Reader Response in the Digital Age

Letters to the editor vs. below-the-line comments

A synchronic comparison

Dissertation

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1 Introduction

1.1 Reader response past and present

Heralded by some as the biggest revolution of the Internet, with great egalitarian and democratic potential, web 2.0 and social media are frowned on by others as sites where users constantly compete to take centre stage, more often than not by sharing everyday banalities, thus flooding the web with "tedious piffle" (Witchall 2010).[1] While it is true that it has never been so easy to 'put in your two cents' worth', the concept of *user-generated content* – one of the buzzwords of today's participatory web – can look back on a long tradition in newspapers, where letters to the editor have always been a highly popular way for readers to make their voices heard in public.[2] In their move online, newspapers started to add comment sections to their websites, thus taking readers' letters to the digital level. However, this does not mean that one genre simply replaced another. Willmott and Foster (2007: 5), the letters editors of the *Guardian*, describe the situation as follows:

> These new formats allow many more people to state their views and put their arguments, and also to express themselves much more freely, than the traditional letter to the editor. Yet so far there seems to be no significant drop in the number of those willing to craft their point of view to a largely predetermined style and length, in the knowledge that it stands at best a one in 10 chance of being published and, as often as not, tightly edited – and sometimes severely cut.

As different as these two forms of reader response may be, they both seem to appeal to a great number of people: every single day, the *Guardian* alone receives hundreds of letters and thousands or even tens of thousands of comments. Yet what do readers do when they post a comment below the line separating the journalistic product, i.e. the article, from the comment section? And how does this new form of reader response differ from writing a traditional letter to the editor?

Letters to the editor and below-the-line comments both constitute so-called *follow-ups,* i.e. "communicative acts […], in and through which a prior communicative act is accepted, challenged, or otherwise negotiated by

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[1] According to Herring (2013: 1), "the term Web 2.0 has become associated with a fairly well-defined set of popular web-based platforms characterized by social interaction and user-generated content", such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube.

[2] According to Pounds (2006: 31), the tradition has its origin in England, where, as early as 1620, the first letter written by a reader was published "in a dedicated correspondence section in the paper".

third parties" (Fetzer et al. 2012: 4). If, as in the majority of approaches to genre, the communicative purpose and "the culture-specific rhetorical context of use" are considered the core defining features of a genre (Barron 2006: 881), the relationship between letters to the editor and below-the-line comments seems even more obvious. Yet although clearly related, the two types of reader response are perceived very differently. While numerous calls for a closure of comment sections can be found (e.g. an article in the *Guardian* entitled "Comment sections are poison: handle with care or remove them"; Moosa 2014), such concerns have not been voiced about letters pages in newspapers. Since comment sections enjoy great popularity despite their negative image, this necessarily raises the question whether, or rather to what extent, the way in which people make use of the right to speak their minds differs between the genres. Yet before this question can be tackled, it is necessary to take a step back and contemplate the overall communicative landscape in which this form of interaction takes place.

1.2 Buzzword *new media*

In studies investigating computer-mediated communication (CMC), it is common, and thus unfortunately highly unoriginal, to begin by stressing how profoundly our communicative landscape has changed over the past few decades as a result of the advent of so-called *new media*.[3] I will therefore skip such commonplace elaborations about the history of the Internet and the rise and spread of new forms of communication (e.g. email, chat, text messaging or Twitter, to name but a few of the most prototypical ones).[4] At this point, it suffices to say that many of the traditional forms of communication, such as writing a letter, making a phone call or talking face-to-face, have now been partially replaced or supplemented by a vast array of new, versatile and constantly evolving ones. In what precise way these developments will, in the long run, affect our communicative behaviour and all facets of our lives that are directly or indirectly influenced by the way we communicate or distribute information, only time can tell. I do not, therefore, feel entitled to judge whether Jucker (2003: 129) is right in claiming that

[3] While at the time radio and television broadcasting were also referred to as *new media*, this term is nowadays commonly used for *digital media*, i.e. "the Internet, the World Wide Web, mobile telephony, and other networked and wireless technologies that support human communication – known as computer-mediated communication (CMC) – and the transmission of information" (Herring 2011: 257).
[4] For a concise history of electronic communication see Baron (2008) or Herring (2011).

> [a]t present, we are witnessing an information revolution whose significance parallels and perhaps even surpasses that of the information revolution caused by the printing press in the fifteenth century.[5]

Yet even without measuring the current developments against such milestones as the invention of the printing press, it can be asserted without any doubt that information technology and new media, with their new forms of communication, influence to a great extent how we interact with each other. It is therefore highly unlikely that the tool we use for interaction, i.e. language, will remain completely unaffected. As a matter of fact, there is great public awareness that language use in new media differs substantially from the ways in which we have used language over the past few decades or even centuries. Fears that recent technological developments not only change language but change it for the worse are the cause of heated debates not only in English-speaking countries.

1.2.1 The public debate: language change and the complaint tradition

The public concern seems to be that new media, with their new forms of communication, are favourable to, or even the cause of, the spread of a completely new form of language that no longer conforms to age-old standards. While the innovative and creative nature of computer-mediated discourse (CMD) is sometimes praised, the negative view of CMD as a threat to children's literacy skills and ultimately language itself clearly dominates the picture. In an enlightening study, Thurlow (2006) analyses a large corpus of journalistic texts portraying language use in new media in order to reveal how CMD is framed in popular discourse. His data illustrate very clearly that CMD is commonly depicted as being completely different from standard language, as spreading rapidly and unstoppably and as having a negative impact on the linguistic competence of future generations. Some of the prevailing views of the journalistic articles quoted in the study are that CMD is allegedly "dumbing down the English language", "lowering standards all round", that "[f]ears are growing that today's teenagers are becoming 'Generation Grunt', a section of society that has effectively lost the ability to talk or express itself" and that "[i]f the already ingrained corruption of the English language is perpetuated, we will soon be a nation made up entirely of grammatical duffers" (2006: 9).

While such extreme attitudes seem startling at first, they are far from being a recent development. According to Labov (2001: 514; original

[5] Similar points have been made, among others, by Wichter (1991), Schlobinski (2005) and Herring (2011).

emphasis), “[t]he most general and most deeply held belief about language is the *Golden Age Principle*: *At some time in the past, language was in a state of perfection*”. In line with this principle, he argues, people will try to reject any linguistic change since it can only be a move away from this supposedly ideal form. A brief look at the current public debate clearly shows that for many people language change still equals language decay. It is thus not even surprising that fears about the decline of language find their way into public discussion in the form of bitter complaints; in fact, this process has such a long tradition that Milroy and Milroy (cf. 1999: 24ff.) tellingly speak of the *complaint tradition*. Interestingly, the claims put forward over the centuries have always remained the same. The authors summarise their characteristics as follows:

(1) The complaints “appeal to a past time in which the language is thought to have been used more correctly and effectively” (1999: 40).

(2) They are based on the assumption “that someone or something has to be blamed for this alleged decline” (1999: 41). And

(3) “linguistic decline is believed to be bound up with a general moral decline – a decline in general standards of behaviour” (1999: 41).

A closer look at Thurlow’s data reveals that the current complaints about CMD follow precisely this pattern: (1) the worries centre on correctness and efficiency in communication, (2) there is a clear culprit (i.e. new media) and (3) the negative influences of CMD not only concern language but society at large, since “CMD was often held responsible for a number of wider social and educational ills” (2006: 9). After a careful examination of the patterns that underlie the framing of CMD in his corpus, Thurlow (2006: 1) comes to the conclusion that

> [r]ooted in extravagant characterizations of the prevalence and impact of CMD, together with highly caricatured exemplifications of actual practice, these popular but influential (mis)representations typically exaggerate the difference between CMD and nonmediated discourse, misconstrue the ‘evolutionary’ trajectory of language change, and belie the cultural embeddedness of CMD.

1.2.2 Public vs. professional opinion and empirical findings

The heightened public awareness of language matters in relation to new media has obviously not passed unnoticed in the field of linguistics and its sub-disciplines. There seems to be a general consensus that the omnipresent worries about language being destroyed are unfounded, just as similar worries in the past turned out to be (cf. e.g. Crystal 2006 and 2008b and Baron and Ling 2011). While there is still a lack of longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of new forms of communication (cf. Beißwenger 2005: 15)[6], scholars working in all areas of CMC research tend to stress that the changes in language currently witnessed are far from being as profound or far-reaching as they are often portrayed (cf. e.g. Baron 2009 and Thurlow and Bell 2009). According to them, rather than being indicators of the lamentable state of our language abilities, the particularities of CMD illustrate nicely how effectively we adapt the linguistic means available to us to the new communicative situations with which we are constantly confronted as a result of the development of new media and the consequent changes in our communication habits (cf. e.g. Herring 2001: 617 and 2012 and Schlobinski 2009: 106f.). These two opposing points of view give rise to the questions of where public concern about CMD originated and why CMD and its influence on language are depicted in such a negative light. Moreover, if CMD is misrepresented in public discourse, what are its true characteristics and in what way is the language used in new media contexts really 'new'? While these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily without taking into consideration the broader cultural background and must therefore be postponed for the time being, some observations on the question of novelty may help to throw some light upon the matter.

1.2.3 The question of novelty

Despite the fact that the novelty and uniqueness of the language used in new media contexts lie at the heart of the current public debate, a considerable number of researchers like to stress that the allegedly novel features are not novel at all, but just used in novel contexts (cf. e.g. Haase et al. 1997, Androutsopoulos 2000 and 2007b, Kilian 2001, Elspaß 2002, Thurlow 2003, Shortis 2007, Crystal 2008b and Squires 2010). Research has shown, for instance, that the differences in spelling and syntactic structures frequently encountered in text messages or chat room conversations are very similar to abbreviation strategies on the word and sentence level that have a long tradition in graffiti, brand names or telegrams (cf. Shortis 2007) or may even go back to ancient forms of creative language use, such as rebuses (cf. Crystal 2008b). Others argue that the different strategies used to

6 Despite some methodological shortcomings, two exceptions need to be mentioned here. Although investigating data that predate the influence of CMC, Sieber's (1998) diachronic study of linguistic change in school texts written by Swiss German pupils between 1881 and 1991 is highly intriguing, as he discovers an ongoing trend towards incorporating features of conceptional orality into written discourse (for a discussion of the concept of medial vs. conceptional orality see 3.2.3 below). Dürscheid et al. (2010) also work with texts written by Swiss German school pupils but focus their synchronic study on whether the pupils' writing habits in new forms of communication (e.g. email, chat and SMS) have a direct influence on their written school texts.

compensate for missing non-verbal cues have been directly adapted from comic strips (cf. Schlobinski 2001a) and that most features of private emails can also be found in private letters dating from the last century (cf. Elspaß 2002).[7] Thus, is CMD really just "old wine in new bottles" ("alter Wein und neue Schläuche"), as Elspaß claims in his diachronic study (2002: 7)?[8]

When trying to assess the novelty of CMD it must not be forgotten that these new forms of communication have led to new occasions for writing, i.e. written CMC is now frequently used in contexts in which it supplements or even replaces spoken language. IRC (Internet Relay Chat) or IM (Instant Messaging) are often mentioned in this respect, and, indeed, the name *Internet Relay Chat* says it all: it is like a spoken casual conversation transmitted in written form via the Internet. Even email, which is generally viewed as a direct successor to the letter and therefore often compared to and contrasted with it, serves to illustrate this point: anyone who takes just a moment to think of the emails written over the last couple of weeks will probably find that the vast majority have replaced a telephone call or a face-to-face conversation rather than a written letter. Given the fact that new genres or forms of communication are always related to previous ones, it is not surprising that many features of what were formerly speech situations are both consciously and unconsciously integrated into the language used in the new writing situation (cf. Storrer 2001b and Androutsopoulos 2007b).[9] This is most noticeably the case as far as choice of register, style, structure, dialogicity, directness and explicitness are concerned – features that all play a vital role in shaping discourse.

Another important and directly related aspect that deserves mention here is the fact that the time spent on producing texts in any of the new forms of communication often tends to be considerably shorter and to involve less editing than is the case when 'traditional' written texts are produced (cf. e.g.

[7] The features analysed by Elspaß (2002) in German emails and letters run the gamut from graphology (orthography, punctuation and other graphological means) to phonetics (apocopes, syncopes, assimilation and regional features), as well as from lexical phenomena (interjections, particles and regionalisms) to syntactic ones (hypotaxis vs. parataxis, ellipses, anacoluthons and regional features).

[8] All translations from German and French are by the author.

[9] This phenomenon is what Bausinger (1972: 81) calls the *principle of stylistic inertia* (*stilistisches Trägheitsprinzip*). Whenever a new genre or medium (e.g. radio, television) is put into use, there is a tendency to take over characteristics and traditions developed in other, similar genres or media. This held true not only for radio but also for television (cf. Straßner 1973) and can currently be observed in numerous genres on the Internet. Several of the characteristic linguistic and communicative features of minute-by-minute sports live commentaries published online, for instance, clearly have their roots in radio and television sports commentaries. These are not only adapted to or even re-enacted in the new, computer-mediated genre, but also combined with novel features, which strongly shapes the still developing genre (cf. e.g. Hauser 2010 and Jucker 2010).

Androutsopoulos 2007b and Schlobinski 2009). Again, email is a case in point: whereas a business letter is normally written and then carefully revised before being printed and posted, many writers of emails – even in business contexts – are far hastier in pressing the *send* button and often do not re-read and edit their texts with the same scrutiny, if they do so at all (cf. e.g. Seltzer Krauthamer 1999 and Baron 2008).

Yet many written electronic texts not only show clear signs of not having been planned and edited as carefully as 'traditional' written texts, they may also contain features reminiscent of the spoken form of communication they directly belong to or have replaced. This has led a number of researchers to the conclusion that instead of dealing with changes in the language system, we are witnessing shifts in the realms of orality and literacy, with CMC texts – despite their written nature – incorporating more and more features of spoken language.[10] Given the differences in register, formality and elaborateness between prototypical spoken and written language on the one hand and the fact that most people are not used to seeing the seemingly 'sloppy' or 'chaotic' nature of spoken language spelt out on the page (or, in the present case: the screen) on the other, this theory already hints at some of the factors influencing the current public debate referred to above.

Thus, not only have new forms of communication produced new types of texts in which the building blocks of well-established genres are reused and combined in novel ways, they have also created new occasions for writing, which directly influence the linguistic strategies chosen. Even though most researchers would probably subscribe to this view, formulating it in this way is far from unproblematic: putting 'the new forms of communication' into the subject position frames them as the major agents of linguistic change, which amounts to considering them the direct cause of the linguistic peculiarities encountered. This deterministic view has sparked great controversy within the research community, especially in light of the ongoing public debate on the subject.

[10] Since this is one of the central claims made in CMC research, the list of publications below is merely intended as an illustration of the noticeable predominance of this hypothesis and by no means exhaustive. The claim has been put forward by, amongst others, Meise-Kuhn 1998, Murray 1990, Ferrara et al. 1991, Wilkins 1991, Maynor 1994, Lenke and Schmitz 1995, Günther and Wyss 1996, Collot and Belmore 1996, Yates 1996, Haase et al. 1997, Baron 1998, 2003, 2009 and 2010, Jakobs 1998, Dürscheid 1999 and 2003, Danet 2001, Storrer 2001b, Bader 2002, Hård af Segerstad 2002, Rehm 2002, Lee 2003, Thurlow 2003, Crystal 2004b and 2006, Zitzen and Stein 2004, Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan 2005, Schlobinski 2005, Baym 2006, Androutsopoulos 2007b, Herring 2007, 2011 and 2012, Frehner 2008, Tagliamonte and Denis 2008, Dürscheid and Brommer 2009, Arendholz 2010, Squires 2010, Cho 2010, Georgakopoulou 2011, Ong 2011, Yus 2011, Tannen 2013 and Locher 2014.

1.2.4 Technological determinism

So far it has been shown that while empirical findings suggest that the way language use in new media is portrayed in public discourse tends to be a distortion and gross exaggeration of the actual picture, there is no denying the fact that language is constantly evolving and that the new forms of communication are characterised by linguistic choices that seem extremely intriguing and worthy of analysis, as the great number of studies undertaken in this field illustrate. Yet even if the ongoing changes in present-day English manifest themselves most strikingly in computer-mediated discourse, the theoretical perspective of *technological determinism* ought not to be hastily adopted. This viewpoint holds the features of the technology itself responsible for the way in which it is used, irrespective of the users' intentions and choices, and has been used to account for negative social outcomes of computer-mediated communication such as depersonalisation or flaming (cf. e.g. Markus 1994). On a linguistic level, this would imply considering the technologically-determined properties of the new medium or respective form of communication (e.g. synchronicity, form of transmission, channel reduction) directly and inevitably responsible for the characteristics of the language used in it. While such technological features undeniably play a role in shaping the linguistic form of the messages produced, the great diversity in linguistic realisations encountered in one single environment suggests that many more aspects (e.g. social, cultural and situational ones) must come into play (cf. e.g. Herring 2001, Androutsopoulos 2007b and Squires 2010). The great number of linguistic choices made both consciously and unconsciously every single time an utterance is produced is influenced by a complex set of interrelated factors, and it would be premature and speculative to take the medium to be the sole decisive one – tempting as this may be.[11]

Hutchby (2001) and Androutsopoulos (2007b) are among those who stress that an acute danger emanates from the viewpoint of technological determinism: not only does it distort the picture and obstruct the view in such a way that the truly decisive factors shaping communication remain hidden; it also puts linguists in a position in which they are unable to confront public criticism effectively and disabuse the public of the assumption that CMC is at the root of the alleged demise of language:

[11] Betz (2004: 31) rightly concludes: "Linguistic analyses should, therefore, not insist on the distinction between media, but uncover and analyse differences conditioned by situational factors. Language use is far more situation dependent than medium dependent" ("Sprachuntersuchungen sollten daher nicht auf die mediale Unterscheidung insistieren, sondern situational bedingte Unterschiede herausarbeiten und benennen. Sprachgestaltung ist weit mehr situationsabhängig als medienabhängig").

> If in public discourse, new media are considered 'partly responsible' for linguistic 'decay', it will be difficult to argue against this viewpoint from a theoretical position that itself views language use in CMC as primarily determined by communication technologies as well.
>
> Wenn im öffentlichen Diskurs die Neuen Medien als 'Mitursachen' sprachlichen 'Verfalls' gelten, wird es schwierig sein, dies von einer theoretischen Position aus zu kontern, die auch selbst den digitalen Sprachgebrauch als primär durch die Kommunikationstechnologien determiniert sieht (2007b: 93).

When analysing CMD and especially when comparing it with texts produced in other media or forms of communication, it is therefore vital not to be too easily blinded by technological features since these may not necessarily be the driving forces shaping the linguistic product. Instead, all other potentially relevant situational and contextual factors need to be investigated with equal care.

1.2.5 The interactional factor

New technologies have not only been held responsible for ongoing changes in the linguistic system but also for changes in the way people interact with each other. Given that the public usually considers linguistic and moral decline to go hand in hand (cf. Milroy and Milroy 1999: 41), it is not surprising that this influence is also generally perceived to be detrimental. Although new media open up a vast range of new possibilities for interaction and are therefore often heralded as the great advancement of the recent past that has brought people closer together, the view that CMC leads to disinhibited behaviour and thus hostility and aggression abounds. As in the case of linguistic decline, it is often the technological properties of the medium that are blamed for such instances of misconduct. The anonymity of the Internet, in combination with the missing social cues of text-based online interaction, is often considered the reason for hostile behaviour and impoliteness. Whereas in the beginning, many hailed the democratic potential of the Internet, which was generally deemed to be truly egalitarian, this belief has now been, if not completely shattered, at least severely shaken. The impression is gaining ground that if everybody is entitled to free speech and provided a platform on which to speak their minds, this does not promote a more balanced discussion of opinions but instead leads to cases of vicious attacks and diatribes, which may even provoke prolonged conflicts. That such occurrences are not perceived to be rare exceptions but rather a regular feature of online interaction is illustrated by the simple fact that they have been given a name, i.e. *flaming* and the resulting *flame wars*. While many studies have addressed this issue and matters of politeness in CMC contexts in general, the prevailing consensus within the research community is that hostile behaviour is not as common as public opinion suggests (cf. Baym 2006). Again, there appears to be a discrepancy between public opinion and scholars' assessment, which clearly calls for more research in this field.

This brief sketch of the importance of CMC, with a clear focus on how it is viewed by the general public on the one hand and the research community on the other, has served to illustrate the general relevance of and need for research into CMC in order to help dispel the myth of linguistic and moral decay. However, I do not mean to imply that linguistic research should always have an agenda of this kind. Studying CMC in order to gain a better understanding of how language is used in these new contexts is a highly relevant and justified research goal in its own right. Indeed, scholars have already come a long way since the birth of CMC research as a sub-discipline of linguistics, even though many questions remain unanswered.

1.3 Research into computer-mediated communication

1.3.1 Previous research and some methodological shortcomings

Given that the new forms of communication mentioned above are used in a wide range of contexts and have become part and parcel of everyday life, it is not surprising that the number of linguistic studies in the field of computer-mediated communication has increased sharply over the past few decades.[12] Whereas many of the studies dating from the 1980s are of a rather anecdotal nature and mostly concerned with describing the surface features of the new forms of communication, the 1990s saw an increase in more systematic analyses of individual forms of CMC (e.g. email or chat rooms). However, even in the 21st century, Herring (2004: 338) still comes to the conclusion that

> much research on online behavior is anecdotal and speculative, rather than empirically grounded. Moreover, Internet research often suffers from a premature impulse to label online phenomena in broad terms.

Unfortunately, CMC is often treated as if it were a homogeneous group of texts, particularly when the focus is on the ways in which the language used differs from that in other media or contexts. Yet if CMC is taken to

[12] For a concise overview of the historical background of earlier research into CMC and the key issues raised see Herring (1996a) and Herring (2001); for an impression of the scope of research at the beginning of the 21st century see Kelsey and St. Amant (2008). The *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, first published in 1995, also illustrates the diversity of studies in this field and the different strands of research.

encompass any form of communication that is transmitted by a computer or a comparable technological device (cf. Herring 1996b: 1), this amounts to claiming that language transmitted via the oral/aural channel or in printed form has certain characteristics that necessarily and sufficiently distinguish it from other kinds of language. This is certainly correct as far as the features directly related to the channel are concerned, e.g. linearity or non-linearity of production and reception, the ephemeral or durable nature of the language product and the range of transmitted cues such as tone of voice, pitch, intonation or speed on the one hand, and the choice of layout and fonts or paragraph structure on the other. However, the great number of variables that determine linguistic choices aside from the medium (e.g. who communicates with whom, for what purpose, in what situation and context) make it completely impossible to make any reasonable claims about computer-mediated language *per se*. Just as there is no such thing as *the* spoken or *the* written language[13], it is anything but conducive to speak about linguistic features of CMC in general, as has often been done in the past.[14] The obvious differences between email and IRC, IM, Twitter or text messaging, not to mention the variety among emails alone, with emails in a private context containing features that are highly unlikely to be found in a professional context for instance, make clear that the data for analysis have to be chosen with serious consideration, and researchers have to be very cautious about the validity and scope of claims made on the basis of their findings. As self-evident as this may sound, a look at previous research into CMC quickly reveals that this point still needs to be stressed; many such over-generalising claims have been made even in the 21st century – a time in which the novelty of the phenomenon can no longer count as a legitimate excuse. Dürscheid (2004: 155) therefore ends her literature review with

> a plea to shift the attention from the macro level to the micro level. Instead of continuing to study language use on the Internet in general, in the future the focus should be placed on the analysis of individual text or discourse types on the Internet.

