding*) as well as negative meaning (*with little justification, surprisingly*).

The importance of metadiscourse has been emphasized in research on casual conversation (Schiffrin 1980), textbooks (Bogdanović 2017; Crismore 1989; Hyland 2000), and dissertations (Akbas and Hardman, 2018; Alotaibi, 2018; Swales 1990). Studies have also investigated the metadiscourse features in texts written by different cultural groups (Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen 1993; Mauranen 1993b), novice researchers (Bogdanović and Mirović 2018), even different genders (Alotaibi 2018), as well as English as a Second Language (ESL) and native speaker student writing (Cheng and Steffensen 1996; Intraprawat and Steffensen 1995). Apart from these studies dealing with many features of metadiscourse, a number of works focused on only one or two categories. The most researched of these are hedges (e.g. Hyland 1998a, 1998b; Pisanski Peterlin 2010), followed by self mentions (e.g. Hyland 2001; Karahan 2013). Boosters are usually investigated together with hedges as their counterparts (e.g. Hyland 1998a; MacIntyre 2017), though they can be studied separately (e.g. Peacock 2008; Vázquez and Giner 2009), while attitude markers have not aroused much interest in academia (e.g. Blagojević 2009). Since there have been no similar studies so far on the use of attitude markers and boosters on English and Serbian discussion forums, the authors decided to analyse these two metadiscourse markers and their use in contemporary academic writing.

A number of researchers have carried out cross-cultural research on the use of metadiscourse. For example, Pérez-Llantada (2010) presented a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic analysis of text- and participant- oriented metadiscourse elements in the introduction and discussion sections of research articles, concluding that the frequency of metadiscourse is similar across cultures, though different preferences can be observed. Contrastive studies indicate that metadiscourse elements vary in different languages. When compared to English, metadiscourse is less used in German, (Clyne 1987), Finnish (Mauranen 1993), Turkish (Akbas and Hardman 2017, 2018; Hatipoğlu and Algı 2018), and Slavic languages such as Polish (Duszak 1994), Slovene (Pisanski Peterlin 2005) and Serbian (Blagojević 2005; Bogdanović and Mirović 2013), which presents yet another obstacle for L2 academicians' prospects to publish successfully in English. This is the conclusion of several studies focusing on the use of metadiscourse by Serbian researchers writing in English (Blagojević 2005; Bogdanović and Mirović 2013); these studies demonstrate that Serbian academicians do not use metadiscourse features sufficiently. However, a recent study by Mirović and Bogdanović (2016) is more reassuring, suggesting that same authors can vary and adapt their use of metadiscourse elements when writing in Serbian and in English. The pervasiveness of metadiscourse

features in academic discourse calls for further investigation into the use of meta-discourse by students as future academicians, which could provide pedagogical implications to improve their possibilities of publishing in the future. In accordance with this, the task of this study is to answer the questions raised regarding the cross-cultural presence of booster and attitude markers on discussion forums.

2.2   Boosters as verbal and non-verbal metadiscourse communication features

Boosters are metadiscourse expressions that allow writers to express certainty, mark their involvement, or communicate their solidarity with the audience. Boosters are expressions that can balance objective information, subjective evaluation and interpersonal negotiation (Hyland 2005b), which can be a powerful feature in gaining acceptance for one's claims. These expressions suggest that writers recognize potentially diverse positions, and choose to narrow them using a single, confident voice. Boosters include evidential verbs (*show, demonstrate, dokazati*), adverbs explaining accepted truth (*substantially, obviously, clearly, očigledno, izvesno*), and factual phrases (*it is clear that, in fact, sigurni smo, pokazuje veoma jasno*). However, following the use of Netspeak, boosters can also be presented as capital, bold or underlined letters and phrases (*WOW, DIVNO*), as well as repetitions of vowels in a word (*waay, Jaooo*).

