Considering etic and emic perspectives on webcare

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Webcare has been defined by scholars as a communicative practice in which businesses engage in online interactions with (dissatisfied) consumers, with the aim of addressing consumer feedback – especially negative feedback (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). In this presentation, I share the findings of a study that investigated a range of practices observed in businesses’ reactions to nWOM, or negative word of mouth. Specifically, the study focused on 50 successful restaurants in a metropolitan area of the southeastern U.S. and examined the various ways in which those restaurants responded to negative reviews on two popular reviewing platforms, *TripAdvisor* and *Yelp*. I further triangulate the patterns of online responses observed with interview data gathered from the same set of businesses. In particular, I pay close attention to the metadiscourse used by businesses in describing their approaches to, and their interactions with, nWOM. Drawing on key notions from applied linguistics, such as *activity type* (Levinson, 1992; Sarangi, 2000) and *audience design* (Bell, 1984, 2001), I further explore the question of whether businesses conceptualize their own online practices as webcare – or rather, as some *other* type of activity. I argue that how businesses talk about their communicative practices is not only consequential, but that by attending to the language that they use in this regard, we can gain emic insights into how they understand the very activity they are – or are not – engaging in.