> ein Plädoyer dafür, das Augenmerk von der Makroebene auf die Mikroebene zu richten. Statt weiter allgemeine Beobachtungen zur Sprache im Internet

[13] The concepts of spoken and written language as well as the so-called *common core theory* developed by Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 16ff.) will be discussed in more detail below (see 3.2).

[14] The most prominent and at the same time most astonishing example is Crystal (2001: 18), who coins the term *Netspeak* and defines it as "a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet and encountered in all the above situations" [i.e. email, chat groups, virtual worlds, and the World Wide Web]. In a later publication, Crystal himself criticises the use of terms such as *Cyberspeak* or his own neologism *Netspeak* on the grounds that "they placed undue emphasis on the potential linguistic idiosyncrasy of the medium and suggested that the medium was more homogeneous than it actually is" (Crystal 2011: 2).

> anzustellen, sollte künftig der Schwerpunkt auf die Analyse einzelner Text- und Diskursarten im Internet gelegt werden.

Focusing on one particular text or discourse type[15] not only allows for a much more fine-grained analysis but also offers greater control over variables such as situation, context, participants and communicative purpose, which is indispensable if the distinctiveness of the group of texts in question is to be accounted for. As illuminating as such a detailed analysis of a particular type of text may be on its own, such a study can yield far more interesting and significant results if the findings can be placed within a wider context. Given the controversial idea of technological determinism as briefly outlined above, the goal should be to discern whether it is the medium or any of the situational or contextual factors that lies at the heart of the peculiarities encountered. In order to achieve this goal, the form of CMC in question needs to be analysed against the background of comparable data produced in other media contexts.

1.3.2 The comparative approach

A considerable number of studies have compared forms of CMC with language use outside the CMC context in order to show in what way these forms of communication differ. As briefly pointed out above, many of these advance the claim that CMC stands out because it incorporates features of spoken as well as written discourse. This has led to the widely supported, but in my view still not sufficiently tested, hypothesis that CMC, as a mixture of speech and writing and therefore a hybrid form, should be positioned somewhere towards the middle on the spoken-written continuum.[16] The problem is that in the great majority of studies, some form of CMC – or even CMC *per se* – is compared to speech and writing in general, i.e. so-called 'typical' features of spoken and written language, instead of taking carefully chosen equivalent genres in the written and spoken media as a *tertium comparationis*. While comparing a particular computer-mediated genre to prototypical spoken or written language indeed makes it possible to position this genre somewhere on the scale, such a comparison cannot explain *why* those spoken or written features are found, since all the other variables that may influence the linguistic characteristics of a text (aside

[15] Terms such as *discourse type*, *text type*, *genre*, *medium, form of communication*, etc. are used in the literature to refer to many different concepts and often without the necessary reflection. The terminological choices made in the present study will therefore be discussed in detail below (see 3.1).

[16] For a more thorough discussion of the different models of speech and writing, especially in terms of whether they are viewed as a dichotomy or a continuum, see 3.2 below.

from the medium in which it is produced and transmitted) are not taken into consideration. Unfortunately, this crucial fact has often been overlooked, and the affordances and constraints of the new medium have only too frequently been held responsible for certain linguistic characteristics. Yet if one claims, for instance, that informal emails in a private context contain many features associated with spoken language (e.g. informal vocabulary, sentence fragments) because of their dialogic structure, the speed of production and transmission as well as their ephemeral nature, would it not be much more illuminating to rank them in comparison to informal handwritten letters in a similar private context instead of holding them up against the supposedly paradigmatic characteristics of extremely heterogeneous classes of texts containing everything from speeches in parliament to chats over the garden fence, i.e. speech, on the one hand, and legal texts and scribbled post cards, i.e. writing, on the other? Only then would it be possible to ascertain whether this particular type of email really contains more features of spoken language than similar texts in the written medium do, and only if this holds true can conclusions about the medium as a decisive factor be drawn.[17] The fact that different spoken genres (e.g. a lecture or an intimate conversation) are usually positioned on remarkably distinct places on the spoken/written continuum (see Figure 1 below) illustrates nicely that genre-specific characteristics greatly influence the 'spokenness' or 'writtenness' of a text.[18]

Akinnaso's (1982) review of studies on differences between spoken and written language and their methodological shortcomings may no longer be up-to-date, but his findings are still relevant and valuable. According to him, the paramount problem and therefore top priority in such comparative studies is "the need for data control", since he has shown that "[m]ore often than not, conclusions about the differences between spoken and written language are an artifact of data choice" (1982: 109f.). A similar point is

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[17] Baron (2010: 26), for instance, bases her comparison of IM with the spoken and written medium on "prototypical descriptions of face-to-face speech" and "paradigmatic writing patterns", which is anything but ideal for "furthering the ongoing discussion of whether IM discourse more closely resembles speech or writing" (2010: 3). Frehner (2008), on the other hand, compares text messages with telegrams, which allows her to reach far more justified conclusions.

[18] One might argue that lectures are oral written texts, i.e. written texts that are read aloud. In this case, lectures would be the result of what Lyons (cf. 1981: 11) calls the concept of *medium-transferability*, i.e. the possibility to transfer a text from one medium to the other. However, these are not the kind of lectures Koch and Oesterreicher (1985) have in mind when they position lectures towards the *written* end of their continuum, since Oesterreicher (1997: 196) claims that "[s]imple medium-transcoding does not affect the conceptional content of discourse". See 3.2.3 below for a full discussion of Koch and Oesterreicher's model of orality and literacy.

made by Biber (1986a and 1986b), who stresses that the differences between genres of the same medium often outweigh the differences between genres across speech and writing (see also 3.1.4.1 below).

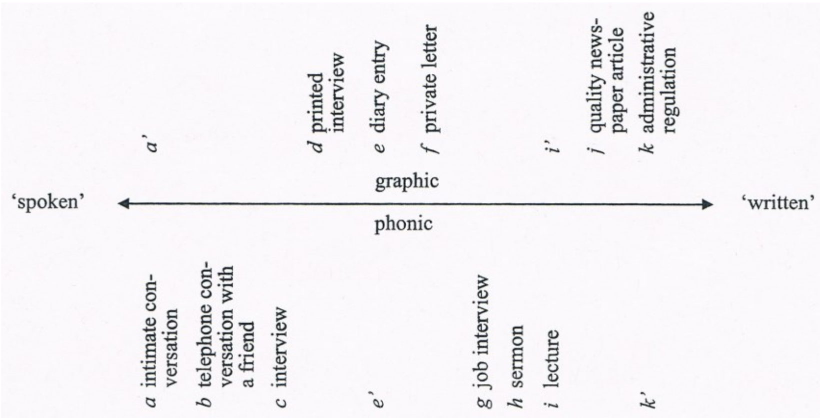

Figure 1 The spoken/written continuum (Koch and Oesterreicher 2012: 444)

There seems to be only one possible conclusion: well-founded claims about the extent to which the medium influences language choice can only be made by looking at a particular discourse type or communicative event that exists in several media, thus allowing for the greatest possible control over all the variables that may play a decisive role in shaping the linguistic product. Yet controlling as many of the variables as possible is obviously easier said than done. The ideal conditions for such a contrastive study would be to look at groups of text that only differ with respect to one variable, in this case the medium (cf. Herring 2004: 350). However, these conditions simply cannot be created if the goal is to study naturally-occurring discourse. Should the researcher thus abandon the idea of doing fieldwork, i.e. analysing natural language, and settle for eliciting data under laboratory conditions instead?[19] Leaving aside aspects such as the evident lack of authenticity and the observer's paradox, the most commonly used research methods in laboratory settings, i.e. discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and role-plays, indeed allow for greater control over the variables in question; however, they are rather ill-suited for studying longer stretches of discourse or even genres. How can this methodological conundrum be solved? Both the desire to study authentic data in natural settings and the

[19] For a helpful discussion of methodological issues and the distinction between *armchair*, *field* and *laboratory* methods in linguistic research see Clark and Bangerter (2004) or Jucker (2009).

pressing need to adopt a wider perspective, i.e. to analyse complete texts and classes of texts as opposed to mere linguistic structures in isolated sentences, argue strongly in favour of empirical methods. Yet in order to investigate whether and how new media shape language use and communicative behaviour, a type of text needs to be found that exists in CMC and has a 'traditional' equivalent in the written medium. In addition, this class of texts should neither be too broad nor too heterogeneous, but have a clear communicative function that sets it apart from other texts of the same format. As was briefly touched upon above, comparing emails to traditional letters would not yield any valuable results as to how the medium influences language choice because both emails and letters can serve a vast range of communicative purposes and thus take on many forms irrespective of the medium in which they are produced and transmitted.

Reader response – the object of the present study – was chosen precisely because it meets the requirements outlined above: it is a clearly delineated group of texts, exists in different media (i.e. both online in the form of below-the-line comments and offline in the form of letters to the editor) and consists of fairly short texts that have a clear communicative function (i.e. to provide feedback and voice the reader's opinion). Moreover, the data are publicly available and can be easily accessed for research. In addition to these advantages from a methodological point of view, the investigation of reader response is also highly relevant in that it promises interesting insights into ongoing changes in public discourse. While letters to the editor can look back on a long history, the option of leaving a comment online has only existed for about a decade. Yet despite their immediate success, such comments sections have still not made the letters page obsolete. Thus, newspaper readers today have the choice: if they want to share their opinion on a certain article, they may either write a letter to the editor or post a comment online; if they want to find out what other readers felt or thought upon reading an article, they may browse the newspaper's letters page or the comments section online. But when do they choose to do what? How does writing a letter to the editor differ from posting a comment below the line? What is the most striking difference between the letters page and the comments section? Is it related to content, function or style? In particular, how does the choice of medium affect language use? Is reader response in digital form nothing but a faster and more interactive version of the good old letter to the editor or are comments sections rather the uncensored and therefore ugly face of reader commentary? A comparison of online reader comments to letters to the editor thus has the potential to reveal in what way and to what extent the choice of medium and genre influences not only linguistic form but also interactive behaviour – two topics that lie at the heart of the current public debate about CMC.

The present study sets out to answer the questions raised above by investigating a corpus of 1,000 comments posted below the line on the websites of the *Guardian* and the *Times* by contrasting them with a corpus of 1,000 letters to the editor written in reaction to the same articles. While such a research design is a vast improvement when compared to many previous studies contrasting CMC with other forms of language use, the two most obvious limitations need to be addressed briefly at this point. First, the people contributing to public discourse via the two types of reader response are not the same, and demographical factors cannot be taken into consideration owing to the anonymity of the commenters on the Internet. Second, different forms of selection and even editing processes are at work, i.e. the analysis can only focus on those contributions that are published and only examine them in their published form.[20]

Nevertheless, the similarities outweigh the differences by far, and the data constitute a reasonably sound basis for comparison. While an analysis such as the present one does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the nature of CMC and writing per se, this kind of comparative approach has the great advantage of offering insights into the reasons for the differences encountered. Not only does this make it possible to test and assess the validity of the claims made by researchers in the past, it also offers a firm and sound basis for addressing the issues of technological determinism, language decay and moral decline introduced above.

2 Aims and research questions

The above has shown that the present data sets, which will be presented in detail in chapter 4 below, were chosen so as to be able to account for any particularities found in the below-the-line comments by recurring to a comparable genre in the written medium, i.e. letters to the editor. Yet the two genres not only offer a very sound basis for contrasting the written and the computer-mediated media, they also play a vital role in shaping today's communicative landscape and are ideal for exploring several of the aspects that lie at the heart of current research into CMC. The present study thus moves beyond a mere genre description and addresses, one by one, four common claims about – or rather (mis)conceptions of – computer-mediated

[20] For a more thorough presentation of the methodological considerations see chapter 3 below and for a more detailed discussion of the data selection process and its advantages and limitations see chapter 4 below.

communication in general and this form of user-generated content in particular.

The first part of the analysis (see chapter 5 below) focuses on surface-level structures and addresses the claim that the language used to communicate on the Internet is substantially different from the language used in other contexts. For this purpose, a catalogue of the linguistic features identified as typical of CMC is compiled on the basis of a thorough literature review. A taxonomy is established and the formal and functional characteristics of each of these features are discussed in detail before the findings of the analysis are presented and illustrated with the help of examples. Since the present study is contrastive in nature, the analysis is also performed on the letters corpus, and the discussion of each characteristic includes a comparison with both the findings of previous studies into CMC and the corpus of letters to the editor. This approach makes it possible to account for the differences and similarities encountered as well as the factors influencing linguistic choices. It should also shed some light on the question of whether the language used in the comments contains significantly more features of spoken language than that used in the letters and thus constitutes a blend of speaking and writing.

Once these micro-linguistic structural features have been addressed, the focus shifts to the interactional structures found in the two genres and the question of who the readers reply to. Since web 2.0 is characterised above all by social interaction (cf. Herring 2013), comment sections are commonly conceived of as spaces for interactive debates among users whereas letters to the editor are perceived as a means of 'talking back' to the newspaper or journalist. Chapter 6 below is therefore devoted to an investigation of whether the majority of contributions in each genre constitute a reaction to the journalistic product or a response to another reader. In addition, it shows how the link between trigger and follow-up is commonly established by presenting and discussing in detail the different moves used for this purpose (e.g. direct quotes or references).[21] The main differences in the use of contextualisation strategies are highlighted, with a special focus on the move of quoting and its various forms and functions. Given that *interactivity* is one of the buzzwords of CMC, comparing the interactional patterns across the media is of vital importance to uncover whether this form of user feedback really is more interactive than more traditional media formats.

Irrespective of the medium used, reader response sections are a hotbed for fierce debate; in addition to being a very popular means of making one's voice heard, they also provide readers with a platform on which to vent their anger or to criticise others, which makes them ideal for studying matters of

[21] For a discussion of the concept of moves see 3.4.1 below.

(im)politeness. Online comment sections in particular are often associated with aggressive or uninhibited verbal behaviour, which has given them the bad reputation of being "clogged with vitriol and hate-mongering" (Meyer 2008: 44). As was briefly touched on above, calls to close comment sections are fairly frequent and indeed, some newspapers have opted to do so. While such concerns do not seem to play a role in the case of letters pages, the way in which the *Guardian*'s letters editor and deputy letters editor, Nigel Willmott and Rory Foster, describe the genre on the dust jacket of their annual selection of letters from the year 2007 points to some similarities: "Letters to the editor are an opportunity for readers to thunder back at the media, correct their misunderstandings, ridicule their pretensions and alert them to all manner of unremarked phenomena" (Willmott and Foster 2007). To throw some light on the differences and similarities between the genres in this respect, the face-threatening act of *criticising others*, in particular the journalist and other readers, is analysed in detail (e.g. aspects criticised, strategies used) in chapter 7, drawing on the framework of interpersonal pragmatics and (im)politeness theory. In order to arrive at a balanced view of the genres, the move of providing *positive feedback* is also discussed. Given the wide-spread view that CMC is responsible not only for a decline in language but also in behaviour, approaching online interaction from the field of pragmatics is particularly significant and relevant.

The fourth and last topic to be addressed is closely related to matters of face in that it focuses on the people contributing and on what (and how much) they reveal about themselves in the individual genres. It has been claimed that via online comments, more and more private topics are entering the public sphere, thus leading to an increase in subjectivity and personalisation (cf. Landert and Jucker 2011) – a trend that has also been observed for both communication on the Internet in general (cf. Dürscheid 2007) and mass media in general (cf. Landert 2014). This last claim is addressed together with the topic of (im)politeness in chapter 7 by exploring how, and how often, strategies of personalisation, i.e. the moves of *relating personal experiences* and *making statements about self* are employed in the individual genres. To offer a more nuanced picture, the opposing move, i.e. that of *claiming expert status*, is also investigated, thus throwing some light on the kinds of identity construed (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2010). Since the move of *criticising others* can also be used to construct identity (both one's own and that of the person criticised), these last two sets of research concerns are embedded in a combined chapter on identity and face, illustrating the different means contributors employ to create their own identity and that of the people talked about or addressed.

The present study thus moves from an analysis of the surface-level micro-linguistic characteristics of the two genres via an investigation of their interactional patterns to a discussion of matters of identity and face. While the choice of aspects to be addressed was motivated by both public discourse about and previous research into CMC, the study is comparative throughout, i.e. the corpus of letters to the editor is always investigated with equal care and in equal detail.

The combined aims of the present comparison can be summarised by the following set of interrelated overarching research questions:

(1) In what ways do letters to the editor and online comments differ in terms of
  a. their linguistic characteristics and
  b. their communicative strategies?

(2) What features commonly considered to be typical of CMC can be found in online reader comments and how does this distinguish them from
  a. letters to the editor on the one hand
  b. and other types of CMC on the other?

(3) How interactive are online comments compared to letters to the editor and how do readers establish the link between trigger and follow-up in the two genres?

(4) Who is criticised most frequently on what grounds in online comments and letters to the editor and how is this criticism performed?

(5) What and how much do commenters and letter writers reveal about themselves and what kind of identity do they construct for themselves and the person criticised?

Although closely related, the overarching research questions presented above have their roots in different areas of research, each with its own theoretical and methodological background. The present study thus constitutes what is commonly referred to as a mixed-methods approach, i.e. in each subsection of the analysis, the methodology best suited to answer the individual questions is chosen. While this means that methodological aspects related to the individual research questions will be discussed in detail in the individual chapters below, the theoretical and methodological considerations that influenced the present research design will be addressed in the following.

3 Theoretical and methodological basis

The comparative approach adopted in the present analysis is designed as a synchronous study of the same discourse type or communicative function (i.e. commenting and providing feedback), across two distinct forms of communication (i.e. letters to the editor vs. below-the-line comments), which also differ in terms of the medium used (i.e. written vs. computer-mediated). Given the considerable differences in the way terms such as *discourse type* and *medium* have been used in the literature, some terminological considerations are required before the corpora can be presented in more detail in chapter 4. However, the aim of the following section is not only to provide working definitions of terms that are central to the analysis but to build the necessary theoretical and methodological basis and to account for the choices made in designing the research project. Highlighting differences or inconsistencies in the way certain central terms have been used in the past is the first step in uncovering the different theoretical orientations that underlie their use and thus also strongly influence the conclusions that can be drawn from previous research. The existing literature on CMD combined with that on orality and literacy, with all their contradictions and complexities, provided fertile ground for the terminological reflections and methodological decisions presented in the following.

3.1 Terminological and methodological considerations

3.1.1 *Discourse type*

The ideal comparative study focuses on the variants of certain variables while keeping the others as constant and stable as possible. To be able to judge whether the similarities and differences between individual forms of communication are a result of the different media used, texts with very similar text-external characteristics need to be chosen for the analysis. As Akinnaso (1982: 110) concludes in his review and discussion of the conflicting findings of previous research into the differences between spoken and written language, the "failure to compare speech and writing from the point of view of how specific communicative tasks are achieved in either modality is partly responsible for the contradictions in the literature". With this in mind, the corpora for the present analysis have been compiled so as to contain texts in which the same communicative task is performed. This means that despite the differences in medium, the corpora consist of texts of the same *discourse type*, i.e. they share the communicative function of commenting and giving feedback as well as the overall setting: in both media, the text produced, i.e. the letter to the editor and the online reader comment, constitutes a follow-up, i.e. a reaction to another text previously published in the same medium.[22]

3.1.2 *Medium*

3.1.2.1 *(New) media* vs. *spoken/written medium*

The fact that the present study seeks to explore language use in a particular new *media* context and to compare it to language used for similar purposes in the written *medium* illustrates that *medium* is used for two related but nevertheless distinct concepts at the same time. On the one hand, the term refers to traditional channels of mass communication (e.g. newspapers, TV or radio) and their digital equivalents or counterparts (e.g. newspaper websites or video-sharing websites such as YouTube).[23] This meaning as "the main means of mass communication" is listed under the second entry of the noun *media* in the *OED*[24] and will henceforth be referred to as *media*$_2$. From the group of new media, only online newspapers are of relevance for the present purpose, and they will be contrasted with the medium newspaper. On the other hand, the term *medium* is generally used when discussing the relationship between speech and writing per se; it is therefore common to talk about the characteristics of *the spoken* and *the written medium*, i.e. spoken and written language respectively. The term *medium* can thus not only be used to refer to individual means for publishing information in mass communication but also to divide all instances of language use into two distinct forms of language representation, i.e. speech and writing.[25]

3.1.2.2 CMC as a third medium

As outlined above, the advent of CMC with its novel forms of communication has led many researchers to conceive of CMC as an individual medium not only in the sense of media$_2$, but also in the sense that it is a form of

[22] *Medium* in this sentence can be understood as referring to the media newspaper and the Internet, as well as referring to writing and CMC in general. The different concepts covered by the term *medium* will be discussed in detail in the following (see 3.1.2).

[23] One of the major differences between traditional channels of mass communication and digital ones lies in the role user-generated content plays. While it is true that user-generated content in the form of letters to the editor can now look back on a comparatively long history in the newspaper tradition, such content plays a far more important (in the case of newspaper websites) if not paramount role (in the case of YouTube) in new media channels. This development makes a comparison of user-generated content produced in the media chosen for the present analysis all the more interesting.

[24] "media, n.2." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 28 March 2017.

[25] Although these are the two most important *media* concepts for the present purpose, several others exist as well. For a more detailed overview see Dürscheid (2005) and below.

language that fits neither the category of speaking nor that of writing but combines features of both. Unfortunately, scholars have often failed to make explicit why exactly they take CMC to be a distinct medium and what their underlying assumptions about the characteristics and defining features of a medium are. This has considerable implications and may distort the overall picture, as will be shown below. A thorough literature review has revealed that the reasons for considering CMC a distinct medium – whether they are stated explicitly or have to be deduced from the comments made – can be grouped into three groups. Although these are presented separately in the following, the individual concepts have often been unjustifiably conflated.

3.1.2.2.1 Intermediate devices

First of all, there is a group of researchers who distinguish sharply between mediated and non-mediated language or communication, the latter existing solely in spoken face-to-face communication (cf. e.g. Dürscheid et al. 2010). As soon as some kind of intermediate device, i.e. a medium[26], is used to transfer the message to the recipient, the form of communication – be it written or spoken – is considered mediated.[27] Following this approach, the device or medium used allows a distinction between different kinds of mediated communication: a telephone conversation is mediated by a telephone, a letter by paper and CMC – as the name computer-mediated communication implies – by a computer. To a certain extent, this tradition is guided not so much by the idea of contrasting *the* written and *the* spoken medium, but by grouping communication according to the means used for transferring the message. However, this conception of medium is not identical to *media$_2$* as introduced above, since there is no distinction drawn between different types of journalistic products (e.g. newspapers and magazines), the only decisive factor being how the message is encoded and transmitted. Newspapers and magazines are therefore subsumed – together with books, flyers, letters, brochures, etc. – under the heading of print media and contrasted with computer-mediated communication, other types of mediated communication (e.g. TV, radio, or telephone – depending on the medium used) and non-mediated, i.e. spoken face-to-face communication. While this tradition distinguishes between different types of speaking and writing depending on the form of message transmission and thus uses a

[26] *Medium* in the sense II.4 of the *OED* entry: “an intermediate agency, instrument, or channel; a means; *esp.* a means or channel of communication or expression”; “medium, n. and adj.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 28 March 2017.