In face-to-face communication, non-verbal communication (e.g. facial expressions and body language) can indicate happiness, satisfaction, fear or anger, and thus deliver additional information demonstrating true feelings related to a specific situation and revealing changes in mood. In online communication, emoticons can do the same. These are graphic representations of facial expressions, boosters for linguistic expressions, and as such they represent a distinctive feature of Netspeak. Emoticons are combinations of keyboard characters used to illustrate positive or negative emotions (e.g. happy face – ☺, sad face – ☹, laugh – :D etc.). They are used for expressing one's sentiments or as surrogates for non-verbal communication (Thompsen and Foulger 1996, 226). Godin (1993, 4) points out that, "until the advent of the smiley, otherwise known as emoticon, individuals using electronic communication had no way to indicate the subtle mood changes". Several studies have revealed that emoticons emphasize and simplify the meaning of a written message (Crystal 2001; Rezabek and Cochenour 1998; Walther and D'Addario 2001). They help convey and clarify the meaning of the textual communication (Kindred and Roper 2004; Walther and D'Addario 2001), assisting communication to become more effective and efficient, as well as supporting the participants in CMC to express their emotions

in strictly text-based communication. Apart from emoticons as graphic representations of feelings and attitudes, images, links or documents can also visually convey commitment to the text and the message uttered.

The aim of the present study is to observe whether students use boosters when writing on discussion forums, as well as the manner in which they use them. The study will try to compare the use of verbal and graphic boosters and make an attempt to draw a conclusion on the representations of feeling and attitude presented by these metadiscourse features.

2.3   Attitude markers as verbal and non-verbal metadiscourse communication features

Attitude markers present metadiscourse expressions that indicate the writer's affective attitude to proposition (content). They can convey surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, etc. (Hyland 2005a, 2005b). These include attitude verbs (*agree, prefer, složiti se, nadati se*), modal verbs expressing obligation (*must, should, trebati, morati, smeti*), sentence adverbs (*unfortunately, ironically, nažalost, neočekivano, istini za volju*), and adjectives (*appropriate, logical, remarkable, značajno, drastično*). Writers use them to express their position on the content and to persuade readers to have the same opinion. Attitude can also be expressed by the use of subordination, comparatives, progressive particles, punctuation, text location, etc, which are not going to be analysed in this study. Apart from lexical items, attitude can be expressed by exclamation marks and graphically, using emoticons.

This study will try to determine whether graphic communication is present on discussion forums to express one's attitude and used together with the lexical attitude markers.

2.4   Discussion forums

In the context of this study, online discussion forums provide the space for posting written contributions during the time frame set by the teacher. Within such a forum, students can start a number of threads. Each thread deals with one aspect of the given topic. The discussion is visible to all participants even after being closed, providing the opportunity for reflection (Greenlaw and DeLoach 2003; Salmon 2002).

Simply creating an asynchronous discussion forum and writing a topic of discussion is not enough to have successful discussions in a classroom (Guldberg

and Pilkington 2006). Instead, discussion topics have to be related to the course objectives, with specific open-end questions which encourage students to take a certain position on an issue. Participating in online discussion forums means that students have flexibility to contribute to the discussion when they are prepared, i.e. at their convenience (Biesenbach-Lucas 2003). Likewise, discussion forums are especially suitable for students who suffer from anxiety when speaking a foreign language or those who are just shy when it comes to speaking in public. In addition, discussion forums may be an efficient educational tool in large classes which lack student participation in classroom discussions.

A number of studies analysed the use of discussion forums in education (Biesenbach-Lucas 2003; Chizmar and Walbert 1999; Shaw and Pieter 2000; Skogs 2014). Discussion forums, due to the student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction they encourage, proved to be a valuable tool for clarifying difficult topics analysed in class (Chizmar and Walbert 1999). The results of a study (Skogs 2014) suggest that students' written online interaction on discussion forums is more similar to academic prose than conversation, implying that students do write in a manner suitable for academic discourse. Even though every computer-mediated environment can exhibit certain challenges, such as technology frustration, coordination difficulties, timing/delay frustration, or skills deficits (Morse 2003, 39), culture also seems to play an important role in CMC communication, since individual behavioural patterns determine the modes for interpreting, assimilating and adapting the CMC experience (Morse 2003, 40). Cultural background directly influences the benefits and drawbacks of asynchronous communication, influencing the assumed learning patterns. Grading is a motivating factor as well, since students are more likely to post messages when graded and encouraged by the active involvement of their instructors (Bagherian and Thorngate 2000). Instructors, on the other hand, may be enthusiastic about the educational potential of asynchronous communication, yet worried about time spent on reading, answering and grading students' posts without adequate career rewards for the activity. All the related studies suggest that online learning and discussion forums may become effective practice if associated with predicted positive learning attitudes and higher achievement (Shaw and Pieter 2000, 17).