[27] This concept of *medium* has its roots in the field of media linguistics (cf. Dürscheid and Brommer 2009). For a more detailed discussion of its origin and use see Dürscheid (2003).

narrower definition of *medium* than those that just differentiate between written and spoken language, it employs clear-cut categories that make it easy to classify individual instances of language use. However, claims that CMC constitutes a new medium made against this backdrop only state the obvious: a new technical device, i.e. a computer, is used to transfer the message from the sender to the recipient.[28]

3.1.2.2.2 Sound waves vs. graphic representation

The second conception of medium is similar to the first in that it consists of clear-cut categories depending on the form of message transmission. The crucial difference lies in the fact that, in the majority of cases, only two broad categories are taken into account, i.e. speech on the one hand, where the message is transmitted via sound waves, and writing on the other, where the message is transmitted via graphic representations of language.[29] There is thus a clear dichotomy that divides all communication into spoken and written language, each having its own characteristics. While a message transmitted via writing tends to be more stable and durable in nature, sound waves are much more volatile and ephemeral, which makes reading and listening two completely different experiences.[30] When reading a written text, we usually have the text in front of us as a finished product, which means that we can let our eyes wander across it. We can take our time and

[28] Strictly speaking, the computer does not transfer the message but simply displays it. It is the network connecting two computers that is responsible for the transmission. Given that nowadays computers are often replaced by other devices, e.g. mobile phones, smartphones or tablets, several terms have been suggested to replace *CMC,* such as *electronically* or *technologically mediated communication* or *Internet-based communication.* Jucker and Dürscheid (2012) provide a full discussion of the motivation behind these proposals and their suitability. Their own suggestion, however, i.e. *keyboard-to-screen communication (KSC)*, is not unproblematic either, since despite acknowledging that the keyboard used may only be a virtual one (in the case of touch screens), they consider it appropriate to exclude voice recognition technologies from KSC on the grounds that “graphically encoded communication is in the center of KSC research” (2012: 3). While this may be true, it needs to be stressed that voice recognition is not only used for telephone calls over IP or Skype conferences, as the authors seem to assume, but also to produce typed – and therefore graphically encoded – text, as when dictating the body of an email to a smartphone. Given that a truly adequate replacement for the firmly established term of *CMC* is still lacking, it is considered best to stick with it for the time being.

[29] Crystal (2001: 238) is an exception here since he considers signing an individual medium in addition to speaking and writing and therefore speaks of three distinct media.

[30] The tentative form ‘tends to’ is used here because there are some forms of written language that are more like spoken language in terms of stability and durability, such as constantly changing advertising hoardings, display panels with passenger information at train stations and airports or subtitles in films. These forms of language representation are perceived visually and therefore written, but since they are digital and not printed, they share several of the properties of computer-mediated texts presented below.

go back to the beginning of a sentence, we can jump entire paragraphs, and we can read the whole text or individual passages again and again. When listening to spoken language, in contrast, we have no such liberties, since we are not presented with a product but rather with a process that is still under way. Spoken language consists of a stream of sounds that flows to our ears: we can neither go back to the beginning nor slow it down, and while we can stop listening for a while, we cannot fast-forward to the end or listen to the exact same stretch of talk again (without using technical devices such as a recorder). The reason for these fundamental differences in perception lies in the basic fact that the physical properties of sound waves differ from those of printed material. In light of the characteristics of digital or computer-mediated texts, it is easy to understand why CMC is often considered an intermediate form that fits neither category although these texts are clearly perceived via the visual and not the auditory channel. While a printed text always stays the same once it is printed, computer-mediated texts are often changed and updated, so that the text accessed on a website today may not be the same tomorrow or it may even have completely disappeared. Computer-mediated texts are thus much more fluid and short-lived than analogue texts and – in the extreme example of IRC, where the text scrolls off the screen if more text appears below it – may even be almost as ephemeral as speech.

Speaking and writing not only differ in the way the message is perceived but also in the way it is produced. While there is usually a time lag between a text being written and read, the two processes of production and reception occur simultaneously in speech, thereby allowing for immediate feedback but also putting speakers under pressure to produce their message spontaneously without being able to revise or edit it. In addition, the interlocutors usually are co-present (a telephone conversation being the exception to the rule) whereas in writing, addresser and addressee are, in the majority of cases, separated both in time and space. This entails that all the visual cues used in spoken communication (e.g. physical appearance, gesture, facial expression and body language) are absent in writing, as are auditory features (e.g. prosody, intonation, pitch, volume, tone of voice and accent). In return, writing can make use of a wide range of graphic features, and numerous conventions have developed that have no equivalent in speech (e.g. page layout, the use of paragraphs and other structural elements as well as capitalisation, underlining, colour and other graphic effects).[31] If the technological properties of the production process in computer-mediated communication are considered, it becomes clear that they also combine features of both the written and the spoken medium. IRC and IM, for instance, allow

[31] For an in-depth investigation of such differences see Crystal (2003: 180ff.).

for quasi-synchronous communication[32] in written form without the need for the interlocutors to be in the same place, thus producing the completely novel phenomenon of "fast, interactive writing", which has properties similar to the spoken medium.[33] Yet despite the minimal time lag between the production and reception processes, the interlocutors are still separated in space, which means that visual as well as auditory cues are absent, just as in the written medium.

All these factors combined have led some researchers to argue that CMC constitutes a medium in its own right: a medium that, in some respects, resembles the spoken medium and, in others, the written one (cf. Herring 2001). Such a claim made from this background goes beyond saying that a special device for message transmission is used and instead focuses on the implications this has on the general technical aspects of the production and reception processes. Printed, digital and oral/aural forms of language representation can thus be described and compared in terms of their physical properties.

3.1.2.2.3 Linguistic features

The last group of researchers does not position CMC somewhere in between the spoken and written medium because of the technical properties of computer-mediated texts as opposed to sound waves on the one hand and printed texts on the other, but because the language used in CMC somehow combines features of both prototypical spoken and written language, e.g. on the levels of vocabulary or syntax (cf. e.g. Maynor 1994, Collot and Belmore 1996, Haase et al. 1997, Lewin and Donner 2002 and Freiermuth 2011). These linguistic characteristics have often been considered the corollary of the physical properties of the medium outlined in the discussion of the second concept of *medium* above. It has thus sometimes been disregarded that these text-internal characteristics are often closely linked to or directly influenced by not only the physical properties of the medium but

[32] IRC and IM are best considered quasi-synchronous instead of truly synchronous since the messages are transmitted post by post and not character by character. False starts, hesitations and corrections are thus not visible, and genuine overlaps and interruptions are impossible. Nevertheless, the production and reception processes are closer than ever before in the history of writing. The only predecessors that come to mind are exceptional situations, e.g. pupils sitting side by side in class writing notes and passing them to each other because they are not allowed to talk. However, in such communicative situations, addresser and addressee are still co-present, which need not be the case in CMC.

[33] The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* quotes Dürscheid (2010) in the headline of an article based on an interview given in 2010 as saying "Fast, interactive writing is a completely new phenomenon that warrants further investigation" ("Das schnelle, dialogische Schreiben ist eine ganz neue Erscheinung, die es weiter zu untersuchen gilt").

also the text-external factors of the communicative situation, such as who communicates with whom, for what purposes and in what context (cf. Meise-Kuhn 1998). After all, not only medium factors determine communicative practice but also situational ones.

In any case, scholars have rightly noted that since language in CMC is often more dialogic, direct and immediate than in prototypical writing and at the same time less formal and less elaborate in terms of syntax and vocabulary, computer-mediated texts often appear to have more in common with spoken language and do not conform to our expectations of traditional written texts. When speaking of *the written* and *the spoken medium*, scholars in this tradition are thus not referring to technical medium factors as such but to prototypical written and spoken language. If it is then claimed that CMC is neither written nor spoken language but an intermediate form and therefore a new medium, this not only asserts that the way language is used in computer-mediated contexts is fundamentally different from the form language usually takes in spoken or written contexts, but also that the technical aspects of the medium are responsible for these differences. Obviously, this contention carries far deeper implications and is more difficult to support with evidence than the claims made in the other two traditions. While it is certainly easy to find instances of language use in CMC that seem to confirm this hypothesis, it is just as easy to find examples where this is clearly not the case. The form language takes in a certain communicative exchange is simultaneously influenced by many factors, but only if the physical properties of the medium are directly and primarily responsible for its characteristics can we speak of CMC as constituting a medium of its own aside from spoken and written language.[34] If the linguistic product is first and foremost shaped by the text-external factors of the communicative situation, such as the communicative function and the relationship between the interlocutors for instance, such a claim cannot be substantiated since the same text-external factors may trigger exactly the same characteristics in written or spoken contexts. Unfortunately, this vital fact seems to have been overlooked in a number of studies,[35] and a techno-

[34] At the present stage of the argument, the spoken and written media are treated as if they fulfilled this criterion, even though there are just as many factors influencing the linguistic product besides the physical properties of the medium in both speech and writing as there are in CMC. Spoken and written language are – just like CMC – far from homogenous, and speaking and writing are best considered two poles on a continuum, as will be addressed in more detail below (see 3.1.3).

[35] A good example is Cho (2010), who compares workplace emails with memoranda and comes to the conclusion that certain linguistic features which he claims to be oral in character are only used in emails and not in memoranda. While he acknowledges that many emails from his corpus also contain phatic communication and therefore do not fulfil the same communicative function as memoranda (cf. 2010: 19), he fails to draw attention to an

logically deterministic view has often been too readily adopted, as noted by Squires (2010: 462):

> When scholars isolate medium-bounded contexts and characterize the linguistic patterns within them as emerging from those contexts, they imply that new technologies breed new language varieties; that a medium in some sense determines the language used there. […] Overall, the medium (typing versus speaking; email versus chat) has tended to be examined without equivalent attention to social parameters within, or surrounding, the medium.

3.1.2.2.4 Terminological confusion

The above illustrates nicely that in order to avoid the risk of drawing the wrong conclusions, the empirical data need to be chosen carefully. The aim of assessing how justified and constructive it is to conceive of CMC as constituting a distinct medium besides speaking and writing can only be accomplished with the help of a comparative study that holds the text-external factors of the communicative situations studied as constant as possible. Unfortunately, this has often been disregarded in the past, and researchers interested in the nature of computer-mediated language have at times backed up their – sometimes little more than intuitive – claims by referring to or even directly citing researchers who have made seemingly similar assertions about CMC constituting a third medium, neglecting, however, to take into account that these assertions were made against the backdrop of the first or second tradition outlined above and therefore based on a completely different notion of *medium*. The predominance of the claim that CMC incorporates features of the written as well as the spoken medium described above can thus be partially attributed to the fact that some scholars commenting primarily on the technical aspects of the medium were understood as referring to the linguistic properties of the language product. Thus, the real problem is not that three distinct concepts of the term *medium* exist, but that awareness of the crucial differences between these concepts is lacking. This leads to assertions from one tradition being simplistically and wrongly transferred to another, or to studies in which features of the individual traditions are unduly merged. This is for instance the case when technologically-determined medium factors are mentioned alongside purely linguistic ones without paying attention to the fact that the former are inextricably linked to the technological affordances and constraints of the medium whereas the latter are not. Baron (cf. 2010: 6) for instance,

important and decisive difference between his datasets: while the emails of his corpus are dialogic in nature and often used to replace face-to-face encounters, the memoranda do not seem to be dialogic but are rather used to document workplace procedures (unfortunately Cho does not give an example of a memorandum).

summing up the findings of previous research, claims that CMC resembles writing because it is a durable medium (technologically-determined medium factor) but at the same time resembles speech because the present tense, first and second person pronouns and contractions are frequently used (linguistic factors). While she may be correct in observing this, these two different aspects of the concept of medium had better be kept strictly separate.[36]

3.1.2.3 *Medium* vs. *mode*

In order to avoid having to use the term *medium* for two distinct concepts, McCarthy (1993: 170) proposes a

> useful distinction […] between *medium* and *mode*, where medium is concerned with how the message is transmitted to its receivers, and mode is concerned with how it is composed stylistically, that is, with reference to sociolinguistically grounded norms of archetypical speech and archetypical writing.

In the context of CMC, however, this is not unproblematic because the term *mode* is at times used to refer to different forms of CMC (e.g. emails or bulletin boards) and thus “the kind of messaging system used” (Herring 2001: 612).[37] Since the present thesis is based on the premise that it is essential to distinguish between the concept of *medium* in the second and third traditions, in the following, the term *medium* will be restricted to technologically-determined factors, whereas the term *mode* will be employed to refer to the linguistic properties of spoken and written language. It will be used in its singular form, yet given the heterogeneity of both speech and writing, it needs to be stressed that the concept of mode is not strictly dichotomous but a matter of degree. As McCarthy (1993: 170f.) points out, it is best to conceive of *mode* as “a cline of ‘writtenness’ and ‘spokenness’”.[38]

3.1.3 *Forms of communication*

CMC is very heterogeneous and difficult to describe because it consists of many different *forms of communication*, e.g. emails, message boards, web-

[36] However, it is debatable whether it is beneficial to speak of CMC in such a generalising way, which constitutes a further contentious point that will be addressed below.
[37] Herring’s (2001: 615) use of the term *mode* is not only more narrow when it comes to classifying CMC, she also speaks of different “oral modes of communication”, e.g. face-to-face and telephone conversations. According to her, modes are not only technologically defined, but also influenced by their historical development and the cultural context. In the present study, the more general term *form of communication* will be used instead (see 3.1.3 below).
[38] The relationship between speech and writing will be explored in more detail when the concept of orality and literacy is presented (see 3.2 below).

sites, text messages or IRC. These individual formats have sometimes been called *medium* (cf. e.g. Tagliamonte and Denis 2008 and Baron 2010), *mode* (cf. e.g. Herring 2001) or *genre* (cf. e.g. Baron 1998 and Claridge 2007), and in the early days of CMC research, all types of CMC were lumped together into a single genre.[39] While *medium* is already used to describe several other, conflicting concepts and therefore best avoided for these formats, *mode* is reserved for the linguistic characteristics of speaking and writing. *Genre* will also be avoided for this concept since it implies that particular situational and functional characteristics can be discerned – characteristics that are common to all emails and thus distinguish them from message boards. However, a form of communication is neither defined by its linguistic characteristics nor by the communicative situation in which it is used but by its formal, technologically-determined characteristics; therefore the term *genre* is inappropriate.[40] An email, for instance, always consists of a header with certain obligatory elements (e.g. sender and recipient) and some facultative ones (e.g. subject line) as well as the body of the message. It can be sent to one or several recipients, and files of various sorts can be attached. Since these are the only characteristics all emails share, they are the defining features of this form of communication.

Usually, several forms of communication are available to transmit a message: we may send a letter or a post card, make a telephone call, leave a message on the answering machine or send an email. While it is certainly true that the choice of form of communication is likely to influence to a certain degree the internal characteristics of the message, it is argued that the communicative purpose and context of the message play a far greater role in determining these.[41] Since chat – like any other form of communication – is solely defined by its technical conditions, it can take many different shapes. If, during an election campaign, a politician is invited by a television channel to a chat session in order to answer selected questions from prospective voters, the chat protocol will look substantially different from that of an unmoderated, anonymous chat session between teenagers killing time. This makes it very difficult and even counterproductive to generalise about any characteristics of forms of communication apart from those that

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[39] This was done by Collot and Belmore (1996), for instance. For a critical overview see Herring (2001). While it is certainly correct that all forms of CMC share what in line with Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 16ff.) could be called a *common core* (see also 5.1.1 below), the heterogeneity of CMC clearly calls for approaches that take this characteristic into consideration and distinguish between different types.

[40] For a discussion of the concept of *genre* see 3.1.4 below.

[41] In the past, too much weight was placed on the influence that the form of communication exerts on the language product. One of the reasons for this may be that the concepts of *form of communication* and *text type* or *genre* were sometimes merged, as will be illustrated below.

are technological in nature. Email and chat should therefore not be conceived of as text types or genres, as done by Günther and Wyss (1996) and Runkehl et al. (1998) in the case of email and by Hess-Lüttich and Wilde (2003) in the case of chat.[42]

3.1.4 *Text type* vs. *genre*

The terms *genre* and *text type* have been used with various meanings not only in text linguistics but also in linguistics in general, and the situation is further complicated by the fact that there are three German equivalents of the English term *text type*, i.e. *Textsorte*, *Textmuster* and *Texttyp*, each having its own implications and tradition (cf. Heinemann 2000).[43] While space limitations preclude a detailed discussion of the different concepts associated with the individual terms and their meanings, it needs to be addressed briefly how the terms *genre* and *text type* will be used in the present analysis.

3.1.4.1 Biber's distinction

Biber (1988 and 1989) distinguishes between the two terms by saying that *genres* are characterised by text-external, i.e. non-linguistic, factors whereas the category of *text types* is based on text-internal, i.e. linguistic, criteria. Factors such as the purpose and situation of use belong to the external, genre features, whereas text types, he claims, can only be distinguished on the basis of the co-occurrence of the linguistic features of his multi-feature/multi-dimension approach (cf. e.g. Biber 1986a, 1986b, 1988 and 1989). Thus, while genre categories can be assigned by competent speakers of a language and thus constitute a 'folk-typology', only a large-scale quantitative corpus study can establish a typology on linguistic grounds (cf. 1989: 5ff.). Analysing individual texts for the co-occurrence of a large set of linguistic features (e.g. the use of final prepositions, by-passives and the present tense), he arrives at a typology that distinguishes between eight very general text types, e.g. *learned exposition*, *involved persuasion* or *imaginative narrative* (cf. 1989: 20ff.). His distinction between *text type* and *genre* allows for the fact that texts from different genres may share many linguistic characteristics and may thus be viewed as belonging to the same text type, whereas texts from within a genre may differ in their linguistic

[42] The same holds true for Hundt et al. (2007), yet given the special meaning of the term *text type* in corpus linguistics, this use is less problematic.

[43] If the term *Textklasse* (cf. Dimter 1981) is included, the number of conflicting notions rises to four. Gansel (2011: 11ff.), for instance, distinguishes between *Textklasse, Textsorte* and *Texttyp.*

properties to such an extent that they can and should be considered different text types. Biber (1989: 6) uses the genre *newspaper articles* to illustrate that our everyday intuitive classification of texts into genres may not necessarily reflect how texts differ (or are alike) in terms of their internal or linguistic characteristics.

> Genre distinctions do not adequately represent the underlying text types of English […]. Texts within particular genres can differ greatly in their linguistic characteristics; for example, newspaper articles can range from extremely narrative and colloquial in linguistic form to extremely informational and elaborated in form. On the other hand, different genres can be quite similar linguistically; for example, newspaper articles and popular magazine articles can be nearly identical in form.

In line with this reasoning, he develops his typology by first using the co-occurrence of linguistic features to determine clusters, which he then interprets as text types; only in this second step does he take communicative characteristics (i.e. non-linguistic features such as the communicative situation or function) into account. As useful as the distinction between *genre* and *text types* and the insights gained by it may be, the value of the approach is diminished by the fact that the text types suggested are rather vague and unbalanced and had therefore better be "taken as indicative rather than final" categories (Lee 2001: 40).[44] Since the present analysis is based on texts from very similar communicative situations and functions, the categories proposed by Biber are too broad. Moreover, although it is very helpful to distinguish between internal and external factors, the ultimate goal must be to illuminate the manifold interrelations between these two criteria. This can only be achieved if the linguistic characteristics of the texts under consideration are not studied in isolation but in combination with the external characteristics of the communicative situation, thus making it possible to arrive at a detailed description and comparison of the individual corpora. Hence, the present analysis needs to be based on a different concept of *text type.*

3.1.4.2 Text-internal and text-external recurring patterns

Following Ziegler (2002), text types are taken to be characterised by text-internal *as well as* text-external factors. The text-internal ones, on the one

[44] Biber (cf. 1989: 38ff.) acknowledges that his types are prototypes and not absolute categories and that some types are more closely related than others. Despite these limitations, his approach is well suited to exploring the linguistic similarities and differences between texts of all kinds and arriving at an overall typology based on these internal features. However, the purpose of the present study is not to establish categories that are broad enough to accommodate the most diverse types of text but rather to uncover the linguistic and functional features that characterise two closely-related genres.

hand, consist of the text-structural and linguistic characteristics that are typical of a particular text type. When analysing a corpus consisting of recipes for instance, one will probably find that one type of recipe is very common, i.e. recipes that consist of a list of ingredients (frequently containing abbreviations), which is usually followed by short instructions in the imperative form.[45] The text-external factors, on the other hand, comprise all those features related to the situational and functional context of the communicative event: the interlocutors and their roles, the function of the communicative exchange, the social setting, etc. In the case of a recipe, the text is usually available in printed, hand-written or digital form and intended as step-by-step instructions for the preparation of a dish. The list of ingredients is used to assemble the necessary components, and the instructions are read and followed during the preparation of the food. The author tends to be someone who has prepared the dish successfully before, and the intended audience consists of people who have some experience with cooking and are therefore familiar with certain technical terms.[46] The term *text type* as used in the present analysis thus refers to certain recurring linguistic as well as contextual and functional patterns. This brings to mind the widely-used and often-cited definition of *text type* suggested by Brinker (2010: 125; emphasis in the original):

> Text types are patterns **used by convention** for performing complex linguistic acts, and each type can be described in terms of the contextual (situational), communicative-functional and structural (grammatical and thematic) characteristics it typically combines. Text types have developed over time in the speech community and are part of the common, everyday knowledge of its members.
>
> Textsorten sind **konventionell geltende** Muster für komplexe sprachliche Handlungen und lassen sich als jeweils typische Verbindungen von kontextuellen (situativen), kommunikativ-funktionalen und strukturellen (grammatischen und thematischen) Merkmalen beschreiben. Sie haben sich in der Sprachgemeinschaft historisch entwickelt und gehören zum Alltagswissen der Sprachteilhaber.

3.1.4.3 Folk classification vs. linguistic categorisation

Yet is it really the case that the combination of contextual, functional and structural patterns typical of a certain text type is part of the common,

[45] The grammatical form typically used for the step-by-step instruction differs from language to language. The German equivalent of the English imperative is for instance the impersonal structure ‘Man nehme …’, whereas in French the infinitive is used (‘Prendre d’abord …’).

[46] Such a rough sketch of a certain text type is of course only the basis for fine-grained, empirical analyses, such as diachronic or cross-cultural studies. The great number of food blogs and platforms for sharing recipes online provide a vast pool of data that could be contrasted with cookery books from the 70ies for instance.

everyday knowledge all members of a speech community possess? Gansel (2011: 32f.) suggests that this may only hold for those types speakers or writers encounter on a regular basis. Yet even if speakers' or writers' comprehensive text-type knowledge is usually restricted to a limited number of text types, they are still familiar with a substantially greater number of genres and their text-external characteristics. Thus, while the concept of text types as recurring patterns on the text-external and text-internal levels seems to be a sound basis for analysing and comparing the texts of the present study, Brinker's concept lacks the distinction between *text type* as a linguistic concept and *genre* as a folk concept that proved to be very helpful in Biber's approach outlined above.[47] While the members of a speech community are certainly able to group texts into different classes and to give them labels such as *love letter*, *obituary*, *instruction manual* or *recipe*, this classification is not based on an analysis of the interplay of the individual patterns Brinker refers to, but largely determined by the content or function of the texts and thus by very salient non-linguistic features. Thus, a distinction should be made between the two different classification processes, and the term *genre* should be used instead of *text type* when referring to speakers' intuitive grouping of texts into categories.