3   METHODOLOGY

For the qualitative and quantitative analysis presented in this paper, two corpora were collected, one in Serbian and the other in English. On beginning the research, it became apparent that professors rarely use discussion forums in their Serbian courses. Finally, the authors managed to obtain access to two courses at

the University of Novi Sad, Serbia. The first one is a course in Fundamentals in Project Management with third year undergraduate students (aged 20–22) at the Faculty of Technical Sciences, Novi Sad. The other one is a course in Hispanic Cultures with fourth year undergraduate students (aged 21–23) at the Department of Romance Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad. The English corpus was gathered from a course in English for Engineers with first year undergraduate studies (students aged 18–20) at the Faculty of Technical Sciences, Novi Sad.

Prior to participating in these courses, none of the students had any preparation or instruction in academic writing. Students speak Serbian as their mother tongue, and according to their curricula all students should have B2 level English language knowledge (following CEFR). Their courses and discussion forums were partially or completely supported by a Moodle platform, though some of the students used Facebook communication as a forum.

As already mentioned, learning was supported by Moodle, a learning management system designed to create and organize online courses via the Internet (https://moodle.org/). It provides students with online materials and activities for studying and also offers the possibility of online communication via discussion forums. In the course in English, a number of topics related to technology were offered to students to encourage discussions on the forums. The posts were posted voluntarily by students during one semester. In two courses in Serbian, lasting for one semester each, professors also left a number of topics on discussion forums for students to comment on or they used the forums to ask questions related to the course and present tasks that had to be completed.

In total, 200 posts were collected in English (24,796 words) and 166 posts in Serbian (3,212 words). Posts were gathered and coded manually by both authors. A potential list of boosters and attitude markers was compiled using the literature (Farrokhi and Emami 2008; Hyland 2005). The list was complemented with Serbian equivalents, and other examples were added as they occurred in the posts. The final list is presented in the Appendix. The list contains both single words and multi-word phrases. The latter were regarded as single markers, following Hyland's idea (Hyland 1999b) that it is easier to compare the occurrences and not the length of metadiscourse markers in corpora of unequal sizes. Hence, phrases and complex structures were quantified as single items and are listed as a single item in the Appendix. The authors worked independently on the entire corpus, listing and counting all the examples found, and they compared the results afterwards. In cases of disagreement, data were reviewed again by both authors and any further disagreement was resolved by discussion. For the purpose of comparison in the study, the percentages used present the percentage of metadiscourse marker occurrences in the entire Serbian and English corpora.

4   CORPUS ANALYSIS

In learning both general and academic vocabulary in ESL, boosters and attitude markers have not been provided with any general attention. Indeed, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) textbooks tend to focus on how referential information is typically conveyed, largely disregarding epistemic aspects of texts (Hyland 2000, 181). It can be assumed that students use these expressions mostly intuitively, without adequate knowledge. Therefore, this study can reveal the way students use specific discourse markers bringing unconscious processing and subjective perceptions into conscious reporting on discussion forums, without prior academic knowledge of them.

4.1   Boosters

As already mentioned, boosters are metadiscourse expressions that allow writers to express certainty, mark their involvement, or communicate their solidarity with the audience. These can be words or phrases; however, boosters can also be presented as capital, bold or underlined letters and phrases, as well as repetitions of vowels in a word. In addition, apart from emoticons as graphic representations of feelings and attitudes, images, links or documents can also visually convey commitment to the text and the message uttered.

Table 1: Number of boosters on discussion forum posts (% of total corpus)

Lexical boosters in Serbian		Lexical boosters in English		Graphic boosters in Serbian posts		Graphic boosters in English posts	
51	1.58%	335	1.35%	98	3.05%	17	0.06%

As it can be observed from Table 1 (and the Appendix), the students do not use a lot of boosters in their posts. This was to be expected, since they have not learnt to use them, and they do not feel the need to express certainty in their statements. The situation is the same when they write in Serbian (1.58% of boosters in the posts) and in English (1.35%). Hyland (1999b, 10) researched the frequency of metadiscourse features in academic textbooks, finding boosters to be one of the rarest categories used, with 5.1% boosters present in the corpora. Vázquez and Giner (2009) argue that the use of boosters differs by discipline, finding it to be much higher in marketing than in mechanical engineering and biology, where there are still more boosters than on these discussion forums. Peacock (2008) found boosters to be even less frequent in research articles over six disciplines.