3.1.4.3.1 Folk classification into genres

The intuitive genre classification may be undertaken on different levels and according to different criteria, i.e. a text may be called a novel or – depending on its content – a fantasy novel or – depending on its style and aim – a satirical novel or – depending on its form – an epistolary novel and so on. The notion of *genre* is by no means restricted to literary genres only; among those encountered on a daily basis are news reports, weather forecasts, shopping lists, to-do lists, diary entries and voice mail messages. All of these genres are associated with certain formal conventions, but the decisive difference between a genre classification and a text-typological one lies in the fact that

[47] Brinker (cf. 2010: 120ff.) acknowledges that there is a difference between *lay concepts of text types* (*Textsorten in der Alltagssprache*) on the one hand and *the linguistic concept of text types* (*der linguistische Textsortenbegriff*) on the other. While the former, i.e. the classification of texts in everyday speech, corresponds to Biber's notion of *genre*, Brinker's definition of the latter, i.e. text types from a linguistic perspective (see the quote above), still considers text type knowledge to be part of the linguistic or communicative competence of a speech community. In his subsequent presentation of an approach to differentiate between different types of text, the distinction between lay and linguistic concepts seems to play no decisive role: the starting points are always the lay concepts, i.e. genres (cf. 2010: 126ff.).

> [g]enre categories are determined on the basis of external criteria relating to the speaker's purpose and topic; they are assigned on the basis of use rather than on the basis of form (Biber 1988: 170).

In the case of the recipe example referred to above, members of a speech community can identify a text as belonging to the genre of recipe even if it does not contain a separate list of ingredients or is not written in the imperative form, as long as it constitutes a set of instructions for the preparation of a certain dish.[48] Thus, while genres are historically-grown conventional categories that can be assigned without any greater knowledge of the individual features that such texts usually exhibit on different levels of analysis and the manifold interrelations that exist between them, a text-typological approach takes precisely these features and interrelations as the point of departure in order to arrive at a classification and description that is not primarily based on intuition and discourse tradition. When analysing a large corpus of recipes, it is thus possible to discern different text types within this genre, and the one described above may not even be the most frequent or prototypical one.

However, saying that lay genre classification is usually undertaken on the basis of text-external features is not meant to imply that the members of a speech community are totally unaware of the text-internal or linguistic features that are typical of a class of texts. This awareness becomes manifest when the linguistic patterns of a particular genre are imitated for stylistic effect, thus creating intertextuality (cf. Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 188ff.). A good example are the many different recipes for happiness and other non-food entities that can be found on greeting cards or on the Internet, the most famous one probably being the "recipe for the new year" ("Rezept für das neue Jahr") attributed to Goethe's mother Catharina Elisabeth Goethe.[49] Yet while such examples demonstrate that members of a

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[48] Paltridge (1995) argues that in such cases, pragmatic criteria are used to assign genre membership. Using the example of scientific reports, he discusses the felicity conditions that have to be met for a text to be considered as belonging to this genre and comes to the conclusion that they are all "essentially non-linguistic" but nevertheless "genre-assigning" (1995: 400).

[49] "Take twelve months, clean them thoroughly of all bitterness, avarice, pedantry and fear, then cut each month into 30 or 31 pieces, so that the stock will last for an entire year. Prepare each day individually and arrange it with one part work and two parts joyfulness and humour. Add three heaped tablespoons of optimism, a teaspoon of tolerance, a grain of irony and a pinch of tact. Then douse the mass with plenty of love. When ready for serving, garnish the dish with small bunches of attentiveness and serve it daily with cheerfulness." "Man nehme 12 Monate, putze sie ganz sauber von Bitterkeit, Geiz, Pedanterie und Angst, zerlege jeden Monat in 30 oder 31 Teile, so dass der Vorrat genau für ein Jahr reicht. Es wird jeden Tag einzeln angerichtet aus einem Teil Arbeit und zwei Teilen Frohsinn und Humor. Man füge drei gehäufte Esslöffel Optimismus hinzu, einen Teelöffel Toleranz, ein Körnchen Ironie und eine

speech community are aware of the text-internal characteristics of some genres,[50] this knowledge is fairly restricted and readers' perception and classification of texts is usually not determined by the combination of contextual, functional and structural patterns Brinker refers to but based on the most salient features of a text. These are often viewed in isolation and usually belong to the contextual and functional categories, i.e. they are of a text-external kind. As Dimter (1981: 24ff.) has shown for German, and as no doubt also holds true for English, genres are predominantly assigned on the basis of three text-external characteristics: the communicative situation (as in *public speech*, *letter* or *telephone call*), the function (as in *commentary* or *notification*) and the content (as in *recipe, weather forecast* or *obituary*). While Dimter tries to prove that members of a speech community are also able to assign texts to genre categories without any knowledge of the content or communicative situation, i.e. only on the basis of text-internal, grammatical and structural features, he has to acknowledge that this could only be shown to be the case for genres with a highly salient, rather rigid surface structure, as is the case with recipes, wills or weather forecasts.[51] In the majority of cases, the folk classification is guided by text-

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Prise Takt. Dann wird die Masse reichlich mit Liebe übergossen. Das fertige Gericht schmücke man mit Sträußchen kleiner Aufmerksamkeiten und serviere es täglich mit Heiterkeit." (http://kraftwort.wordpress.com/2010/12/25/rezept-fur-das-neue-jahr/; last accessed January 11, 2017). In the thread of below-the-line comments drawn on in the conclusion (see 9.2), a commenter wants to know "how to get as many recommends as possible" (for the recommend function in comments sections see 4.2.2 below). One of the replies is also delivered in the form of a recipe: 'Take a good smattering of Tbliar, Ca-moron, Gidiot and mix thoroughly with a healthy dollop of Tory scum, con-dem nation, neo-liberal elites, the 1%, evil global corporations. Bake for 3 hours in a stone oven or Aga, then sprinkle liberally with the working classes, the poor, inequality, injustice and any 'ists, 'isms, 'bics you have to hand. Devour with bile, hatred, disgust, frustrated rage, impotence and a barely disguised sense of self importance then regurgitate, spew, puke and vomit it all back up again in your comments box.' [CMC G-BTL c30].

[50] This is mainly the case with genres characterised by a clear and salient structure, as in the case of recipes.

[51] In his study, he presented 37 respondents with modified texts in which all meaning-carrying units were replaced by fillers that do not carry any meaning in German; the verb 'erscheinen', for instance, was replaced by the nonsense verb 'belasen' (cf. Dimter 1981: 123f.). Among the features retained were pronouns, articles, conjunctions, numbers, the verbs 'haben' ('have'), 'werden' ('will') and 'sein' ('be'), as well as number of syllables, inflectional endings and paragraph structure (cf. 1981: 123ff.). While the fact that the categories were assigned correctly in 77% of the cases suggests that text-internal features indeed play a role in determining what genre a certain text belongs to, these findings would most likely be quite different if genres were used that are not characterised by such firmly established, rigid surface structures. The will, for instance, was easily recognisable because of the title and the first sentence (which contained the words 'Mein' ('My') and 'Ich' ('I') followed by what could only be the date and place of birth) as well as the § symbol and the numbered paragraphs containing figures that could only represent sums of money.

external features; genre categories can thus be assigned even if only little text-internal evidence suggests considering a group of texts as constituting distinct text types as well.

When contemplating the data of the present analysis, it can be argued that while a letter to the editor is a well-established and easily recognisable genre, the only requirement a text has to meet in order to qualify as belonging to that genre consists of being a letter written to and subsequently published in a newspaper. The same applies to online comments, which are all those texts typed into the respective text entry box below an article on the newspaper website. In these cases, genre assignment is clearly dominated by the choice of means of communication and reveals little about constituent parts and structures or recurring patterns. Members of a speech community may have some experience with these genres and therefore some intuition about what such texts look like, yet if asked about their characteristics apart from the communicative situation they appear in, even within a speech community, the answers are most likely to be very diverse. The goal of the present analysis is precisely to uncover these characteristics and investigate which of them are shared by the two forms of reader response and in which they differ.

3.1.4.3.2 Linguistic categorisation into text types

In a typological approach, the analysis is not biased by genre categories: texts are analysed in terms of their external as well as internal features, and if certain patterns or clusters of patterns can be discerned, they can be categorised into text types. Since this classification is undertaken on the basis of all criteria and not just external genre characteristics, a genre may, on the one hand, consist of several text types or, on the other, belong to a text type that is very closely related to other genres that might not have any perceivable similarity if only viewed from the outside. However, the distinction between genres and text types is not primarily a matter of one category being broader than the other but a matter of distinguishing between different approaches to the classification of texts. While genre labels can be attached on a more or less ad-hoc basis, much closer scrutiny is necessary when it comes to assigning typological categories, since the characteristic patterns may be very easy to discern, as in the case of recipes, but they may also be less salient, especially when it comes to linguistic patterns. Thus, a linguistic description and categorisation can only be undertaken in a bottom-up approach that examines a great number of texts, i.e. tokens, in order to uncover recurring patterns, i.e. types, on all levels of analysis.[52]

In addition to using different criteria and processes for categorisation, the approaches also differ in outcome: genres are more or less absolute categories[53] that have evolved historically and, according to Lee (2001: 38), "have the property of being recognised as having a certain legitimacy as groupings of texts within a speech community (or by sub-groups within a speech community, in the case of specialised genres)". Text types, in contrast, may lack this 'legitimacy' and are best conceived of as prototypes: while they may share bundles of features, there are usually some texts that are better or more central representatives of the group than others. The great advantage of a typological approach, however, is that texts from different genres are approached from the same perspective and the features analysed are treated as being of equal importance, thus avoiding the risk of being unduly influenced by intuitive assumptions about the characteristics of certain genres. So while the analysis may yield text types that might not match a speech community's lay categorisation of the same texts into genres, the typological description and classification generates a detailed and clear profile of the constituent parts and characteristics of the texts studied. By uncovering patterns that may cut across genre boundaries, a typological approach moves beyond a detailed genre description and allows groups of texts to be arranged in novel ways. It needs to be stressed, however, that the goal does not merely consist in building a new taxonomy but in gaining a deeper understanding of how groups of texts are related and connected to each other and how they can be positioned within a model of text types that makes it possible to capture their essence instead of simply perpetuating preconceived ideas about genre membership and characteristics.

3.1.4.4 The approach of the present analysis

The aim of the present analysis is to investigate the text-external characteristics as well as the text-internal patterns of a corpus consisting of two distinct yet related genres produced in different media. In light of the fact that letters to the editor and online comments are without doubt recognised genres, the analysis sets out to explore whether they can only be considered as constituting distinct groups because of their external characteristics, i.e.

[52] For a discussion of bottom-up and top-down approaches to text typology see Fix (2008: 65ff.).

[53] The 'more or less' is added here since although genres have clear boundaries, a text may belong to different genres at the same time, especially if a genre has several recognised subgenres, as in the example of novels mentioned above.

because they are used in a well-defined communicative situation, or whether they can also be distinguished on the basis of structural, functional and linguistic characteristics. While the way in which members of a speech community would classify the texts into genres is taken into account – the corpora being built on the basis of these genre categories – the texts are approached from the same perspective. Since in the present case, genre assignment is predominantly influenced by the communicative situation and thus the medium used, this is essential if the trap of technological determinism is to be avoided. The goal is to analyse and describe recurring patterns and highlight the most important differences, thus throwing some light on the role played by the medium in shaping the communicative product. Some letters to the editor, for instance, may exhibit certain patterns that can also be found in a certain number of online reader comments, and the overall similarities between individual texts from different genres may in fact even turn out to be greater than the similarities shared by texts from within the same genre – a finding that would strongly argue against the claim that many features of online reader comments are technologically determined. The major asset of such an approach is thus that it is able to reveal differences and similarities that cut across genre boundaries and uncover characteristics which are much more likely to be obscured if working with individual genres only. All in all, this makes the approach ideal for comparing CMC with 'traditional' written language.

Swales' (1990 and 2004) work on genre analysis in the field of English for specific purposes and particularly his concept of *moves* offer a good basis for investigating the structural characteristics of texts (see 3.3 below) and constitute the framework for the present analysis. In her review of different approaches to genre analysis, Solin (2011: 130) argues that the crucial question that still needs to be addressed is "whether stability, in the form of textual regularities, is a necessary precondition of genre status". If, as in the present thesis, a distinction is drawn between *genre* and *text type*, the answer is quite simple: textual regularities do not determine genrehood since genres can be recognised and accepted within a community on the basis of other criteria. According to Solin (2011: 131), "[t]he critical question is then whether the recognisability of a genre as a form of action overrides the need for typification on the level of texts". Here, I argue that this is definitely not the case, since only a thorough investigation of individual texts and a close analysis of the moves performed will uncover how texts work, what features make them recognisable as representatives of a certain genre and what subtypes exist. Such a comprehensive in-depth analysis allows the researcher to reveal how language use may vary according to a wide range of factors – the medium being only one among many.

Since the genre boundaries of the present data are mostly determined by the communicative situation and hence the medium used, the analysis is able to reveal whether the medium or genre really plays such a decisive role in shaping the text produced as is commonly assumed. The research design was strongly influenced by the impression that despite contrary belief (cf. e.g. Landert and Jucker 2011) letters to the editor and reader comments not only share the common core of constituting reader commentary and feedback but many other characteristics besides.[54] I argue that in a substantial number of cases, there are no clues within the text itself as to whether it is a letter to the editor or a reader comment posted below the line and that many of the characteristics of online comments attributed to the CMC context can also be found in traditional letters to the editor. This is not to say that there are no differences; yet only a large-scale study can yield an adequate and comprehensive description of the different types of reader response and reveal points of convergence and divergence.

Even if the findings of the present study cannot be directly transferred to other contexts of language use or generalised in such a way as to hold true for CMC in general, the approach adopted is precisely what is needed, not only in the field of CMC but also in research into the differences between spoken and written language.

3.2 Research into spoken and written language

3.2.1 The dimensions of linguistic variation

As outlined above, it is common to speak of *the* spoken and *the* written language, even if the use of the definite article suggests a homogeneity that does not exist. According to Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 16), the difference between spoken and written language, i.e. variation according to medium, is only one of five major types of variation, and these types or dimensions are to a great extent interrelated. In their system of dimensions of linguistic variation, they distinguish between two dimensions which "relate primarily to the language user", i.e. variation according to (1) region and (2) social group, and three which "relate to language use", i.e. variation according to (3) field of discourse, (4) medium and (5) attitude (1985: 16). As the authors point out repeatedly (1985: 24), the selection of a certain variety is governed by *contingent constraints*: "the use of a specific variety of one

[54] The case study undertaken by Landert and Jucker (2011) will be presented in more detail below (see 3.2.3.2).

class frequently presupposes the use of a specific variety of another". Although many different types of variety exist, the authors argue that a

> COMMON CORE or nucleus is present in all the varieties so that, however esoteric a variety may be, it has running through it a set of grammatical and other characteristics that are present in all the others. It is this fact that justifies the application of the name 'English' to all the varieties (1985: 16; emphasis in the original).

Thus, speech and writing are varieties of the same language, and despite a considerable number of differences, they share a common core. According to Quirk et al. (1985: 25), "[m]ost of these differences arise from two sources", i.e. the situation in which the communicative event takes place and the devices used in each medium to transmit the message. Since the addressee is usually present in a speech situation but absent when the written medium is used, the level of explicitness differs substantially across the media. In addition, the transitory nature of speech does not require as much care and planning as is usually devoted to a written text, which "can be read and reread, slowly and critically" (1985: 25). In terms of the differences caused by the devices used to transmit the message, the authors argue that since features such as stress, rhythm and intonation are not present in writing, "writers often have to reformulate their sentences to convey fully and successfully what they want to express within the orthographic system" (1985: 25). On the other hand, however, "the written medium has the valuable distinctions of paragraphs, italics, quotation marks, etc, which have no clear analogue in speech" (1985: 25). In addition to these medium-related factors shaping speech and writing, the form language takes in each medium also strongly depends on the other four dimensions, especially that of field of discourse (cf. 1985: 25).[55] As is to be expected when language is influenced by several factors at once, varieties cannot be considered homogeneous. Quirk et al. (1985: 31) therefore argue that "the various conditioning factors (e.g. region, medium, attitude) each constitute a continuum rather than a discrete category". Unfortunately, the authors do not expand on this topic and fail to stress that it is in fact not only the conditioning factors that constitute a continuum but also the varieties themselves, i.e. linguistic usage. The factor conditioning the dimension of speech and writing is the medium; however, it is not primarily the medium that consti-

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[55] By *field of discourse* Quirk et al. (1985: 23) mean "the type of activity engaged in through language". Among the labels used to distinguish between different fields are *literary*, *learned*, *scientific, instructional* or *journalistic*. The authors highlight that many more fields and subfields exist (e.g. *headlinese* within the field of *journalistic discourse*) and point out that the term *register* is sometimes used for this type of variety (cf. 1985: 24).

tutes a continuum but rather the mode.[56] The literature on this subject reveals that this is an important terminological distinction scholars have often failed to make.

3.2.2 Terminological confusion

The failure to distinguish clearly between *medium* and *mode* is comparable and even directly related to the terminological confusion surrounding the concept of *medium* and the status of CMC described above (see 3.1.2), and it, too, has caused many misunderstandings in research into orality vs. literacy. When looking at texts discussing the properties of spoken and written language and the differences between speech and writing, one can very easily collect a vast number of seemingly contradicting quotations about their characteristics. In the majority of cases, the reason for these incongruities lies in the fact that the different authors use the terms *spoken* and *written* for two distinct concepts and do not always make it sufficiently clear which one they have in mind. As pointed out above, this terminological hurdle can easily be avoided if one follows McCarthy (1993) and distinguishes between *medium* and *mode*. A similar distinction was made and developed into a full-blown theory by Koch and Oesterreicher, whose model from the 1980s is widely known and highly valued in the German-speaking and Romance research communities but has to date received only little attention amongst English-speaking linguists.[57] Given the great significance this model has gained in the field of research into orality and literacy over the past 30 years, any study exploring the differences between speech and writing would be incomplete without a brief review of the model and an assessment of its suitability for the analysis at hand.

3.2.3 The model of medial and conceptional orality and literacy

Koch and Oesterreicher (1985) propose a clear-cut terminological distinction between *medial* and *conceptional* orality and literacy, arguing that even though a text may be delivered in written form (medial aspect), it can still contain linguistic features that give it a 'spoken feel' (conceptional aspect). The medial aspect thus relates to what they call the *phonic* or *graphic code*

[56] While the medium could be argued to constitute a clear dichotomy, with texts either being encoded graphically or phonically, the discussion below will reveal that if all medium-related aspects are included, such as durability and stability, the view of a dichotomy cannot be upheld (see 3.2.3.1.1 below). However, the focus at the present stage needs to be on the fact that the mode, too, is a matter of 'more-or-less' oppositions rather than one of 'all-or-nothing' categories.

[57] For one of the most recent collections of papers based on Koch and Oesterreicher see Ágel and Hennig (2010).

(cf. Oesterreicher 1997) and constitutes a straightforward dichotomy: a text can either be delivered orally (phonic medium, i.e. spoken) or represented in the graphic medium (i.e. written). The linguistic conception, on the other hand, refers to "the style or the mode of expression" of a text (1997: 191) and is scalar in nature: any text – irrespective of its medial aspect – contains features of conceptional orality and literacy and can therefore, depending on how prominent these are, be positioned somewhere on the conceptional continuum between the poles 'spoken' and 'written', as illustrated in Figure 2.

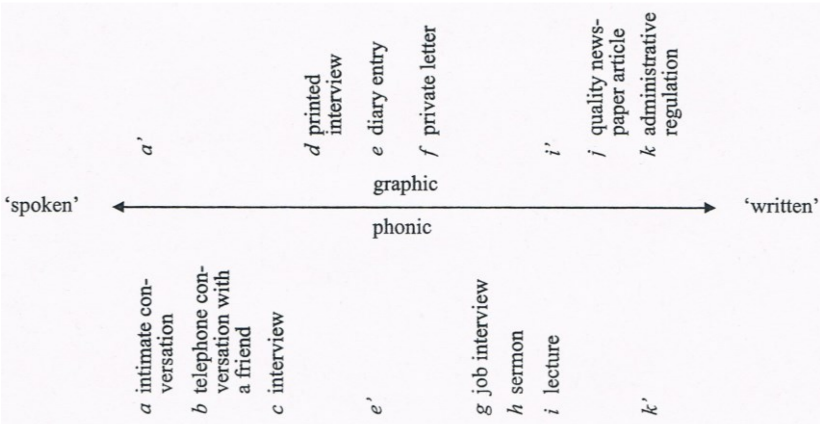

Figure 2 The conceptional continuum (Koch and Oesterreicher 2012: 444)[58]

Since the "conceptional profiles of any discourse are, as a matter of principle, independent of the medium of discourse" (Oesterreicher 1997: 191), Koch and Oesterreicher prefer to avoid the terms *spoken* and *written* and suggest calling the two ends of the conceptional continuum *language of immediacy* (*Sprache der Nähe*) and *language of distance* (*Sprache der Distanz*) instead. While Figure 3 below illustrates nicely that texts in the graphic code or medium have a tendency towards communicative distance whereas texts in the phonic medium lean more towards communicative immediacy, Figure 2 above shows that there are nevertheless spoken texts, i.e. texts in the phonic medium, that are more written-like, i.e. that contain

[58] Oesterreicher (1997) translates the German adjective *konzeptionell* as *conceptional*, and this is also the term used in the English abstract of their 2007 paper (i.e. Koch and Oesterreicher 2007). However, in the English publication from which the figure above is taken (i.e. Koch and Oesterreicher 2012, which is the English translation of Koch and Oesterreicher 1985), *conceptual* is used instead of *conceptional* throughout.

more features of communicative distance, than a number of texts produced in the written medium.[59]

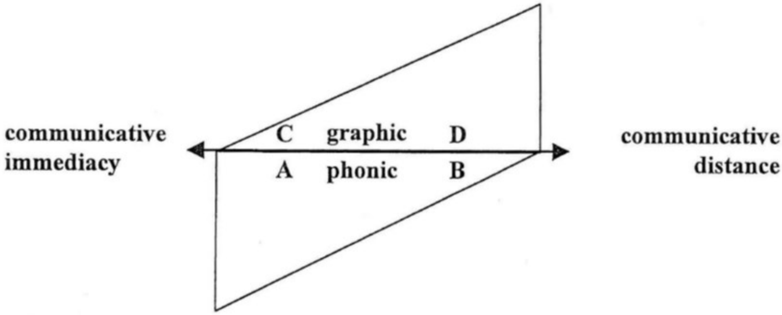

Figure 3 Model of communicative immediacy and distance (Koch 1999b: 400)

The clear separation of medial and conceptional aspects of orality and literacy, with the former being understood as constituting a dichotomy and the latter a continuum, is the great asset of the model proposed by Koch and Oesterreicher, as it allows for the fact that texts may differ in their degree of 'writtenness' or 'spokenness' – i.e. in terms of what is called *mode* in the present study – despite being produced in the same medium. In light of the claim that computer-mediated texts combine features of both speaking and writing, the question arises whether and how a model dating back to a time in which computer-mediated communication was still in its infancy can be applied successfully to texts from today's multifaceted communicative landscape.

[59] Even though Figure 2 serves to illustrate quite nicely that medial and conceptional aspects are independent of each other, the figure is not unproblematic. Not only are the genres positioned on the continuum from categories that vary substantially in scope, it is even questionable whether it makes sense to work with genres in the first place (cf. Betz 2004: 38). A lecture, for instance, can take many different shapes, depending on variables such as speaker, context or audience, and quality newspaper articles – even if taken from just one newspaper – vary markedly depending on their function and the newspaper section they appear in (e.g. hard news vs. opinion pieces, politics vs. sport). Moreover, it should be kept in mind that Koch and Oesterreicher's categorisation is more a matter of intuition than an abstraction based on the findings of linguistic analyses. As helpful as the figure may be to illustrate the fundamental point, what needs to follow now is an application of the model by looking at individual texts and trying to position them on the continuum; for such an approach see Ágel and Hennig (2006a).

3.2.3.1 Evaluation of the model and its suitability for studying CMC

Given that several attempts to adapt the model to the context of CMC have been made (cf. e.g. Kattenbusch 2002, Dürscheid 2003, Berruto 2005, Ágel and Hennig 2006b or Landert and Jucker 2011), the suitability of the model for studying CMC and communication in general, as well as its suitability for the purpose of the present analysis will be assessed briefly in the following.

3.2.3.1.1 The medial aspect

At first glance, it seems as if the medial aspect, i.e. the clear dichotomy between the phonic and the graphic medium, corresponds to the concept of *medium* in the second tradition described above, i.e. the one focusing on the technical aspects of message transmission. However, this fails to be the case, since Koch and Oesterreicher do not consider the full scope of these factors but limit the medium aspect to sensory differences. In a later publication, they therefore assign CMC to the graphic medium, simply arguing that it is perceived visually (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 2007: 358f.). Yet despite being transmitted via graphic means, digital texts exhibit certain characteristics that necessarily distinguish them from analogue or traditional written texts, irrespective of the communicative situation. If the indisputably helpful distinction between medium and conception is to be upheld, these characteristics need to be included in the medial aspect since differences in durability, stability, production and reception are not of a conceptional nature but solely determined by technological factors. While it is easy to conceive of the graphic and phonic codes as constituting a clear dichotomy if only sensory differences are taken into account, the picture becomes more complicated if all the relevant medium factors are included. In fact, it could be argued that an additional code or medium needs to be added to the dichotomy, i.e. that of CMC, positioned between the phonic and the graphic ones, but nevertheless constituting a distinct, clearly defined category of its own.[60] Yet given the number and scope of the medium factors outlined above and the fact that not all communicative exchanges in either the written, spoken or computer-mediated form share exactly the same medium characteristics, this model turns out to be too simplistic. Just as not all graphically or orally/aurally transmitted texts are identical in

[60] Kattenbusch (2002: 192), for instance, suggests adding a third code (which he calls *lalisch*, derived from the Greek word for *chat*), constituting a “hybrid of graphic code and iconographic code” (“Hybrid zwischen graphischem Kode und ikonographischem Kode”). Space limitations preclude a discussion of the numerous problems this attempt at adapting the model raises. For an overview of the most important weaknesses see Kailuweit (2009).

terms of their durability, stability and the production and reception processes involved, computer-mediated texts vary considerably in these respects. This not only means that the Koch and Oesterreicher model is not suitable for any type of analysis that includes medium factors, it also suggests that the claim made about CMC constituting a new medium in the second tradition as outlined above can be challenged on the grounds that CMC is too heterogeneous to be viewed as a single bundle of medium features that is sufficiently distinct from the bundles of features characterising the technical aspects of the written and spoken media respectively. However, one could argue that the same holds true for the spoken and written media: they can only be conceived of as clearly distinct and dichotomous in terms of their technological aspects if only prototypical speaking and writing situations are taken into account. One form of spoken communication that cannot be captured adequately by such a prototypical approach is a telephone conversation: in this speech situation, the interlocutors are separated in space and thus cannot rely on the visual cues that are usually present in the spoken medium. While this suggests that it may be better to abandon the idea of comparing and contrasting the medial aspects of speaking and writing in general and to concentrate on individual forms of communication and their technical characteristics instead, there lies great appeal in being able to generalise and to move beyond merely describing and comparing individual instances of speaking and writing.

3.2.3.1.2 The conceptional aspect

The conceptional aspect of Koch and Oesterreicher's model comprises, on the one hand, what they call *communicative conditions* and, on the other, *strategies of verbalisation*, the latter being seen as resulting from the former and influencing the linguistic shape of the message (cf. Oesterreicher 1997: 193).

3.2.3.1.2.1 Communicative conditions

Unfortunately, the factors that Koch and Oesterreicher subsume under the heading of "parameters that characterize communicative conditions of immediacy and distance respectively" (1997: 194) are, on the one hand, characteristics that are determined by the physical properties of speech and writing and, on the other, characteristics that depend on the individual communicative situation.[61]

[61] Ágel and Hennig (2006b: 13f.) make a similar point in arguing that the model mixes some universal features with others that differ depending on the type of discourse used. However, calling these features *universal* not only suggests that they remain the same in all contexts of

Table 1 Parameters of communicative immediacy and distance (based on Oesterreicher 1997: 194)

1. face-to-face interaction of partners versus distance in space and time
2. private versus public setting of the communicative event
3. familiarity versus unfamiliarity of the partners
4. context embeddedness versus contextual dissociation of a discourse
5. dialogue versus monologue
6. maximum versus minimum cooperation of partners
7. spontaneity versus reflexion
8. involvement versus detachment
9. free topic versus fixed topic

The necessity of the interactants being face to face if the message is to be transmitted via sound waves and the possibility of being separated in time and space in the case of writing clearly belong to the medium-determined, first group of features whereas matters such as *free topic versus fixed topic* or *familiarity versus unfamiliarity of the partners* (see Table 1 above) may vary from situation to situation and therefore belong to the second one. Thaler (2007) even argues that the group of communicative conditions suggested by Koch and Oesterreicher consists of three distinct groups.[62] Firstly, there are those that are solely determined by the technological properties of the medium, such as physical co-presence as well as the degree of cooperation, by which Koch and Oesterreicher mean the possibility of backchannelling, feedback, interruptions, etc. The second group consists of those features that are influenced not only by the technological properties but also by the form of communication (e.g. letter, email, chat) as well as by the precise function it fulfils, i.e. which genre it belongs to (e.g. business letters, private emails or political chat). Context embeddedness and the degree of dialogicity are among the characteristics of this group. The last group comprises those characteristics that are determined solely by the genre in question, such as the degree of familiarity between the interlocutors and the question as to whether the topic is fixed or free. Individual genres of the same medium and even of the same form of communication may vary

speaking and writing (which is not the case since a telephone conversation is not face-to-face but still spoken) but also misses the essential point that some of these parameters are determined by medium factors and not the individual communicative situation.

[62] Thaler (cf. 2007: 155ff.) calls these groups, which will be briefly outlined below, (1) *communicative conditions determined by technology (technologiebestimmte Kommunikations-bedingungen)*, (2) *communictative conditions determined by technology and genre* (*technologie- und gattungsbestimmte Kommunikationsbedingungen)* and (3) *communicative conditions determined by genre (gattungsbestimmte Kommunikationsbedingungen)*.

considerably along these lines, the surrounding technological conditions exerting no influence on these factors (cf. 2007: 155ff.).

Irrespective of whether the communicative conditions are best subdivided into two or three groups, it has become obvious that some of the characteristics that Koch and Oesterreicher list as belonging to the conceptional aspect are solely and inevitably determined by the technological affordances and constraints of the medium and therefore medial in nature. Just like the other technical features outlined above, they need to be included in the medial aspect, which is thus broadened to encompass the full concept of medium in the sense of the second tradition. While this means that the concept of a medial dichotomy cannot be upheld, such an adapted version of the model offers the decisive advantage that the communicative conditions of its conceptional aspect are now free of features that do not depend on situation but on medium.[63]

3.2.3.1.2.2 Communicative conditions vs. strategies of verbalisation

Now that the fundamental weakness of the model of immediacy and distance has been addressed, the *communicative conditions* and *strategies of verbalisation* suggested by Koch and Oesterreicher (see Figure 4 below) can be examined in more detail.

Despite their intuitive appeal, the individual categories as well as the overall classification as *conditions of communication* on the one hand and *strategies of verbalisation* on the other are highly problematic. Many of the categories remain rather vague and abstract, and several – if not all – of the so-called *strategies* are not strategies at all but rather the characteristics or results of a certain communicative situation, begging the question as to why a distinction between *conditions* and *strategies* was drawn in the first place.

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[63] While the original model has been criticised before for failing to take medium-related factors into account and for reducing the medial aspect to the form of language representation (cf. e.g. Dürscheid 2003 and Androutsopoulos 2007b), a fully satisfactory revised version is still lacking. Some adaptations have been suggested in order to be able to include CMC, yet these focus on different aspects. Dürscheid (2003) adds, among other changes, the distinction between synchronous, quasi-synchronous and asynchronous communication, whereas Berruto (2005) adds an additional cline of interactivity. Landert and Jucker (2011), in contrast, are more concerned with the public versus private nature of communicative exchanges. Interestingly, these three adaptations have in common that one of the features of communicative conditions is selected from the original list and taken to be the decisive factor that needs to be added to the conceptional and medial aspects if CMC is to be included in the model. The mere fact that a different feature is chosen in each adaptation strongly suggests that matters are not as simple as that.

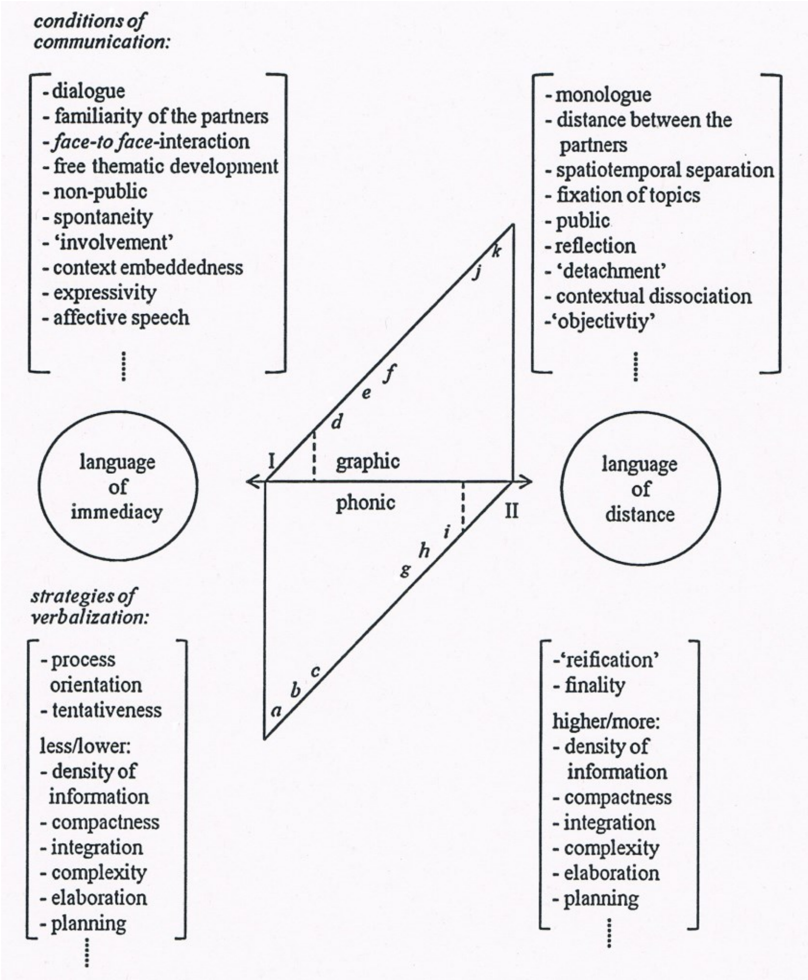

Figure 4 Model of immediacy and distance (Koch and Oesterreicher 2012: 450)

Why should *expressivity* and *affective speech* or *'objectivtiy'* [sic] – whatever these terms are to mean – be part of the conditions of communication, but *process orientation*, *'reification'* and *finality* belong to the strategies of verbalisation?[64] In addition, the model seems to suggest that all the factors

[64] Koch and Oesterreicher (1990: 8) subsume the features of expressivity and affective speech under the heading of *emotional involvement* (*emotionale Beteiligung*) but do not provide a definition. Even their sample classification in the second edition of their monograph (cf. 2011:

are of equal importance and fails to account for the ways in which the individual aspects relate to or influence each other. While it is undeniably true that several of the features included play a substantial role in shaping the language product, the lack of precision in addition to the flaws briefly addressed above make it impossible to apply the model consistently.

3.2.3.1.2.3 Interim discussion

So far, it can be concluded that despite the great appeal of a theory that distinguishes between medial and conceptional factors, a closer look at the model suggested by Koch and Oesterreicher quickly reveals its limitations: while the so-called medial aspect is reduced to sensory differences, the conceptional aspect comprises many different features that blur the whole notion of *conception*. Are the communicative conditions really part of the conception? If the conception is “the style or the mode of expression” (Oesterreicher 1997: 191), why can the communicative conditions alone be used to position genres on the conceptional continuum, as done in the case of private letters and sermons (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 2011: 8f. and above)? This implies that certain communicative conditions automatically trigger specific strategies of verbalisation and ignores the fact that interlocutors may choose to employ certain linguistic features in order to shape the communicative situation or illustrate how they interpret it.[65] This is not accounted for in the model, which, despite using the term *strategies*, does not seem to consider the interactants as playing an active role in shaping the

8) does not shed any further light on what is meant by *emotional involvement*: they illustrate how to position the communicative conditions of certain genres on the clines of immediacy and distance by using private letters and sermons as examples. According to them, private letters are characterised by a comparatively strong emotional involvement, and therefore this communicative condition is positioned relatively close to the pole of immediacy in the conceptional profile of this genre. A sermon, in contrast, has only “clear emotional components” (“klare emotionale Komponenten”) (2011: 8) and is thus further towards the pole of distance in this respect. While this classification may not contradict most speakers’ intuition blatantly, it needs to be stressed that this is precisely the crux of the problem: the whole classification seems to rely solely on sweeping generalisations and intuition. While *tentativeness* (see Figure 4 above) could be interpreted as a strategy, the German term used in the original figure (Koch and Oesterreicher 1985: 23) is *preliminary character (Vorläufigkeit)*, which makes it sound like a condition rather than strategy.

[65] Androutsopoulos (cf. 2007b: 80) has argued convincingly that the relation between situational context and text is not one of unidirectional influence but one of mutual influence, i.e. linguistic features can be used not only to reflect existing distance or immediacy but also to create it in the first place. While Koch and Oesterreicher (cf. 1985: 24) point out that, in some cases, partial immediacy or distance can be created on purpose with the help of the respective verbalisation strategies (as is the case when the narrative device of a stream of consciousness is used in a novel), their model is not based on the premise that there is always a mutual influence between a text and its context.

communicative exchange. Combined with the fact that the interrelations between the various features included in the conceptional aspect remain unclear, this obscures the whole concept of *conception*, even before the third part of the conceptional aspect, i.e. the individual linguistic properties, have been addressed.[66]

3.2.3.1.2.4 Individual linguistic properties

When it comes to using the model for an analysis of the mode, i.e. the linguistic properties of spoken and written language as in the third conceptualisation of *medium* outlined above, the suitability of the model is equally questionable. While these features clearly belong to the conceptional aspect, the overall focus in the publication from 1985 lies much more on the *communicative conditions* described above and the supposedly ensuing *strategies of verbalisation* than on the individual linguistic features to be found on the morpho-syntactic, lexical and textual-pragmatic level, which are only enumerated and not examined further. However, in a monograph published five years later, Koch and Oesterreicher (1990) provide a full description of the linguistic properties of the language of immediacy in French, Italian and Spanish. Their corpus-based analysis is divided into features they claim to be 'universal', i.e. to be found in all three languages, and features that are unique to one of the three languages.[67] Among the 'universal features' ranked on the morpho-syntactic level are *holophrastic utterances* and *incomplete sentences*, on the lexical level *low type/token ratio* and *passe-partout words* and on the so-called textual-pragmatic level *corrections, modal particles* and *use of present tense in narration* (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher: 27f.).

As interesting as their analysis may be for a better understanding of the characteristics of spoken language, it only addresses features of immediacy and not those of distance and therefore covers the present aim only partially.

[66] Kailuweit (2009: 13ff.), for instance, takes *conceptional orality* to denote a type of orality that is created on purpose and therefore merely a staged imitation of orality. According to him, this makes it problematic to describe casual face-to-face interaction as being conceptionally oral.

[67] While the monograph focuses on French, Italian and Spanish, the original version of the model (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985) does not restrict the so-called 'universal' features to just these three languages. An example of a language-specific feature on the morpho-syntactic level is the use of the *passé composé* instead of the *passé simple* in spoken French and, on the lexical level, the frequent use of lower-register vocabulary, such as *bouquin* instead of *livre* (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985: 28). As Koch and Oesterreicher (1990) focus on Romance languages when discussing the individual-language features, these are not considered in greater detail here. However, the use of phrasal verbs instead of their Latinate equivalents may be considered an example of such a language-specific characteristic on the lexical level in English.

Although the authors sometimes refer to the communicative conditions when exploring individual linguistic characteristics, these interrelations are neither reflected nor properly included in the underlying model. Apart from the statement that the communicative conditions and strategies of verbalisation "determine linguistic conception" (Oesterreicher 1997: 194), the precise relationships between these individual aspects remain as unspecified as the differences in their degree of weightiness (cf. Dürscheid et al. 2010: 39ff.). Despite drawing attention to the many different factors that may shape the linguistic product in the theoretical part of their study, i.e. in the presentation and discussion of their model of immediacy and distance, the analysis does not advance any further than any of the other numerous studies comparing speech to writing. One could even argue that – notwithstanding the quality of their analysis – Koch and Oesterreicher fail to apply their own model, since it is neither evaluated nor refined after the corpus analysis; it is not even employed to compare different parts of the corpora systematically. Contrasting texts that differ in only some of the variables of the model would not only allow to assess the relationships between individual factors; it would also reveal to what extent and in what way individual communicative conditions influence the linguistic product.

3.2.3.2 Positioning CMC in the model

In light of the claim that CMC constitutes a third medium, the question of how to include CMC in the model needs to be addressed. Figure 2 above has served to illustrate that speaking of *the* spoken and *the* written language in general is problematic because although a list of prototypical characteristics of speaking and writing (or, if one wants to stick with the terminology of Koch and Oesterreicher: of the language of immediacy and distance) can be compiled, texts usually combine features of both or vary in how prominent these features are. If the conceptional aspect of a text is considered scalar in nature, it follows that there is no such thing as *the* written and *the* spoken mode (or medium in terms of purely linguistic features as in the third tradition outlined above). As a result, the question asked at the beginning needs to be reformulated. It is not a matter of deciding whether CMC is a third mode but of examining which linguistic characteristics of orality and literacy it exhibits and which medium factors it shares with speaking and writing.

For the purposes of the present study one can begin by ascertaining whether it is possible to position CMC somewhere on the cline. However, the fact that CMC is merely defined by the most general means of message transmission, i.e. the use of digital networks, makes it impossible to accomplish this task. Just as it is impossible and in contradiction to the whole concept of scalarity to position the categories of ‘printed texts’ or ‘spoken material’ on the continuum, CMC as such cannot be placed since it does not consist of a homogeneous group of texts.

Given that CMC as hyperonym is too broad a category, one might consider working with the next level, i.e. particular forms of communication or types of CMC instead. However, even this level turns out to be too heterogeneous for such an endeavour. Although individual forms of communication share technological features, the shape of the linguistic message transmitted via these forms of communication varies greatly depending on factors such as purpose, context and interlocutors. It is therefore impossible to position forms of communication (e.g. email or IRC) on the continuum (cf. Haase et al. 1997, Androutsopoulos 2007b: 92 and Dürscheid et al. 2010: 41).

In their sample analysis, Koch and Oesterreicher (1990) perform the positioning on what can be considered the next lower level, i.e. that of genres. While their analysis does not run counter to the overall impression one might have of a particular genre, it is weakened by the fact that it constitutes nothing more than an intuitive description of what is perceived to be typical of a certain genre, e.g. a sermon or a private letter. However, if the communicative product is understood to be shaped not only by the technological characteristics of the medium used or the general communicative situation but also by social, functional and stylistic factors as well as the individual choices of the interlocutors (cf. Androutsopoulos 2007b: 92), such a generalising description of abstract genres is of little value when the goal is to uncover not only how people adapt their language to suit the communicative act but also what strategies they use in order to shape it consciously or unconsciously. Such an approach cannot substitute for an empirical, fine-grained analysis of actual instances of language use.

In the context of CMC and the purpose of the present analysis, it thus makes little sense to try to position letters to the editor and online comments on the continuum. Such a positioning could only be undertaken on the basis of one’s intuitive perception of their prototypical characteristics and would therefore be based solely on text-external and not internal features. In an empirical approach, however, the analysis needs to be carried out with the help of a corpus consisting of actual texts from the genres under consideration, and the positioning needs to take place on the level of individual texts. Interesting as such an analysis may be, it is unfortunately severely limited in scope and explanatory power. A researcher obviously wants to move beyond the level of individual texts and be able to draw broader conclusions. However, such more general conclusions only have a sufficient degree of scholarly legitimacy if the focus is not on individual genres and one's overall impression of their characteristics but on texts that share certain patterns and can thus be considered similar in type. A typological approach (see 3.1.4.4 above) should be able to uncover such patterns and thus allow clustering texts into groups or types that can be positioned on the continuum. While the present study may reveal that a number of texts from the computer-mediated corpus exhibit many features of conceptional orality, it may also reveal that such texts are neither unique to nor significantly more frequent in this particular corpus – yet only if this were the case, would it be possible to position the genres as such on the continuum.

Clearly, working with text types instead of genres is the only sensible starting point when comparing different genres from different media in terms of their conceptional profiles, even if the ultimate goal is to contrast the genres as such. While matters of conceptional orality are often addressed in CMC research, there appears to be only one study in which an adapted version of the model proposed by Koch and Oesterreicher is used to compare the two genres that constitute the object of the present investigation. In their diachronic case study comparing letters to the editor published in the *Times* in 1985 and online reader comments posted on *Times Online* in 2008, Landert and Jucker (2011: 1432) find that online comments are characterised by "a greater reliance on private topics and an increasing use of conceptionally oral language" and therefore position them further towards the pole of conceptional orality in their adapted and enriched version of the model (see Figure 5 below).[68]

Given that the material analysed in this case study consists of only eight letters to the editor and 31 online comments, there is no need stressing that another set of data chosen randomly might have led to very different findings. In order to judge whether the differences encountered are indicative of a general tendency to use more informal language in digital media as the authors suggest (cf. 2011: 1424) referring to similar claims made by Dürscheid (2007), a synchronic comparison of far larger, and thus more representative, corpora of present-day letters to the editor and online comments is required. The present study intends to show whether the findings of the case study are representative of the genres at large and thus symptomatic of changes in communicative behaviour influenced by medial aspects.