Hence, it is not surprising that students can recognize and use an even smaller proportion of these items.

Table 2: Most frequent boosters in posts

Frequency ranking	Boosters in Serbian posts	Total of boosters in Serbian posts		Boosters in English posts	Total of boosters in English posts	
		No.	%		No.	%
1	emoticons	62	41.61%	think	58	16.48%
2	pictures	20	13.42%	really	39	11.08%
3	vowel repetition	13	8.72%	very	35	9.94%
4	links	8	5.37%	always	21	5.97%
5	videos	4	2.68%	actually	17	4.83%

On the other hand, what is surprising are the boosters that student do utilize in their writing (Table 2, Appendix). When writing in English, students prefer the verb *think* (1),[1] as well as the adverbs *really* (1) and *actually*. However, when they write in Serbian, lexical boosters can be found rarely, in only several instances (2). Instead, students use graphic boosters to present their ideas.

(1)　We can't know how exactly communication is going to look. What we can do is make a prediction. I guess that in 100 years' time we will have hologram phones or something like that. Would'n it be cool to call someone and be able to see, in front of you, a hologram of that someone? I *think* that would be *extremely* cool, and I would love if that were possible in the near future 'cause I *really* don't want to wait a 100 years for that to happen. (EP69[2])

(2)　Lično sam *izuzetno zadovoljna* onim što sam naučila, dosta sam se zabavila prilikom izrade zadatka. Žao mi je što nisam imala *više* vremena da *dublje* izučim ono što smo radili, ali nadam se da ću imati priliku tokom leta. Srećno!! :) (SP103)

In the English posts, boosters are used to persuade the readers that the authors are experts on the topic (3), that they are certain in their statements (4), or that they have a high degree of confidence in the veracity of their statement (5). Also, these expressions are used to stress the author's personal opinion, convincing the reader

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1　Although the verb *think* may be suspected to be a hedging device due to the lower degree of commitment and certainty, the authors regard it as a booster, following the list of metadiscourse markers provided by Hyland (2005).

2　In coding the posts, EP stands for English post and SP for Serbian post, followed by a post number.

to accept it as such (6). The boosters posted by Serbian students on discussion forums differ from those made by students from Iran (Tajeddin and Alemi 2012, 110), who prefer the verb *think*, but also the verbs *believe* and *know*, rather than using adverbs as boosters (Table 2).

(3)   *Without a doubt* the dark web is *indeed* a dangerous place, hidden underneath the everyday users superficial internet browsing. The dark web has many invisible content that goes by unnoticeable by search engines, thus making it hard for the authorities to regulate it. (EP97)

(4)   Using computers in any designer profession is one of the main things in achieving the best possible results. Trying to consume and make an idea, first in some graphic program, and then putting it in the realization is the first thing. *Of course*, besides that, internet can be a constant renewable source for inspiration. (EP54)

(5)   Should I worry? Reason for caring *certainly* has, but not for everything. First of all, thanks to the success of Silk Road, new onion domains have emerged that basically provide the same functionality as the original Silk Road. (EP98)

(6)   I *completely* agree with most of your statements. Video games play a major role in modern society, and can *definitely* have a positive impact on people. However, if we do not properly manage the time we spend playing video games, it can turn into an obsession and even ruin personal relationships. (EP128)

When writing on discussion forums in Serbian, it is clear that students feel freer in their mother tongue. They transfer the skills of tweeting and Netspeak into posts in Serbian rather than elaborating their vocabulary. In this study, it can be observed that students do not regard discussion forums as academic discourse; rather, they write and behave as on any other social network. As a result, they boost their short posts with emoticons (7), pictures, links (8) and videos.