[68] Landert and Jucker (cf. 2011: 1426f.) divide the scale of communicative immediacy into three separate scales: that of accessibility (who has access to the texts, how public are they), privacy (in terms of content) and linguistic immediacy (linguistic realisation). As letters and comments both belong to the graphic code, their figure does not include the phonic/graphic distinction.

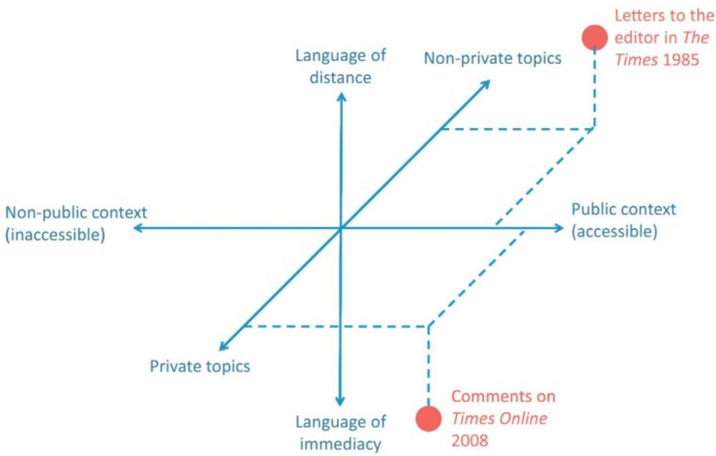

Figure 5 The position of letters and comments (Landert and Jucker 2011: 1432)

Thus, while many levels of analysis used in the past only provide the basis for intuitive descriptions instead of empirically founded claims, working on the level of individual texts is unsatisfactory for research questions that are not confined to matters of individual instances of language use. The only solution seems to be to use a text-typological approach that may reveal patterns of usage that can then not only be put in relation to other variables but also be used to highlight and eventually account for the differences between distinct forms of communication and media.

3.2.3.3 Application of the model

Leaving aside all the problems revealed for a moment, it needs to be stressed that despite its many weaknesses, the model successfully illustrates that spoken and written language can – and indeed should – be conceived of as constituting the two ends of a continuum, with many intermediary stages in between. The position of a text is influenced by a multitude of factors, and any text, irrespective of whether it is perceived visually or aurally, can exhibit features of immediacy and/or distance. Depending on the combination of features and their prominence, this text can thus appear to be more similar to either prototypical speaking or writing.

Apart from this enlightening way of conceptualising speech and writing, the details of the model proposed by Koch and Oesterreicher have been revealed as to be problematic. While an attempt could still be made to apply the model to the present analysis, the fact that it does not even advance a rudimentary account of how its many different factors are related or may depend on each other but merely enables the researcher to describe texts or prototypical representations of a certain genre casts doubt about how fruitful such an endeavour would be. The present study will thus not be designed to fit the model suggested by Koch and Oesterreicher; but given its prominence, at least in the German and Romance research communities, its suitability for the present purposes (besides the distinction between medial and conceptional aspects and the idea of scalarity) will be addressed again once the findings have been presented (see 5.5 below).[69]

3.3 Research into CMC

3.3.1 The *waves* of linguistic CMC research

As was briefly mentioned in the introduction (see 1.3 above), much of early CMC research focused on isolated surface features, lacked a thorough investigation of larger data samples and was characterised by a generalising tendency as well as technological determinism. This kind of research is what Androutsopoulos (2006a and 2008) has termed the *first wave* of linguistic CMC studies. With its clear focus on the supposedly novel linguistic features "unique to the Internet" (Crystal 2001: 18), studies of this wave attributed such importance to the technological aspects of the medium that all the other factors shaping language use in individual communicative settings tended to be neglected. Drawing attention to the fact that in public discourse, CMC is still framed, even today, as a new and distinct language – a phenomenon Dürscheid (2004) and Androutsopoulos (2006a) call the *netspeak myth*[70] and *Internet language myths* respectively – Androutsopoulos suggests a link between public perception and this strand of research: "[p]aradoxically, perhaps, academic work has done its part in perpetuating Internet language myths" (2006a: 420). He argues that instead of "sustaining homogenized and simplified conceptions of language use in CMC" (2006a: 420), researchers need to consider carefully all the factors that may influence language use apart from the technology employed (e.g. situational, contextual, functional, social and user-related ones) in order to

[69] Space limitations preclude a more detailed discussion of the model. For a critical review see, among others, Dürscheid (2003), Androutsopoulos (2007b) and Dürscheid and Brommer (2009), and for a more detailed discussion of its weaknesses and suggestions as to how they may be overcome see Ágel and Hennig (2006b: 14ff.).

[70] To be precise, Dürscheid's (2004: 141) contribution carries the title "Netspeak – a new myth" ("Netzsprache – ein neuer Mythos").

be able to describe language use in new media adequately (cf. 2006a: 420f.).

In what Androutsopoulos (2008: 1f.) calls the "second wave of language focused CMC studies", the limitations of the first wave have largely been overcome: the focus of attention no longer lies on the medium-specific features of certain forms of communication or even CMC per se but on individual communicative events and on the individual technological, situational and social factors that together influence linguistic practices. Drawing on pragmatics, sociolinguistics and discourse studies allows the researchers to gain a better understanding of socially-situated language use and to detect and account for linguistic variation. Interactants are attributed a far more active role because "[c]haracteristic features of 'the language of CMC' are now understood as resources that particular (groups of) users might draw on in the construction of discourse styles in particular contexts" (Androutsopoulos 2006a: 421) and no longer as direct consequences of medium factors.

The move away from the homogenising tendencies of the first wave and the shift towards focusing on situated language use went hand in hand with a considerable expansion of the scope of research interests. A brief look at the topics of linguistic studies published over the last decade and more in the two main journals of the field, i.e. the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* and *Language@Internet*, conveys a good impression of the wide range of foci. In addition to the unique linguistic features of CMC that have sparked much controversy and debate, attention is given to issues as diverse as gender, politeness and hostility, community and identity, language variation and multilingualism, interpersonal relations, anonymity and privacy as well as style, to name only some of the most central ones. In terms of methodology, a move towards combining online with offline data or comparing different forms of communication can be identified as well as a general trend towards combining methodologies, as suggested by Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) approach to researching online behaviour. This approach is based on the following theoretical assumptions:

(1) "discourse exhibits recurrent patterns" (2004: 342),

(2) "discourse involves speaker choices" (2004: 342) and

(3) "computer-mediated discourse may be, but is not inevitably, shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems" (2004: 343).

The goal of CMDA research is to uncover these consciously or unconsciously produced patterns through careful observation and to account for linguistic choices by investigating the factors underlying and influencing these choices. Since the approach rejects *a priori* technological determinism, it is of key importance that the studies are based on empirical data and carried out in a systematic fashion. This is best achieved by using and adjusting well-established methodologies from other branches of linguistics. According to Herring (2004: 342), CMDA is best understood as an approach which "provides a methodological toolkit and a set of theoretical lenses through which to make observations and interpret the results of empirical analysis". This methodological toolkit draws on the paradigms that originated in text and conversation analysis, pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics as well as critical discourse analysis and can be applied to investigate what Herring (2004: 360) identifies as the "four domains of language", i.e. *structure*, *meaning*, *interaction* and *social behaviour*.[71] This means that micro-level linguistic phenomena can be studied as well as or even alongside macro-level phenomena by simply adapting the analytical tools from other research paradigms to the computer-mediated context. In many of the more recent studies into CMC, scholars have systematically drawn on such tools, e.g. by applying different politeness and impoliteness models, as for instance exemplified in the papers of the special issue on "Politeness and Impoliteness in Computer-Mediated Communication" in the *Journal of Politeness Research* (Locher 2010). While this is a case of employing paradigms of pragmatics to study the domain of meaning, other examples can easily be found, such as the analysis of turn-taking in emails (Harrison 2008) or IRC (Beißwenger 2005), i.e. the use and adaptation of conversation-analytic methods for studying interactional features in text-based CMC or the use of genre analysis to describe the structural features of blogs (Herring et al. 2004). By selecting from the vast pool of methodologies and tools available those appropriate for addressing their research questions and interests and subsequently adapting them to the context of CMC, researchers have not only successfully demonstrated the potential of such a framework but also made it possible to position CMC in the broader field of discourse studies and to compare it with non-mediated forms of language use.

Now that the homogenising and exotifying tendencies of the early days of CMC research have been overcome, there is a sheer abundance of features that can be analysed from various perspectives and with the help of numerous different methods. From this sea of opportunities several core

[71] For a more thorough presentation of the CMDA framework developed by Herring (2004) see 3.3.2 below.

issues have started to emerge, and some aspects seem to have received more attention than others. In her overview of CMC research in the fields of discourse studies and pragmatics, Georgakopoulou (2011) outlines four major areas of studies: (1) *CMC between speaking and writing*, (2) *play and performance*, (3) *communities* and (4) *self-presentation and identities* – several of which will be addressed in the present thesis. This wealth of options has turned CMC research into a lively and most fascinating field while at the same time making it difficult to capture the state of the art. However, despite the multi-faceted nature not only of CMC as such but also of CMC research, a clear shift from the first to the second wave of CMC research can be noted in terms of how CMC is approached. Georgakopoulou (2011: 106) comes to the conclusion that technological determinism has been overcome: "[i]n its place, a shift towards a contextualized view of the medium as part of as well as in interaction with situational and sociocultural parameters is expected to be consolidated and expanded".

Yet while these developments constitute a remarkable improvement, Androutsopoulos (2008: 2) still criticises that in most cases, the analysis is based solely on the linguistic data collected. As Herring (2004: 339) outlines in her discussion of the CMDA approach:

> It [i.e. CMDA] may be supplemented by surveys, interviews, ethnographic observation, or other methods; it may involve qualitative or quantitative analysis; but what defines CMDA at its core is the analysis of logs of verbal interaction (characters, words, utterances, messages, exchanges, threads, archives, etc.).

While researchers sometimes collect such supplementary data, e.g. by conducting focus group discussions as in Baron and Ling (2011), the vast majority of studies restrict their analysis to the log files collected. To remedy this one-sided view, Androutsopoulos (cf. 2008: 2) proposes a combination of methods that he calls *discourse-centred online ethnography*. This approach "combines the systematic observation of selected sites of online discourse with direct contact with its social actors" and thus allows a better understanding and interpretation of the underlying discourse practices and perspectives than can be gained from studying transcripts only (2008: 2).

3.3.2 Positioning the present approach

While the use of an ethnographic methodology in CMC research is indeed highly promising, especially in studies with a sociolinguistic background, such an approach is limited in the types of data it allows researchers to address. After all, one of the great advantages of online data lies in the fact that it enables researchers to study linguistic products and processes from social groups they are not part of or would have difficulties in getting access to in 'real life', such as diaspora communities in remote parts of the world. Whereas online linguistic data are often freely accessible to the CMC researcher, getting directly in touch with the interactants as required in the ethnographic tradition would in many cases be extremely difficult. The reason for this may be – as in the case of diaspora communities – that these communities are walled off and that their members tend to prefer to communicate only with each other[72] or – as in the case of the present study – that the interaction under investigation is not performed by tightly-knit, clearly delineated groups of people in the first place. Although gathering information about participants' awareness and understanding of their practices via interviews and questionnaires immensely enhances a study's analytic potential, in many cases this is simply not feasible. Especially if the interactants do not qualify as coherent online – or offline – communities and if the study consists of a comparison of several data sets produced by different groups of people, collecting this type of ethnographic data would be – though not completely impossible – far too time-consuming if done properly.[73]

In the present analysis, the main and sometimes only characteristic the interlocutors have in common is that they feel the need to share their opinions on matters of public interest with a potentially large audience; the platform for doing this – be it a newspaper or a newspaper website – serves as their only point of contact. Despite the existence of a substantial number of regular comment writers, the contributors to the comment sections on the two newspaper websites studied do not perceive themselves as belonging to a small, tight-knit online community as it is the case in certain kinds of forums. The researcher studying the interaction is therefore no less of an outsider than any of the users participating in it – provided that the effort is made to observe the interaction systematically and over an extended period of time. The same applies to letters to the editor; since the active participants are no more closely connected with each other than with the passively observing researcher, the latter has access to the same kind and amount of information as the former. Thus, focusing the investigation on the information made relevant in the discourse by the interlocutors themselves does not limit the researcher's understanding to any considerable extent. Even if

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[72] See Androutsopoulos (2008) for practical recommendations on how to overcome such obstacles. His guidelines are based on first-hand experience gained by studying an online hip-hop community (Androutsopoulos 2007c) and German-based diasporic web forums (Androutsopoulos 2006b and 2007a).

[73] The term *online community* is not uncontested. For a suggestion of a set of conditions that have to be met in order to qualify as online community see Baym (2003).

information about the individual production processes or users' answers to questions about their motivation for contributing in the first place would certainly be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the communicative events under investigation, much can be deduced from the behaviour of the interactants.

Notwithstanding the advantages that a methodology such as *discourse-centred online ethnography* offers for sociolinguistic research on computer-mediated data, the usefulness of this – or any other – approach can only be measured in terms of its practicability and its suitability to address the research questions at hand, i.e. methodological decisions always need to be taken on the basis of individual projects (cf. e.g. Jucker 2009 and Sunderland 2010). The nature and the goals of the present analysis as outlined above clearly justify focusing the analysis on log file data. Yet despite not following the latest trend in CMC research, the present approach does not represent a step back, since it combines in many ways the advancements of the second wave of CMC research: it aims to include in the analysis all relevant technological, social, contextual, situational and functional factors as attested in the data and uses several of the methodologies of CMDA to investigate sets of phenomena on the levels of *structure*, *meaning*, *interaction* and *social behaviour* (see Table 2 below).

First of all, the data sets are analysed on the level of structure, i.e. the online comments are compared to the letters to the editor in terms of their orthographic, typographic, lexical and syntactic features in order to outline their genre – or rather text-typological – characteristics and shed light on the issue of orality and complexity (see 5 below). The issue of genre is also addressed by analysing the most important moves performed (e.g. criticising, relating personal experiences). Investigating how the moves may be combined and how they may differ between the genres as well as within a genre makes it possible to compare the individual genres and types of feedback not only in the domain of structure but also that of meaning (see Table 2 below). On the interactional level, the corpora are compared in terms of coherence and interaction by looking at how the individual contributions relate to each other and what strategies readers may employ in order to weave a coherent thread of discourse (see chapter 6 below). The analysis is concluded with a focus on the domain of social behaviour, i.e. by investigating the creation of identity and the management of face in the individual forms of communication (see chapter 7 below).

Table 2 Phenomena and methods for CMDA according to domain of language (Herring 2004: 360)

	Phenomena	Issues	Methods
Structure	Typography, orthography, morphology, syntax, discourse schemata	Genre characteristics, orality, efficiency, expressivity, complexity	Structural/ Descriptive Linguistics, Text Analysis
Meaning	Meaning of words, utterances (speech acts), macrosegments	What the speaker intends, what is accomplished through language	Semantics, Pragmatics
Interaction	Turns, sequences, exchanges, threads	Interactivity, timing, coherence, interaction as co-constructed, topic development	Conversation Analysis, Ethnomethodology
Social Behavior	Linguistic expressions of status, conflict, negotiation, face-management, play; discourse styles, etc.	Social dynamics, power, influence, identity	Interactional Sociolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis

While the present approach can clearly be considered to belong to the second wave of CMC research, this does not mean that the linguistic surface features that were the focus of much research during the first wave are totally ignored. In fact, it is argued that systematically analysing their occurrence and function in a carefully chosen corpus means overcoming the limitations of the first wave while at the same time addressing a topic that – despite receiving much attention in public discourse – has not been satisfactorily dealt with yet. While it is certainly correct that the focus of attention should no longer be solely on the allegedly unique linguistic features of CMC, the fact that their occurrence has hardly ever been explored consistently and related not only to medium factors but also to situational ones calls for an investigation of this kind. Although these features are still regularly mentioned in publications on CMC (cf. e.g. Herring 2012), they are only rarely investigated thoroughly in empirical studies based on larger datasets. An in-depth analysis (see chapter 5) of one type of communicative event in terms of all the features commonly identified as typical of CMC can – despite working with the very same set of features – indeed help to dispel the netspeak myth.

3.4 The genre perspective

As outlined above, addressing the linguistic characteristics of online comments as a particular form of CMC in order to contrast them with the linguistic make-up of letters to the editor and compare the genres with respect to features of orality and literacy is only one of the goals of the present study. As important as such an analysis may be to dispel some of the most common misconceptions about language use online and to position this form of CMC in the fields of spoken and written language, it reveals little about what users do or try to achieve when commenting online or writing letters to the editor. In her overview of the main strands of research in CMC, Georgakopoulou (2011: 107) notes a similar tendency and comes to the conclusion that

> it is […] remarkable how little explored CMC instances are from the point of view of genre theory that [sic] would shed light on the relative importance and on the conventionalized features of genres that have proven to figure prominently in other contexts of ordinary communication […].

Adopting a genre perspective allows to shed light on the functional characteristics of letters to the editor and online comments and to compare the two types of reader response in terms of the role they are assumed to play in public discourse.

3.4.1 Genre and move analysis

For a comprehensive description and comparison of the present genres, their constituent parts and characteristics need to be explored. From a genre perspective, this can be done by analysing how the discourse is typically structured and organised in terms of functional discourse units. Since this kind of knowledge is part of the communicative competence that speakers – especially non-native speakers – need to acquire or even be taught explicitly, it is not surprising that much work on the description of generic structures originated in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The best known proponent of this type of analysis is certainly Swales (1990), who developed a framework for what he calls *move analysis*, which has been used to study a great variety of genres especially in professional settings, such as university lectures (e.g. Thompson 1994), research articles (e.g. Stoller and Robinson 2013) or legal discourse (e.g. Bhatia 1993). In this framework, *moves* are considered the functional building blocks that texts belonging to a particular genre usually share. They have a clear communicative purpose and may be further subdivided into individual *steps*. Since texts from the same genre usually exhibit similar move structures, move analysis can be used as a tool to describe the typical composition of texts from a genre. Such descriptions and analyses can then in turn be used to further the development of discourse competence in language learners. However, the potential of move analysis is not just pedagogical in nature: examining the units discourse is composed of and understanding how texts are structured by uncovering underlying functional patterns also enables the researcher to study patterns of language use systematically, to define genre without simply recurring to text-external characteristics, such as the communicative situation in which it occurs, and to compare similar genres produced in different media, as is the aim of the present analysis.

3.4.1.1 The corpus-based approach to discourse analysis

Since the goal is not only to investigate the texts produced to perform reader feedback in terms of their functional units but also to uncover the linguistic characteristics of these units, the corpus-based approach proposed by Biber et al. (2007) as a way of refining move analysis is adopted in the present study. This seven-step top-down approach starts with identifying the functional units of a text and then moves on to an analysis of their linguistic, i.e. lexical and grammatical, characteristics in order to uncover discourse-organisational tendencies.[74] It is based on the premise that while a move is a functional unit, it also has structural significance: not only do moves often have characteristic surface forms, they also tend to occur in particular orders or combinations. For an adequate description of the patterns of discourse organisation it is therefore necessary to work with a combination of functional and formal analyses.

Although the internal structure of specific types of texts has often been studied, Biber et al. (2007: 10f.) criticise that this kind of genre analysis is usually qualitative in nature and often based on fewer than five texts (cf. also Upton and Cohen 2009: 586f.). Large-scale corpus studies, in contrast, are able to offer insights about the use and distribution of certain lexical or grammatical features across a large number of texts, yet they usually do not

[74] In contrast to the distinction between *top-down* and *bottom-up* approaches to text typology drawn by Fix (cf. 2008: 65ff.) as briefly discussed above (see e.g. 3.1.4.3.2), this approach is based on a slightly different understanding of the terms in question. According to Upton and Cohen (2009: 587), "[i]n a bottom-up approach, the lexical and/or form-focused corpus analysis comes first, and the discourse unit types emerge from the corpus patterns", whereas in a top-down approach the focus is first and foremost on meaning and function, i.e. the texts are segmented into moves before the attention is turned to their linguistic and formal characteristics.

cover higher-level aspects such as discourse structure and organisation.[75] In order to remedy the fact that "we know little at present about the general patterns of discourse organization across a large representative sample of texts from a genre" (Biber et al. 2007: 11), the authors attempt to combine the two research perspectives in their approach to discourse analysis, which Upton and Cohen (2009: 588) later call the *Biber Connor Upton (BCU) Approach.*

In the present analysis, the approach is used to uncover the organisational and linguistic patterns of the discourse type of reader response performed in the genres of letters to the editor and below-the-line comments. The goal is to reveal what kinds of discourse organisational tendencies exist and how they are distributed across the genres and media. Since the analysis aims to uncover whether the differences between the genres and media are greater than those within a genre or medium, such an approach is especially well-suited, as it can be used to group texts according to their moves or discourse patterns and thus distinguish between different text types irrespective of their text-external genre categories. Thus, despite having its origin in genre analysis, the approach can also be used to study discourse in a typological approach that analyses texts from different genres from the same perspective (see 3.1.4 above).

3.4.1.2 Steps in the analysis

The BCU approach consists of seven individual steps, summarised in Table 3 below. The analysis begins by identifying the functions that the discourse units of a group of texts can have. In order to develop a framework of functional units that can later be used to analyse the entire corpus, the researchers need to spend a substantial amount of time reading and rereading a large number of texts from the corpus. Some categories will emerge fairly quickly; others, however, may be less salient or frequent, which means that the evolving framework needs to be constantly refined until it becomes more or less stable. Once the framework is complete, the researchers can begin to work their way systematically through the texts of their corpus, segmenting each text into discourse units and classifying each individual unit by assigning one of the functional labels developed in the first step of the analysis (see steps 2 and 3).

[75] This is little surprising considering that corpora like the Brown, LOB and London-Lund Corpora do not consist of texts but of text files of 2,000 words each, which means that several texts are often combined within a text file and that texts are cut off as soon as the word limit is reached (cf. Biber et al. 2007: 11). While this makes the corpora ideal for quantitative corpus analyses or for comparing linguistic features across different sub-corpora, it does not allow the researcher to study structural or organisational features of individual texts or types of text.

Table 3 BCU approach: steps required in the analysis (Upton and Cohen 2009: 589)

Required step in the analysis	*Realization in this approach*
1. Communicative/ functional categories	Develop the analytical framework: determine set of possible functional types of discourse units, that is, the major communicative functions that discourse units can serve in corpus
2. Segmentation	Segment each text into discourse units (applying the analytical framework from Step 1)
3. Classification	Identify the functional type of each discourse unit in each text of the corpus (applying the analytical framework from Step 1)
4. Linguistic analysis of each unit	Analyze the lexical/grammatical characteristics of each discourse unit in each text of the corpus
5. Linguistic description of discourse categories	Describe the typical linguistic characteristics of each functional category, based on analysis of all discourse units of a particular functional type in the corpus
6. Text structure	Analyze complete texts as sequences of discourse units shifting among the different functional types
7. Discourse organizational tendencies	Describe the general patterns of discourse organization across all texts in the corpus

This functional analysis is followed by a formal one: the linguistic characteristics of individual discourse units are analysed and described (see steps 4 and 5). Depending on the genre studied, different features may be chosen for analysis, such as word choice, voice, tense and aspect or stance markers (cf. Upton and Cohen 2009: 596). Since the aim is not only to describe and compare types of units but also to study textual organisation, the sixth step is performed on the level of complete texts as opposed to text fragments. Analysing how individual texts are structured, i.e. how the individual discourse units are combined, makes it possible to compare texts with each other and to uncover tendencies in discourse organisation, which represents the final step of the analysis.

3.4.1.3 Application of the approach to the present analysis

To illustrate how the *BCU Approach* can be applied to investigate genres, Upton and Cohen (2009) use a study on *birthmother letters*, discussing and demonstrating the analytical processes required for each individual step of the analysis.[76] The same approach is also outlined by Biber et al. (2007) and in that case illustrated with the help of an analysis of the genre of *direct*

[76] When introducing the corpus, Upton and Cohen (2009: 590) describe the genre as follows: "[b]irthmother letters are the letters written by prospective adoptive parents to expectant mothers considering adoption plans for their unborn children".

mail letters for non-profit fundraising. A comparison of these types of data to the data of the present study reveals some striking differences.

Whereas birthmother or fundraising letters have a clear purpose and are fairly restricted in terms of semantic content, this is not the case in reader response. Especially the first step of the analyses of birthmother and fundraising letters is – despite the functional nature of moves – strongly determined by the propositional content of the individual units. Among the move types developed in the birthmother study are (1) *introductions*, (2) *thanking, empathizing and/or reassuring expectant mother*, (3) *describing the couple's history before marriage* and (4) *why couples want to adopt*. The subordinate steps of move (3), for instance, are *childhoods, adult lives* and *how they became a couple* (cf. Upton and Cohen 2009). While such a predominantly semantic classification can be undertaken for texts from a genre that is as specialised and therefore also restricted in terms of content as birthmother letters, the moves of reader response could only be based in the same way on semantic content if only comments about a particular topic, e.g. climate change, were chosen for analysis.[77] Since the present analysis is not confined to such a thematically specialised sub-category of reader response, the framework developed in the first step needs to consist of functional categories that are broader and do not have such strong semantic components. In their analysis of fundraising letters, Biber et al. (2007) identify moves such as (1) *get attention*, (2) *introduce cause and/or establish credentials of org.*, (3) *solicit response* or (4) *offer incentives* – a categorisation evidently less dependent on propositional content. However, moves such as (4) *offer incentives* are still strongly restricted in terms of their semantic content – a characteristic that is to be expected of such a genre. Since this is not the case in the present data, the challenge lies in building an analytical framework that is broad enough to cover all types of

[77] It has to be stressed that the classification of moves described in Upton and Cohen (2009) is still functional in nature, although – especially on the subordinate level of steps – it is also strongly influenced by the content of the individual discourse units. Describing the couple's *physical environment*, which constitutes move 7, for instance serves the communicative function of revealing information about the prospective home of the child and reassuring the birthmother. To illustrate that – depending on the communicative purpose fulfilled – segments similar in content can represent different move types, the authors use the example of talking about the couple's pets. In one case they assign move type 6 (*Profile of the couple – Step 6B: Character and values*), and in another they assign move type 7 (*Physical environment – Step 7B: Pets*), arguing that "[w]hile both of these moves had animals as their topic, it was important to look closely at what the purpose of the text segments, within their contexts, were" (2009: 595). In the first case, the couple used the move to breathe life into their self-portrayal as a warm-hearted and loving couple, whereas in the second case, they simply described the family members and their environment. Nevertheless, the degree to which the function and content of a discourse unit correlate is far higher in the case of such specialised genres than it is in those of the present study.

moves performed in the two media without making the move types too broad and thus meaningless.

Another striking difference between the genres that have already been studied with the help of the BCU approach, e.g. birthmother letters (Upton and Cohen 2009) and biochemistry research articles (Biber et al. 2007), and the present genres is the length of the texts under consideration. With the average birthmother letter consisting of 2,022 words (cf. Upton and Cohen 2009: 591) and the average biochemistry research article of more than 5,000 words (cf. Biber et al. 2007: 75), as opposed to 126 and 87 words in the cases of letters to the editor and online comments respectively, the texts examined by Upton and Cohen (2009) and Biber et al. (2007) are substantially longer than those of the present analysis. However, this does not necessarily mean that their structure is simpler or that fewer moves are performed. As soon as one starts to identify moves in reader response, one is forced to realise that in many instances two or even more functional moves seem to be performed at the same time – a fact that does not allow for the kind of segmentation into successive moves as carried out by Upton and Cohen (2009), who seem to assign each text fragment one single move. In his study of direct mail letters, however, Upton (cf. 2002: 72) acknowledges that several moves may be combined within a sentence and that a move may be embedded in another one, while Biber et al. (2007: 32) point out that such inserted moves are "rather unusual" and "tend to occur mainly in genres that are less constrained and allow more variability than those that are more prescribed".[78] The present analysis will show whether the genres of reader response, which both seem to belong to the group of less prescribed genres, are characterised by such embedded moves or whether their main characteristic is what could be called layered moves, i.e. discourse units that are used to perform several moves simultaneously.

In any case, the fundamental difference in text length means that the discourse units of the present analysis are not only significantly shorter but can also serve several functions at the same time, i.e. they either contain embedded moves or belong to more than just one type. Therefore, steps 2 and 3 of the BCU approach (see Table 3 above) need to be adapted to allow for assigning several functional moves to one single discourse unit. This crucial modification also has repercussions on the subsequent steps, making

[78] Upton's (2002) study is also discussed in Biber et al. (cf. 2007: 50f.), and in this case a tagged example of embedded moves is used to illustrate how such text fragments were segmented and coded. What is striking about the example given is the fact that the embedded moves may be as short as one word, e.g. 'tax-deductible', which was coded as move type 4 (*offer incentives*) and embedded in move type 3 (*solicit response*). This seems to run counter to their definition of the term *move*, in which they claim that "[m]oves can vary in length, but normally contain at least one proposition" (Biber et al. 2007: 24).

it especially interesting to investigate what combinations of move types are particularly common (as part of steps 6 and 7, see Table 3 above) and whether such combinations are also reflected in the linguistic characteristics of these units (as part of steps 4 and 5, see Table 3 above). While the BCU approach needs to be slightly adapted to suit the makeup of the present corpora, it can still be applied successfully to texts that neither share such strong limitations in terms of semantic content as birthmother or fundraising letters, nor have such a clear and fairly rigid structure as biochemistry research articles.

3.4.2 Identifying and classifying moves

As outlined above, the method for move analysis used in the present study is based on both Swales (1990) and Biber et al. (2007). If such a functional approach is to be performed on a large number of texts, it is of cardinal importance to develop a solid analytical framework that can be used in a consistent, systematic and reliable manner. Since a "functional approach to text analysis calls for cognitive judgement, rather than a reliance on linguistic criteria, to identify the intentions of a text and the textual boundaries" (Biber et al. 2007: 32), developing the coding scheme for a certain genre is a very labour-intensive task, as Biber et al. (2007: 33; emphasis in the original) do not hesitate to point out:

> First, in order to identify the move categories for a genre, it is important to get a 'big-picture' understanding of the overall rhetorical purpose of the texts in the genre. The second step is then to look at the *function* of each text segment and evaluate what its local purpose is. This is the most difficult step. Move categories need to be distinctive. Multiple readings and reflections of the texts are needed before clear categories emerge.

In the present study, the coding was performed with Maxqda, a software tool for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. Although not specifically developed for linguistic research, this tool is ideal for the purposes of move analysis: it allows the researcher to develop a hierarchical code system that can be constantly adjusted, to assign the individual codes to segments of text and then to retrieve all segments that were coded with a particular code (or combination of codes) for analysis and comparison or a second round of more detailed coding. The code system was developed by reading texts from both corpora, following the BCU approach outlined above. Some categories started to emerge fairly quickly while others only appeared at later stages and then needed to be added to the existing framework. For this reason, even once the framework was deemed fairly stable and ready to be used for categorisation, it was considered best to begin the final coding process with a pilot study, as recommended by Biber et al. (cf. 2007: 33). In this pilot study, the coding scheme was applied to samples of fifty texts chosen randomly from each corpus. During this coding process, the initial scheme was refined further; yet the majority of changes concerned the level of sub-moves (i.e. by distinguishing between two or more sub-categories within certain moves, e.g. the different aspects of criticism, see 7.3.4 below). Although Biber et al. (2007: 33) acknowledge that "[i]t is also not uncommon that additional steps or even move types will be discovered during the analysis of the full set of texts" the pilot study revealed that all the texts of the two samples could be segmented and coded sufficiently well with the scheme of moves developed, which suggested that it was sophisticated enough to be applied to both corpora in their entirety.[79]

The most striking characteristic of the coding scheme developed in this process is probably the absence of steps. On average, the texts count only a little more than 100 words but still contain a considerable number of moves. Since – especially when consisting of sub-moves – these were felt to be sufficiently detailed to capture the function of the discourse unit, subdividing them further into individual steps seemed neither necessary nor effective. After all, moves that are as specific and as narrowly defined as that of criticising the journalist for lacking integrity (a subcategory of *criticism directed at the journalist*; see 7.3.4.1.4 below), for instance, are hardly comprised of individual steps.

In order to guarantee a high level of consistency in the coding process, Biber et al. (cf. 2007: 35) suggest measuring inter-rater agreement. The fact that the coding in the present study was performed by only one researcher makes it of course impossible to do this; thus, it was considered best to test intra-rater reliability instead. This was achieved by repeating parts of the initial coding process after several months and comparing the results. Maxqda has proven a very useful tool for this procedure because texts that have already been coded can be coded again from scratch if a different user account is used and the settings are changed so that only the codings of the present user are displayed.[80] For the present purpose, it was considered best

[79] One of the invaluable advantages of working with a software such as Maxqda is that when a certain move type needs to be subdivided into additional steps/sub-moves or even divided into two separate move types at a later stage of the coding process, this can easily be achieved by retrieving all segments that were coded with this move and then working one's way through the list of codings and repeating the coding process with the refined set of categories.

[80] The software even offers a feature to compare the two coding results and thus measure inter-rater reliability or, as in the present case, intra-rater reliability, i.e. the agreement among two coding processes performed by the same rater at different points in time. This "Intercoder Agreement Function" was not used, however, as coding with different usernames and comparing the results side by side offers a more detailed picture of the agreement (or differences) between the two codings than do percentages calculated automatically.

to test the coding reliability with a set of random samples. In the clear majority of cases, agreement was high. While the precise beginning and/or end of a coded segment differed occasionally, the codes assigned to the letters or comments were the same throughout. In a further attempt to guarantee that codes are assigned as consistently as possible, the first step in the analysis of each move type to be presented below always consisted in a thorough re-examination of all the text segments to which this particular code was assigned, adjusting and refining the categories if necessary. This combination of strategies ensures the highest level of consistency possible in a qualitative analysis of the present scope performed by only one coder.

3.4.2.1 Functional moves vs. structural elements

In their analysis of birthmother letters, Biber et al. (cf. 2007: 52ff.) distinguish between functional *moves* and *structural elements*, the latter comprising, among others, salutations, date lines and signatures. Since structural elements are considered merely templates, they are excluded from the functional analysis. However, such a distinction is not unproblematic, as the authors themselves have to acknowledge:

> Indeed, it could be argued that at least some of these elements should be viewed as moves in themselves, as they are functional units of the text serving a specific purpose that adds to the persuasive nature of the letters. Textual choices within these structural elements, for example how to phrase the salutation, are actually quite significant and can be viewed as something beyond a standardized template (Biber et al. 2007: 58).

In the present corpora, only elements clearly beyond the control of the individual users are not considered moves, i.e. the date, the time stamps and the nicknames in the CMC corpus, as well as the invariant use of the salutation 'Sir,' at the beginning of each letter to the editor published in the *Times*.[81] As these features are either automatically generated pieces of content or determined by editorial policy and therefore not the choice of the user, they cannot be considered to carry a functional load. The signature in letters to the editor, however, is considered a move, as the amount of information provided may vary. While the full name(s) of the author(s) is/are always published, other pieces of information are usually added, depending on the status of the author: in the case of normal citizens, i.e. private individuals, their place of residence is always specified, whereas in

[81] These features will be presented in detail in chapter 4 below. The nickname is of course the user's choice, but once selected, it is added automatically to each contribution; thus it is considered a structural element and excluded from the analysis. The invariant use of 'Sir' in the letters published in the *Times* will be discussed in more detail below (see 7.3.4.1.1.2).

the case of politicians or other public figures, it is usually their function or position that is indicated, as in (1).

(1) […]
Kulveer Ranger
Mayor of London's adviser on transport policy [NEWS T06-006][82]

In addition, further details may be provided, such as title, profession, age, height, affiliation and even links to the websites of organisations. From an identity perspective, these are deliberate acts of positioning and hence clearly functional in nature, which is why they were considered relevant for the analysis (see 7.4.1.2.4 below).

3.4.2.2 Types of user contribution and move categories

Given that the genres studied in the present analysis are not as specialised as those usually chosen to perform a move analysis, it is impossible to provide a complete move structure for letters to the editor or online comments in the form of a single and neat table as done for instance in Biber et al. (2007: 52). Depending on the overall function of the reader's response, different move structures apply, and no single move structure is valid for all the texts of a corpus. The moves used in a contribution produced above all to criticise the journalist or a public figure, for instance, clearly differ from those used when the main aim is to relate a personal experience or produce a pun. To complicate matters even more, nearly any combination of moves is possible, so that for instance some contributions contain criticism and claims of expertise at the same time or any other combination of the moves to be outlined below. For this reason, the following discussion will not present complete move structures but rather concentrate on a selection of the most important move types, describing their distribution across the individual corpora, presenting their linguistic characteristics and highlighting frequent combinations. Despite this modification of the approach, it still provides a fairly good and detailed impression of the two types of reader response and the different types of contribution within these genres, which will now be presented in more detail.

[82] As will be discussed below (see 5.2.3.3.3.1), 'CMC' stands for the corpus of comments and 'NEWS' for that of letters to the editor; the letters 'G' and 'T' serve to identify the respective newspaper or newspaper website.

4 Data

As outlined above, the genres chosen for the present comparative study are closely related: they both constitute a form of reader response, and the newspaper articles triggering these follow-ups are the same. While this provides a sound basis for comparison, there is no denying the fact that certain differences exist between the corpora. In the following, both corpora will be presented in detail, and the decisions that influenced the data selection process will be discussed, highlighting both the advantages and limitations of the present data set.

4.1 The written corpus: letters to the editor

Comparative studies always face a dilemma: if the individual corpora are too heterogeneous, too many variables are involved, thus precluding a meaningful comparison. In contrast, if they are too narrow and specialised, the encountered differences and similarities cannot be accounted for, as they may simply originate from the idiosyncrasies of just one particular newspaper at a certain moment in time. While it would make for a very interesting research project to analyse the letters to the editor of the British press in general, running the gamut from broadsheets to tabloids or even magazines, a study working with two distinct media can only focus on one particular sector of the press, which should be chosen on the grounds of representativeness and comparability. For the present study this means that letters to the editor should be an important feature in that particular sector and they should have an equivalent online.

In an attempt to strike a balance between these different requirements, two quality newspapers, i.e. the *Guardian* and the *Times*, were chosen for analysis. The two are very similar in terms of the market they address, have a fairly popular and lively letters page and a corresponding news website with a commenting function that provided the material for the computer-mediated corpus. Since the study is synchronic in nature, the data were collected over a time span of six successive weeks, which was considered sufficient to yield a fairly representative data set.

4.1.1 Composition

Based on Herring's (2004) discussion of the advantages and limitations of data sampling techniques in computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), *sampling by time* was chosen as the best method for capturing the essence of the two genres while preserving coherence and offering a rich context. To build the written corpus, all the letters to the editor published in the *Guardian* and the *Times* during a period of six successive weeks in the summer of 2009 were collected. As approximately 60% of the 1,106 letters thus collected were published in the *Guardian* and only 40% in the *Times*, this distribution was maintained when the corpus was limited to the first 1,000 letters for ease of comparison. The combined corpus of letters thus amounts to 600 published in the *Guardian* and 400 in the *Times*, which together build a corpus of 138,680 words. Letters to the editor vary greatly in length, tone and style; it was therefore considered vital to include each individual letter published during that time span in order to produce a balanced and representative corpus. Despite the numerous differences, all the letters share the same communicative situation, which will be briefly outlined in the following as it may help to account for the occurrence of certain features and thus allow for the comparison of the individual corpora.

4.1.2 The communicative situation

To a certain extent, letters to the editor are similar to 'traditional', i.e. personal or even business, letters. They are dialogic in nature, and the production and reception processes are separated in time and space. Both kinds may initiate the dialogue or constitute a reaction to a previous message, i.e. a follow-up. In the case of traditional letters, the message triggering the reply is usually a letter as well, whereas letters to the editor are generally written in reply to a particular newspaper article or a previous letter to the editor. If letter writers take the initiative, their letters are usually intended to draw attention to a topic neglected by the press or to address a matter of general public concern without specific reference to a recent article. The analysis of the interactional patterns found in the two genres in chapter 6 below will not only address whether the majority of letters in the present corpus constitute follow-ups but also whether the trigger is more often a newspaper article or another reader's letter.

As the name *letter to the editor* implies, the letter is written – and in the case of the *Times* even directly addressed – to the editor of the newspaper; its intended readership, however, is far greater than in the case of personal or business letters, since it consists of all the readers of the newspaper in which it is to be published.[83] The communication model is thus to a certain extent similar to that of narrative or dramatic texts, since the actual and implied readers are not the person addressed but nevertheless the audience for which the text is intended.[84] This is usually different in traditional

[83] All letters to the editor published in the *Times* start with 'Sir, …', as will be discussed in more detail in 7.3.4.1.1.2 below.

[84] One could thus speak of different levels of communication, which are not unlike those identified by Pfister (cf. 2001: 20ff.) for narrative and dramatic texts: the internal

letters. They may be written to more than just one person, but the addressee(s) is/are usually identical with the recipient(s). A letter may of course be shown to readers other than the addressee(s), yet in contrast to letters to the editor, where the letter is primarily intended for this 'over-hearing' audience, these are usually not envisaged by the author in traditional letters. This does not mean that the editor is only a place holder or substitute for the real, intended readership. In many cases, letters to the editor are used to criticise, praise or otherwise comment on the journalistic product and therefore constitute an important direct backchannel between the public and the media.[85] They form a valuable source of feedback for the editors of a newspaper; however, feedback that is provided – and thus also to a certain extent performed – in front of a large audience, with all the implications this carries for matters of facework.[86]

4.2 The CMC corpus: below-the-line comments

In order to keep as many variables as constant as possible, the corresponding websites of the two newspapers chosen to compile the written corpus provided the data for the CMC corpus.[87]

4.2.1 Composition

Since topic, content as well as style of a newspaper article are likely to influence the reader response, it was considered best to focus on those newspaper articles that had also triggered traditional letters to the editor when collecting the online comments. Thus, for each letter to the editor written in response to a particular news item, the corresponding newspaper article was identified, and all the comments posted below it on the newspaper website were collected; i.e. from the vast pool of reader comments available in the online version of the two newspapers, only those were chosen that have direct equivalents in the written corpus. While this leads to the fact that the CMC corpus does not include every single reader comment posted during the time of data collection, the great diversity of the newspa-

communication system, i.e. the letter writer communicating with the editor, is embedded in the external communication system, of which the newspaper reader is part.

85 The role played by criticism and positive feedback will be explored in detail in 7.3 below.

86 As will be discussed below (see 7.3.4.2.3), criticism performed in front of an audience is generally perceived as especially face-threatening.

87 The *Guardian* website can be found at http://www.theguardian.com/uk and the website of the *Times* at http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/. While the former can be accessed free of charge, a paywall was introduced to the online presence of the *Times* in June 2010. At the time of data collection, both websites could be accessed without subscription or registration.

per articles serving as triggers still guarantees that the CMC corpus covers the whole spectrum of reader response.[88]

Despite the many advantages this form of data collection has, it does not yield a perfect balance between the two corpora. The greatest problem is that the number of replies in the two media varies greatly, with some newspaper articles receiving more than 1,000 comments online. The space for reader response being far more limited in a printed newspaper, a maximum of five or six letters commenting on one particular news item are usually chosen for publication, even if many more may have been received. This of course stands in stark contrast to the average numbers of 36 and 125 comments posted below each article in the present data on the *Times* and the *Guardian* websites respectively, thus amounting to a total of 28,552 online comments with more than three million words. For such a fine-grained and to a large extent qualitative analysis as the present one, where the coding cannot be done automatically, it was indispensable that the CMC corpus be limited to a manageable size. In order to allow for a direct comparison with the written corpus, it was considered best to reduce it drastically to match the 1,000 letters to the editor chosen for analysis. Yet while it is fairly easy to reduce the size of a corpus, there are different methods for doing so, and not every method is equally suitable for the aims of the present study. Reducing the number of comments posted in response to each newspaper article to the number that would generate a corpus of the same size as the written corpus in terms of either the total number of words or comments would yield two fairly balanced corpora ideal for studying the occurrence of certain linguistic features, such as those indicative of conceptional orality or literacy. However, as this would mean that from each comment thread only two to three comments could be chosen for analysis, it would become impossible to investigate how previous comments might influence subsequent ones, how a thread of comments might develop over the course of time and in what way individual comment writers engage and interact with each other – questions that are of vital importance for the present analysis. Therefore, in an attempt to ensure – as far as possible – representativeness and generalisability on the one hand, without risking a total lack of coherence and context on the other, the following technique of *random sampling* (cf. Herring 2004: 351 and Androutsopoulos 2013: 238) was applied: the first twenty comments in every fifth thread of comments were retained. This yielded a distribution of 600 comments from the *Guardian*

[88] For a helpful discussion of other data sampling techniques in CMDA see Herring (2004) and Androutsopoulos (2013).

website and 400 from that of the *Times*, amounting to a total of 96,068 words.[89]

While this means that the online comments are equally distributed over the time span of six weeks used to collect the letters to the editor, there are still two minor differences between the two corpora that need mentioning at this point. First, not every newspaper article serving as a trigger for letters to the editor also elicits feedback online. This is not necessarily a sign of lack of interest on the part of the online readership but largely due to the fact that the comment function is disabled in certain sections of the two newspaper websites. Second, while it is possible to write a letter to the editor without a recent newspaper article serving as a trigger, i.e. for instance to raise a topic or to provide feedback of a more general kind, readers commenting online need a newspaper article to post their comment below. As will be discussed in detail in chapter 6, there are thus some types of letters to the editor without equivalents in the CMC corpus; given the purpose of the present study, they were still retained in the written corpus in order to yield a representative corpus of the genre *letter to the editor*.

4.2.2 The communicative situation

Leaving a comment is similar to writing a letter to the editor: in both cases, the readers have read a newspaper article, choose to express their opinion in the form of letters or comments, which are then sent to and subsequently published in the respective medium, i.e. the printed newspaper or the newspaper website. However, there are some fundamental differences between the two processes, which will be addressed in the following.