(7)   Ja sam baš zadovoljna mojim kursem, skroz mi se svidja *:))* Završen i predat za ocenjivanje *:D* (SP146)

(8)   Ja se u potpunosti slažem sa njime samo sam mišljenja sa još nisam dovoljno zreo da pokrenem svoj biznis, ali definitivno to je pravac kojim težim. Pogledajte ovo malo *:)* https://youtu.be/Slt12gj67S0 (SP99)

It can be observed that posts in Serbian are much shorter than the ones in English. It seems that students are not capable or not willing to express themselves in words, boosters and attitude markers included. And while they are making an effort in a foreign language to express themselves in longer and more accurate

statements, they do not do the same in Serbian. They compensate for a lack of vocabulary with pictures and emoticons, as visual representatives of their certainty and attitude. The Serbian corpus has 77 emoticons expressing happiness, surprise, irony or sadness, out of which 62 are used as boosters (9) and 15 for no evident reason (10). There are also six pictures standing alone and having a meaning of their own, without any words accompanying them. These cannot be categorized, since they cannot be linked to anything except students' willingness to present them to other students.

(9) Meni se dopada, divno je 🙂 (SP69)

(10) Kako je bilo danas na fakultetu sa našim gostima? 🙂 (SP15)

Likewise, following Netspeak, posts in Serbian have multiple vowels in words as boosters to express author's involvement and solidarity with the audience. While there are 13 instances of vowel repetition (11), as well as seven instances of punctuation mark repetition (12), there is only one such case in the English posts (13).

(11) eeeeeeeee tii suuu 🙂 važii, hvala ti! (SP21)

(12) Svi su odlični, Kristina! Bravo!!! (SP71)

(13) Not so much related to the topic, but what do you guys think about the conspiracy that the processor power our technology achieved today was available _waay_ before, just that companies kept following Moore's law ('the doubling of processor power will occur every two years') so that they can put out a *new and better* product out every year and make more money? (EP10)

It may be concluded that students, while writing in a foreign language, have more sense of communication being an academic discourse. On the other hand, Netspeak is prevailing in students' mother tongue. This has to be considered rather seriously, since a number of these students will eventually join academia, bringing multiple vowels and emoticons into academic discourse while not being able to elaborate their certainty or opinion.

4.2   Attitude markers

As mentioned earlier, attitude markers present metadiscourse expressions that indicate the writer's affective attitude to a proposition (content) and try to persuade readers into having the same opinion. Apart from lexical items, attitude can be expressed by exclamation marks and graphically, using emoticons.

Table 3: Number of attitude markers on discussion forum posts (% of total corpus)

Lexical attitude markers in Serbian		Lexical attitude markers in English		Graphic attitude markers in Serbian posts		Graphic attitude markers in English posts	
82	2.55%	279	1.12%	5	0.15%	3	0.01%

Attitude markers are also not used very often (Table 3 and the Appendix). There were only 1.12% of attitude markers in the corpus of English posts in total, which is much less than the percentage (6.3%) of these markers used in academic textbooks (Hyland 1999b, 10), meaning that students should have read these markers frequently and, consequently, should have used them more often. However, if compared to the results of Blagojević (2009, 71), it seems that Serbian students use attitude markers more than Serbian researchers when they write in Serbian (0.40%) or English (0.36%). These results can also be compared to the only 0.45% attitude markers found in 200 research articles' discussion sections, as reported by Dobakhti (2013). This can be explained by the fact that students have a need to express their opinion and emotion while presenting a thought on a discussion forum, as well as the fact that students tend to be more direct and have not yet adopted the academic rules of hedging and stance. This is even more evident when students post in Serbian (2.55%) and express their agreement with the statements and the importance of the statement itself.

Table 4: Most frequent attitude markers in posts

Frequency ranking	Attitude markers in Serbian posts	Total of attitude markers in Serbian posts		Attitude markers in English posts	Total of attitude markers in English posts	
		No.	%		No.	%
1	!	22	25.29%	agree	89	31.56%
2	moći	14	16.09%	even x	66	23.40%
3	morati	7	8.04%	important	24	8.51%
4	slažem se	5	5.75%	!	10	3.55%
5	trebalo bi	5	5.75%	interesting	9	3.19%

As can be observed from Table 4 (and the Appendix), there are two features used in both Serbian and English posts, namely exclamation marks (14, 15) and the verbs *agree/slažem se* (14, 16). Exclamation marks can be regarded as a visual feature, contributing to emoticons and pictures used as graphic boosters.

(14) I absolutely *agree* with you*!* Living in the era like this where everything is digitized, good (or even unbreakable) encryption is one of the most important problems engineers are facing. (EP53)

(15) I od mene srećno svima*!* :) (SP106)

(16) Ja se takođe *slažem* sa njegovom izjavom, međutim postoji još razloga zbog kojih se ljudi odluče za posao pre nego da pokrenu svoj biznis. Na primer, neki ljudi ne žele da preuzmu toliki rizik i toliko odgovornosti na sebe, lakše im je da rade za nekog i tako se osećaju sigurnije. Takođe, ne žele svi da steknu bogatsvo, već su zadovoljni platama i takvim načinom života. :) (SP100)

In the Serbian posts (Table 4), it is evident that students' attitude is mostly expressed using verbs. There are individual instances of phrases such as *drago mi je, što se mene tiče, po mom mišljenju*; however, verbs are used more frequently (17, 18).

(17) Takodje se *slažem*, nisu svi ljudi spremni da preuzmu taj rizik. Imati svoj biznis predstavlja i mnogo žrtve i zapostavljanja porodice. Svako *mora* pronaći šta mu najviše prija i u čemu uživa. (SP101)

(18) Mislila sam da sam zapisala sve korake redom kako treba, međutim nešto *očigledno* nije u redu :) S obzirom da vidite celu formulu, da li *možete* da mi kažete šta je greška, zbog čega ne radi? (SP143)

Example 14 is very interesting, since it combines the booster *absolutely* to commit to the agreement using the attitude verb *agree*, and complements it all with the exclamation mark as the attitude marker. This example also has the attitude marker *even* expressing surprise; *even*, as in the example 19, can also express extreme surprise.

(19) There are skillful hackers who can lock you away from your own social media accounts and steal your personal information. They can steal your identity, hack your bank account and steal your money and *even* track your movement using street cameras and by tracking your credit card activity. No matter what you do, you are not safe. (EP35)

Students used adjectives which function as subject complements in sentences with the expletive *it*, such as *it is necessary, it is important, it is impossible* (20, 21). Serbian counterparts, such as *potrebno je, obavezno, razumljivo je* can be observed in only one instance, and this is due to the student's idiolect rather than the transfer of vocabulary.

These findings concur with Dobakhti (2013). The author analysed the discussion sections in research articles, and found that the researchers prefer adjectives,

which comprised around 70% of all attitude markers, with *important*, *appropriate* and *interesting* being the most frequent. The second category used were adverbs, among which *even* was the most frequently utilized. *Even* (14, 19), *important* (20), and *interesting* are among the most used attitude markers on discussion forums in English (Table 4), though *even* is more used than adjectives, and verbs are used more than both adjectives and adverbs.

> (20) (…) For a company to be successful, <u>*it is necessary*</u> to create a website in order for its customers, potential employees, business partners, even investors to find out more about the products and services it offers. Accordingly, if you don't have a website, you potentially lose a lot of jobs that companies with websites can easily get. <u>*It is very important*</u> to take the creation of a website seriously. To make a good first impression, the site needs to be well-designed. Otherwise, the website will spoil the image of your company. (EP78)

> (21) Although the first PCs were developed primarily because of military needs, today <u>*it is almost impossible*</u> to imagine our day-to-day life without them. Computers have completely changed the world in the past three decades. They have replaced printing machines, fax machines, calendars, newspapers, and a lot of other things, and thus greatly facilitated our lives. (EP88)

When posting on discussion forums in English, it appears that students in different countries tend to use the same attitude markers. For example, the attitude markers used by Serbian students (Table 4) correspond to markers used by Iranian students (Tajeddin and Alemi 2012) on discussion forums. In Tajeddin and Alemi (2012, 107), the students most frequently used *important*, *agree, even, unfortunately, interesting* and *prefer*. The Serbian students did use most of these (Table 4), including *unfortunately* (six instances); however, they did not seem to like the verb *prefer*. This comparison demonstrates that cultural background may not be a relevant issue when using English Netspeak in CMC. This finding is in accordance with Hyland's (2005) argument that globalization has increased intercultural and interlingual contacts, as well as the demand for learning rhetorical features that subsequently affect academic writing in English, although not present in one's own non-English writing culture. Unfortunately, even though one would assume that cross-cultural differences may exist when comparing L1 Netspeak, there have not been any comparative studies among two or more L1 that would provide more information on the issue.

Unlike in English, apart from verbs, posts in Serbian do not have many other parts of speech expressing students' attitude. There are individual examples of *bilo bi divno, po mom mišljenju, što se mene tiče*. In posts in English, there are also

individual examples of attitude markers such as *remarkable, unbelievable, surprised*. It seems that the students used them intuitively, without any knowledge of the feeling these can arouse in the audience. One more interesting attitude marker is the use of two words, *cool* (22) in English posts (nine instances) and *divno* (23) in Serbian posts (five instances). These two words, often followed by one or more exclamation marks, and sometimes even capitalized, present excitement, surprise and interest by the students as authors, definitely arousing the same emotions in the students as the audience.

(22) It was <u>cool</u> that he mentioned World of Warcraft as an example for software. I think it's realy <u>cool</u> to develop games and even make hardware for gaming. I hope that some day i become a game developer so i can develop games that like :D (EP19)

(23) Ovo je jedna verzija bookmarks, uradila bih 3–4 sa različitim slikama, ali bih da čujem vaše mišljenje 🙂 (SP67)

Meni se dopada, <u>*divno*</u>🙂 (SP69)

(24) Dobro jutro vrijedni ljudi! 🙂 (SP19)

Unlike boosting, graphic elements were not used in the analysed corpus to provide the author's attitude. There were no images as attitude markers. There were only five instances of emoticons in the posts in Serbian, two of them ironic (16) and three showing that the author is evidently joking (24). In posts in English, the students used emoticons as attitude markers in only three instances. Thus, it can be concluded that attitude is still uttered lexically rather than graphically.

5   CONCLUSION

Discussion forums present an effective alternative to classroom communication, due to their flexibility, quality and quantity in participation, communication openness and possible post-participation review. Although intended for academic communication between students and professors, they present a blended writing approach, with the elements of formality used together with Netspeak. In expressing their opinion and certainty about written statements, students only occasionally present their attitude, using both lexical and graphical boosters and attitude markers, as expected.

The present study was an attempt to answer several research questions regarding the cross-cultural presence of booster and attitude markers on discussion forums. The research represents a small step towards examining the presence and use of

attitude markers and boosters in posts published on discussion forums and written by Serbian students in Serbian and English. The authors of this study are aware of certain limitations due to the relatively small size of the corpora, and further research is needed for a more detailed assessment of the results. Future research could include more undergraduate students from diverse departments, which would provide larger corpora, or even students with diverse L1, which would provide a better insight into cross-cultural similarities and diversities.

The first research question was concerned with the diversity of usage in the two languages. The conclusion is that there is not much lexical diversity in using boosters and attitude markers in writing. Students prefer boosters in English posts in order to increase the persuasive force of their statements, while they often use attitude markers to express their position on the issue and to persuade readers into having the same opinion. The results of the study also indicate that the posts written in Serbian mostly have just verbs as attitude markers, disregarding the possibility to use boosters in order to be more persuasive. This can be explained by the fact that students tend to be more direct in their L1 and hence they express their agreement with the statement more freely. When writing in a foreign language, students tend to write more complex sentences to sound more formal. On the other hand, in the Serbian posts, students rarely use lexical boosters and often rely on emoticons to boost their ideas. Netspeak prevails in their writing, e.g. the usage of multiple vowels in words as boosters to express their involvement and solidarity with the audience, and the insertion of emoticons to illustrate their emotions. It can be observed that students use similar expressions in both languages, e.g. adjectives *cool/divno* as boosters to express their excitement, surprise or interest, and verbs *agree/slažem se* as attitude markers.

In relation to the second research question, the study demonstrates that students do not frequently use boosters and attitude markers when they write on discussion forums. In the analysed corpus, lexical attitude markers account for 2.55% of the total word count in the Serbian corpus and 1.12% of the total English corpus, which can be explained by the fact that the students have not yet learnt academic writing skills. The students tend to be direct when expressing their surprise, agreement, importance or frustration. In addition, they do not use a lot of boosters in their posts either. Lexical boosters account for 1.58% of the total Serbian corpus and 1.35% of the total English corpus. Students rarely express certainty in their posts, especially in the corpus written in Serbian. Though one cannot provide a clear explanation for this, the lack of boosters may be attributed both to the lack of authorial voice of undergraduate students and the setup of assignments on the learning platforms. One of the findings indicates that students compensate for the lack of lexical boosters with graphic boosters (3.05% of the total Serbian corpus), which they are more familiar with and more certain in using. Hence, the results of this study indicate that students do not often use these expressions as a means of surprise, agreement, certainty or persuasion in their online communication, regardless of the language used.

The third research question addresses the issue of using graphic features to complement the linguistic ones. The study demonstrates that the students use graphic features to boost their statements in Serbian rather than in English. When they write in English, the students tend to use lexical features, probably having more sense of the communication being a form of academic discourse. Another possible reason could be their lack of knowledge of L2 Netspeak. However, when they write in Serbian the students act as on any other social network, finishing their statements with emoticons and complementing them with pictures, videos or links, disregarding the fact that the communication is on an academic platform and that the teacher is one of the participants. This finding is evidence that Netspeak has entered academic discourse, i.e. that students, when writing in L1, use a variety of written language with the elements of spoken communication and graphic displays.

On a final note, in order to reduce the cultural input into academic writing, at least when boosters and attitude markers are concerned, teachers may refer to authors like Peacock (2008) and Hyland (1998b) who offer teaching suggestions on how to present and teach students how to use boosters, attitude markers or hedging in order to emphasize their opinion, certainty and commitment in academic communication. Moreover, since Netspeak may be expected to infiltrate discussion forums on learning platforms, teachers, being aware of this fact, may choose to utilize some classroom time to advise their students on certain (un) desirable (in)formal aspects in academic writing.

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Appendix

This is a list of boosters and attitude markers compiled from literature (Farrokhi and Emami 2008; Hyland 2005) and complemented with Serbian equivalents, as well as other occurrences that were added as they occurred while manually analyzing the corpora.

a) List of boosters and attitude markers on discussion forums in Serbian

BOOSTERS	Count	ATTITUDE MARKERS	Count
emoticons	62	!	22
pictures	20	moći	14
vowel repetition	13	morati	7
links	8	slažem se	5
capital letters	7	trebalo bi	5
video	4	*emoticons*	5
baš zadovoljna	4	bilo bi divno	3

BOOSTERS	Count	ATTITUDE MARKERS	Count
jako	4	nadamo se	3
Bravo!!!	4	mislim	3
u potpunosti se slažem	3	DIVNA FOTKA !!!	2
izuzetno	3	verovatno	2
veoma	2	potrebno je	2
underlined	2	žao mi je	2
bold	2	šteta je	1
dosta	2	pažljivo	1
Jao	2	obavezno	1
Word document	2	naglasite!	1
eeeee tii suuu	1	ne smeta	1
definitivno	1	po mom mišljenju	1
ne samo…već i…	1	razumljivo je	1
gif	1	bar naglasiti	1
poll	1	očigledno	1
		što se mene tiče	1
		drago mi je	1
		nikako	1

b) List of boosters and attitude markers on discussion forums in English

BOOSTERS	Count.	ATTITUDE MARKERS	Count
think	58	agree	89
really	39	even x	66
very	35	important	24
always	21	!	10
actually	17	interesting	9
believe	16	cool	9
completely	15	It is x	9
know	13	quite x	8
definitely	11	mostly	7
of course	11	x enough	6
sure	11	unfortunately	6
never	10	simply	5

BOOSTERS	Count.	ATTITUDE MARKERS	Count
photos	9	amazing	4
truly	8	disagree	4
emoticons	8	understandable	3
certain	5	emoticons	3
extremely	5	it is impossible	2
fully	5	it is necessary	2
absolutely	5	essential	2
find	4	essentially	1
totally	4	agrees	1
certainly	3	appropriate	1
far	3	astonished	1
found	3	expected	1
obvious	3	remarkable	1
proved	3	surprised	1
true	3	unbelievable	1
indeed	2	significantly	1
must (possibility)	2	it is dangerous	1
shown	2	it is the fact that	1
surely	2	it is a crucial	1
undoubtedly	2	claims	1
without doubt	2	logical	1
clear	1		
clearly	1		
consistently	1		
no doubt	1		
proves	1		
undeniable	1		
hold the view	1		
strongly	1		
wow	1		
hahaha	1		
vowel repetition	1		
bold letters	1		