4.2.2.1 Registration and anonymity

Readers who want to leave a comment are required to register first. Creating a user account only takes a couple of minutes, though, since the information that needs to be provided only consists of a username of one’s choice, an email address and a password. Thus, while a certain form of registration is necessary in order to be able to post a comment, this is not the case with letters to the editor. However, letters are only published if the writers provide their full name and address as well as a telephone number, and

[89] With 138,680 and 96,068 words respectively, the written and the CMC corpora differ slightly in size. This could have been avoided if more online comments had been added to the CMC corpus. However, as the main research focus is generic and not corpus-linguistic, it was considered preferable to work with the same number of texts instead of the same number of words. For all cases in which occurrences per corpus and not per comment or letter are needed, frequencies will be normalised (per 10,000 words) to avoid skewing the results.

some of these personal details are published together with the letter.[90] In the case of comments, in contrast, other readers only see the username chosen by the author at the point of registration. There is no need to provide a real name and address, and even the email address used for registration is not visible to other readers. Thus, while it is possible to hide behind the anonymity of one's username when posting a comment, the fact that one can be clearly identified as the author of a letter to the editor may lead to certain consequences in real life. If the opinion expressed in one's letter is not shared by others, one may not only be directly criticised or attacked in subsequent letters to the editor but also in the street. Authors of comments, whose online identity cannot be traced back to their real one, face no such problems. If they offend others with their critical remarks or even blatantly misbehave online, they can be criticised verbally or even be banned from the community; yet they do not have to fear any consequences in real life and may always register again, simply using a different username and email address. This seemingly unimportant difference in the communicative situation may affect communicative behaviour and thus have significant repercussions on the way the interaction develops. Neurauter-Kessels (2011), for instance, argues that the anonymity of the comments sections, together with their large audience, acts as a catalyst for unrestrained and impolite behaviour on newspaper websites. The different degrees of anonymity in the two types of reader response thus make a comparison of the use of criticism and face-threatening acts in general very promising (see 7.3 below).

4.2.2.2 Immediacy and the likelihood of publication

Once one is registered and logged in, leaving a comment is simply a matter of typing it into the text entry box below the newspaper article and hitting the *send* or *post* button. Since the comment goes online immediately afterwards, the time span between reading an article and leaving a comment is usually extremely short, especially when compared to the several days that may elapse between reading a newspaper article, writing a letter to the editor and then finally seeing it published. Thus, online comments are much more immediate – both in terms of reception as well as production. Given the possibility of instant feedback, leaving a comment on the newspaper's website is much more likely to be a spur-of-the-moment decision than writing a traditional letter to the editor, with the latter usually being far

[90] In both the *Guardian* and the *Times*, the names of the authors are published together with the name of the city/town, the county and – if situated outside the UK – the country. If the author is a public figure (e.g. a politician) or writes in the role of a professional (e.g. as the chief executive of an organisation), these details are provided instead of the personal ones.

more carefully crafted in order to increase the likelihood that it will be selected for publication. Since the space provided for letters is extremely limited in the printed version of a newspaper, very few of those received are published.[91] The comments posted online do not have to go through this editorial selection process but are displayed the minute after they are transmitted. This suggests that the threshold for writing a letter is far higher since it may be written and sent in vain. Letter writers are therefore likely to be more passionate about the underlying topic or at least fairly committed to their contribution, which suggests that they probably do their best to make the letter fit for publication. Writing a comment requires far less effort and may even be done out of boredom rather than true dedication to the matter under discussion. Since there is no editorial control before publication, users do not have to be as careful with what they say and how they phrase it. However, this does not mean that they can do as they please, since posted comments may be removed if they fail to abide by the community standards.[92] The number of deleted comments in the corpus, small as it may be, indicates that these rules may at times be forgotten, especially when emotions run high. The differences described above are also linked to a great difference in symbolic value: having one's letter published in the printed version of the *Times* or the *Guardian* is of course far more prestigious than being one among hundreds of anonymous commenters on the Internet. It is probably in order to compensate for this lack of recognition that the newspapers have incorporated certain functions, such as the *recommend* function or, more recently, the *Guardian pick* function, into their websites, as will be discussed in more detail below. At the present

[91] Information about the precise number of letters usually sent to the editor is very hard to find, but Eilert (1989) suggests that newspapers receive thousands of letters each month, of which only a tiny percentage are selected for publication. According to the letters editor of the *Guardian*, a letter "stands at best a one in 10 chance of being published" (Willmott and Foster 2007: 5). In 2008, i.e. one year prior to the time of data collection, the *Guardian* editors still received "200 to 300 or more" letters per day (Willmott and Foster 2008: 5) and this "at a time when this oldest form of reader input to the press faces competition from many new forms of participation" (Willmott and Foster 2007: 5). More recent figures suggest that the number of letters has not diminished over the years: according to Toby Chasseaud, one of the journalists on the *Guardian's* letters desk, the *Guardian* received approximately 200 genuine submissions each day at the beginning of 2016 (cf. Chasseaud 2016). Interestingly, the majority of letters to the editor are now sent by email and only about 20 letters by post. While assuring readers that snail mail is also considered for publication, the *Guardian* also draws attention to two disadvantages: a posted letter not only takes longer to arrive, it also needs to be typed up, whereas an email can be copied and pasted (cf. 2016).

[92] The deletion of comments and the community standards of the two websites will be discussed in more detail below (see 4.3). In the case of the *Guardian*, deleted comments leave a trace, thus allowing readers to see not only how many but also whose comments have been deleted.

point, it suffices to say that online comments are more immediate in terms of the production and reception processes and are not subject to the same form of editorial control as letters to the editor.

4.2.2.3 Degree of interaction

Since the comments can be accessed by everybody as soon as they are transmitted, they are visible to all the subsequent readers and authors of comments. While it is quite often the case that traditional letters to the editor trigger other letters, which may result in a series that is continued over several weeks, the time that elapses between the publication of individual letters imposes a comparatively tight limit on the potential degree of interaction. In online reader comments, in contrast, it is far easier to take other comments or comment writers into consideration by referring to them, quoting them or even directly addressing them when commenting on the newspaper article in question. The time lapse between production and reception being only minimal, it is even possible for real dialogues to evolve. In contrast to letters to the editor, there is no limit to the number of comments that may be posted by one individual; hence users may toss the ball back and forth between them and thus take part in a truly dialogic discussion, albeit one under special constraints. How these differences in the communicative situations shape the interactional behaviour will be explored in detail in chapter 6 below.

4.3 Herring's faceted classification scheme for CMD

Since the above has illustrated that the communicative situation may exert a non-negligible influence on the interaction, the individual factors shaping the communicative situations in the two genres need to be explored in more detail. In the light of technological determinism, however, it needs to be stressed that this description can neither replace nor predict the outcome of a close analysis of the individual contributions. We, as creative language users, are without doubt confronted with the actual conditions under which communication takes place, but we may still choose to respond to them in different ways. The following discussion, in which the properties of the two forms of communication are further explored, is thus only the basis of the subsequent bottom-up linguistic and functional analysis.

Herring's (2007) *faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse* is ideal for describing the communicative situations in more detail. This scheme, largely based on Hymes's (1977) SPEAKING grid as used in the *ethnography of speaking* tradition, was developed to classify computer-mediated discourse into different types and can be employed to characterise online reader comments in more detail and to compare and contrast them not only with other types of CMC, but also with the form of communication used in the written corpus. Since each of the scheme's factors has been shown to exert an influence on linguistic practice, the following description not only highlights similarities and differences between the corpora but also forms a solid basis for the subsequent analysis on the linguistic level.

Herring (2007) distinguishes between *medium factors*, which are of a technological nature, and *situational factors*, which vary according to the social context and are not determined by the technology used. Since most situational factors depend on the concrete context and can only be analysed on the basis of particular texts or small groups of text, the focus will be on the medium factors.

4.3.1 Synchronicity

Herring's first factor, synchronicity, is one of the basic criteria by which different types of CMC were distinguished or grouped together in the past. In the early days of CMC research, asynchronous forms of communication, such as sending an email, were often compared with synchronous forms, i.e. forms in which the interlocutors need to be logged on at the same time in order to send and receive the messages because these are not stored in the system. IRC is the classic example: those users who are not logged on at the moment the interaction takes place are not able to receive the messages sent and cannot retrieve them afterwards. More recently it has been pointed out that even the so-called synchronous forms of CMC are only quasi-synchronous, since the production and reception processes are still separated in time, unlike in real synchronous speech situations, in which the interlocutors witness the production process (cf. e.g. Thaler 2003: 12f.).[93] However, the concept of a dichotomy between quasi-synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication was still maintained. Today there is an increasing awareness that not the form of CMC is the decisive factor but the user's choices. Email, which used to be regarded as a typical representative of an asynchronous form of communication, is a case in point: in more recent studies, many researchers have commented on the fact that emails can indeed reach quasi-synchronous status, as in work-place settings for instance, where they are sometimes sent to and fro on a minute-by-minute basis (cf. e.g. Baym 2006, Androutsopoulos 2007b and Baron 2010 as well

[93] In Herring's (2007) scheme, witnessing the production process is not part of *synchronicity* but of a second factor, i.e. that of *message transmission (1-way vs. 2-way)*, which will be presented in more detail below (see 4.3.2.).

as Thurlow 2003 for text messages). IM systems, one of the prototypical forms of quasi-synchronous CMC, on the other hand, can be, and indeed often are, used to send messages without expecting an immediate answer, thus representing an asynchronous use of a form of communication that allows for quasi-synchronous interaction (cf. e.g. Baron 2010). This clearly illustrates that the notion of synchronicity is scalar in nature; it is a matter of user choice and – though partly restricted – not necessarily determined by the technology employed.

Writing and sending a letter to the editor is clearly an asynchronous form of communication. Posting a comment online, whether this takes place on a newspaper website, YouTube, Facebook or elsewhere on the Internet, is, in terms of the technology used, an asynchronous form of computer-mediated communication, since the comment remains permanently available, and readers who were not present at the time the comment was written can still access it. Yet even though the technology is of an asynchronous nature, it can still be used in a quasi-synchronous manner. In theory, it is possible for comment writers to post their immediate reactions to another user while the initial comment writer is still online, which may result in the initial writer immediately posting a reply, thus creating a form of disrupted dialogue in slow motion. If synchronicity is understood as a scalar phenomenon, letters to the editor are clearly situated further towards the asynchronous end of the continuum than online comments.[94] This difference is of great importance for the present analysis, since the factor of synchronicity of participation has often been used to compare CMC to speech and writing and to account for the differences in linguistic form among the three media (cf. e.g. Ko 1996, Yates 1996, Meise-Kuhn 1998 and Squires 2010). According to Herring (2007: 14), it is even a "robust predictor of structural complexity, as well as many pragmatic and interactional behaviors, in computer-mediated discourse".

4.3.2 Message transmission (1-way vs. 2-way)

The comments people post on the newspaper websites appear in their entirety once the *send* or *post* button is pressed. Other readers are neither able to witness the production process, nor are they informed about the fact that a message is currently being produced, as is the case in some forms of quasi-synchronous CMC, e.g. IM. The form of message transmission is thus message by message and one way. In this respect, online comments are similar to letters to the editor because in both cases, the production and

[94] However, the CMC corpus could only be positioned more precisely on this scale if the mean time elapsing between individual comments was calculated.

reception processes are clearly separated. Systems with two-way transmission, i.e. keystroke-by-keystroke transmission, are rare in CMC (cf. Herring 2007: 14), probably because of the heightened cognitive effort required when following a conversation on a split screen and when having to read and write at the same time. In both types of reader response, simultaneous feedback and interruptions are thus not possible.

4.3.3 Persistence of transcript

Speaking and writing are often compared on the basis of how persistent the language product is. While speech is usually described as ephemeral, written forms of language tend to have far greater longevity, which makes them ideal for documentation (cf. e.g. Crystal 2003: 180ff.). Newspapers, being a printed form of language with high circulation, are far more persistent than the spoken word; however, as the saying goes, today's news is tomorrow's fish and chip paper. Unlike books, newspapers are usually thrown away as soon as they are no longer up to date, and they are hardly ever read more than once. However, since newspapers are a media product, archives exist and can be accessed fairly easily. Since the two newspapers under consideration also publish their articles on their websites, their persistence has increased considerably, and these digital archives can be accessed anytime from anywhere. Finding an article that is weeks, months or even years old is now a comparatively easy task, and since letters to the editor are also published online, they are now far more enduring than they used to be. All the letters of the *Guardian* sub-corpus, for instance, can still be accessed online at the moment of writing, i.e. several years after their publication.[95]

Online comments are stored permanently on the website and can thus be considered fairly persistent as well. However, they do not attain the same level of persistence as traditional letters to the editor, since comments that

[95] Two marginal notes need to be made at this point. First of all, the difference between newspaper content past and present does not affect *persistence* in the true sense of the term but rather *access* to the transcript. Even if it is easier to find old newspaper articles today, one could consider the Internet as simply a new form of newspaper archive that grants immediate access to anybody with an Internet connection. Since the newspaper website is an electronically searchable database, the time spent locating specific content can be drastically reduced. Second, one might even argue that persistence has decreased in the Internet age since the content provided online may be edited or updated even after its first publication. This is of course impossible in printed newspapers, which is why each newspaper has a *corrections and clarifications* section for such purposes. Thus, while the content provided online persists, its precise form may change over time. However, this is rare and when it happens, it is usually indicated at the top of the page. Of the letters studied, none has been changed after having been published online.

do not conform to the community standards may be deleted and therefore disappear, as is sometimes bemoaned by users. In addition, the Internet is the only place where the comments are stored and if the newspaper decides to take them offline, they are lost for good. While the comments posted on the *Guardian* website in 2009 are still available at the time of writing, the *Times* has, in the meantime, redesigned its website, deleting all of the older comments in the process. Since this has happened before (cf. Landert and Jucker 2011: 1429), online comments are best considered far more persistent than speech, yet not as persistent as writing. According to Herring (2007: 15), the question of how long a message is retained influences the linguistic product and is in part responsible for the differences between written and spoken language: "[t]he overall greater persistence of CMD heightens metalinguistic awareness: It allows users to reflect on their communication – and play with language – in ways that would be difficult in speech". As the analysis will show, this metalinguistic awareness is noticeable in both forms of reader response, as is playful language use.

4.3.4 Size of message buffer

In some systems of CMC, the number of characters allowed per message is limited. The most prominent examples are text messages, with a message buffer of 160 characters, and tweets, with a limit of 140. Unsurprisingly, such limitations have been identified as a reason for the use of abbreviations or special discourse structures (cf. e.g. Herring 2007: 15). As in the case of synchronicity, a medium factor has been held at least partly responsible for the occurrence of a number of linguistic particularities in several studies to date (cf. e.g. Thurlow 2003, Crystal 2008b and Dürscheid et al. 2010).

Both websites impose a character limit; yet at 5,000 characters for comments to the *Guardian*, the great majority of comments are unlikely to exceed it.[96] Letters to the editor in both the *Guardian* and the *Times* do not have an officially stated character or word limit; however, since the space for reader response in a newspaper is not infinite, they tend to be rather short as well; while the longest letter consists of 776 words, the average is only 126 words.[97] The comments vary considerably in length, ranging from one word to 856; the average comment has 87 words, which makes it

[96] The longest comment in the corpus, [CMC G08-094 c8], consisting of 4,983 characters and 856 words, is an exception as it is cut off in the middle of the last word.
[97] Discussing editors' selection criteria for letters to the editor, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002: 75) reports that "[m]ost papers strictly enforce a 300-word limit" – a point that will be taken up below (see 8.2).

slightly shorter than the average letter.[98] However, the two forms of reader response differ in how their length is regulated and when these regulations take effect. While the limit of online comments is determined by the system and therefore rigid in nature, decisions about the maximum length of contributions in newspapers are taken by a person or group of people on the basis of individual contributions. If a letter is particularly insightful, if the writer has a certain status or if there is a lack of other competing contributions, more space may be granted than is usually the case. In a similar vein, if a letter to the editor is deemed worthy of publication despite its length, it may be published nonetheless, yet in an abbreviated form. In contrast, online users simply cannot post their comment if it exceeds the allotted limit. They are thus forced to either use fewer words to communicate what they wish to say or to refrain from commenting altogether. Metaphorically speaking, the wall between production and publication has a rigid opening in the case of online comments, and users must tailor their messages so that they fit through if they wish to have them published. In the case of letters, in contrast, this hole can be adjusted in individual cases by the media representative. This adjustment takes place after the production process has been completed, and it can affect the hole in the wall as well as the message itself, which may be amended so that it fits through.

4.3.5 Channels of communication

CMC provides both audio and visual channels of communication, with the latter consisting of diverse sub-channels, e.g. plain or formatted text, static and animated graphics and video (cf. Herring 2007: 15f.). What makes many of the more recent forms of CMC very intriguing, yet at the same time also highly complex and difficult to describe, is the increasing combination and even merging of several channels or modes within the same system (cf. e.g. Herring 2013 and Bolander and Locher 2014). However, over the past few years, multimodality has not only sharply increased in CMC, its proliferation has also reached journalism in general and online journalism in particular (cf. e.g. Jucker 2003 and Schumacher 2009), thus turning *multimedia* into one of the buzzwords of the present age.[99]

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[98] When measuring the average length of the user contributions, only the text of the letter or comment proper was included, i.e. the information added automatically when posting a comment online (see 3.4.2.1 above) was excluded from the word count, as were the signature lines in the letters. This is why in both cases, the size of the individual corpus mentioned in 4.1.1 and 4.2.1 above is slightly larger than the average length of contribution multiplied by the total number of contributions.

[99] The terms *multimedia* and *multimodality* are often used interchangeably. According to Kress (2010: 30; emphasis in the original), however, "to use the term *multimedia* is to confuse […] the cultural technologies of *dissemination* – radio, newspaper, TV, etc. – with the cultural

4.3.5.1 Multimodality and user profiles

Despite the increasing presence of multimodality in both CMC and journalism, the comments of the present analysis consist almost exclusively of text-based interaction, the only exception being the avatar pictures that users of the *Guardian* website may upload and add to their profiles. This picture is displayed along with the username next to each comment posted by this particular member of the community. Adding an avatar picture is not mandatory: if users prefer not to upload a picture of their own choice, a default avatar is displayed instead. It consists of the white icon of a person in front of a grey backdrop. The colour of the backdrop can be changed in the profile settings; however, in the vast majority of cases, users have not opted to do so. While many members have decided to use a personal picture, it hardly ever represents a human being, and if it does, it can fairly often be ruled out that the picture is an image of the comment writer him/herself. There is no option to add a picture to one's profile in the online version of the *Times*, where the only personal information provided consists of the bold words 'USERNAME wrote:' introducing each comment. While this makes it possible to identify the author of a comment or at least link comments to an online identity, this identity remains extremely vague. Not only is there no profile picture, there is not even a profile itself. The most fundamental difference between the format of the commenting function on the *Times* website and that of the *Guardian* is thus that the *Guardian* user profiles provide additional information about the individual members of the community. According to the *Guardian* website, the avatars were introduced in order to allow the users "to represent themselves visually as well as verbally online" and because of the "hope that being able to see a bit of the person behind the comment will help users to treat each other more

technologies of *representation*: writing, speech, image, etc.". While the former are media in the sense of $media_2$ described above (see 3.1.2), the latter are what Kress calls *modes*. Kress (2010: 79; emphasis in the original) defines *mode* as "a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning. *Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack and 3D objects* are examples of modes used in representation and communication". This definition of *mode* is considerably broader than the one proposed by McCarthy (cf. 1993: 170) to distinguish between *medium* and *mode* (see 3.1.2.3 above), since it covers all aspects of speech and writing (and other, non-linguistic semiotic resources) and not just their linguistic properties as opposed to their technologically-determined ones. If *mode* is understood as a semiotic resource in general, *multimodality* is "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001: 20). Forms of CMC in which there is an interplay between writing and images or videos (as in Facebook, for instance) are examples of multimodal discourse, as are newspapers – a medium in which the combination of written text with images has a long tradition.

considerately".[100] Interestingly, this explanation establishes a direct causal link between anonymity and missing social cues on the one hand and hostile behaviour and flaming on the other – an idea that will be examined in full detail in chapter 7 below.

4.3.5.2 Formatting and paralinguistic restitution

In contrast to many other forms of CMC, the avatar picture added to the comments on the *Guardian* website constitutes the only visual channel available to the users apart from the text of the comment itself, which – like any written or digital text – is also transmitted via the visual channel. In addition, online comments differ from other forms of text-based, non-multimodal CMC in the ways in which the text can be formatted. Whereas some forms of text-based CMC (e.g. text messages or tweets) do not allow for any type of formatting, other forms (e.g. some discussion forums or blogs) offer a wide range of formatting choices, such as different fonts, font sizes, underlining, colours, (animated) emoticons or graphics. While the comments on the *Times* website cannot be formatted at all, the *Guardian* at least allows its users to put parts of their text in bold or italics and to mark text as blockquotes or links. This can either be done by adding the respective HTML tags or – for those unfamiliar with HTML – by using the formatting buttons above the text entry field. The comments are thus limited to text-based interaction with – as on the *Guardian* website – only the most basic options for formatting the message or – as on the *Times* website – none at all. In this respect, they are quite similar to written letters to the editor, which are formatted by the editor and not the original author: in both newspapers, the letters consist of plain text only, without any highlighting features such as bold print or italics.

Especially in those CMC contexts in which the interaction is limited to plain text, interlocutors have been found to use what Thurlow (2003) calls *paralinguistic restitution*, i.e. they try to capture and represent with the keyboard what is normally lost when transferring spoken language to writing. Among those features that have become characteristic of CMC rank above all strategies used for stress and emphasis (i.e. capitalisation and the iteration of signs) and the linguistic representation of paralinguistic (e.g. laughter) as well as kinesic features (e.g. mimicry, gestures and body language).[101] According to the prevailing opinion, they are used to express

[100] http://www.theguardian.com/community-faqs#420; FAQ section of the *Guardian* website; last accessed January 20, 2017.

[101] In the following, a distinction will be made between two types of non-verbal communication: *paralinguistic* on the one hand and *kinesic* on the other. While the former consists of vocal means of communication, such as manner of articulation, pitch, volume, voice

with the help of the keyboard what is usually expressed vocally or visually and thus constitute a type of compensation strategy for missing social and visual cues. In written language, in contrast, features such as stress or emphasis may either be represented with the help of formatting devices (e.g. underlining) or special grammatical structures, such as cleft sentences. Since in the texts of the computer-mediated corpus, features such as stress and emphasis cannot or – in the case of the *Guardian* website – can only partly be expressed via formatting devices, the analysis of these features promises to be very interesting.

4.3.5.3 Absence of kinesic phenomena

Both types of reader response are presented in written form and perceived visually. However, unlike in face-to-face communication, the visual channel is limited to the printed or digital texts, i.e. the letter and comment writers cannot rely on their body language to support their message or communicate their stance. The strategies used to compensate for this lack of shared communicative space in CMC have received considerable attention, especially in studies focusing on chat language, and have also been used to compare CMC to speech and writing (cf. e.g. Beißwenger and Storrer 2012). The fact that the interactants cannot use body language, gestures and facial expression to add layers of meaning to their message is directly related to the even more fundamental fact that they cannot rely on visual social and emotional cues to communicate or interpret the interaction.

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quality, rhythm of speech and features such as laughing and coughing, the latter encompasses all non-vocal, i.e. visual, phenomena, such as body language, gestures, mimicry and eye contact (cf. Bußmann et al. 1996). This distinction, however, is sometimes not drawn in the literature (cf. 1996: 809), and Thurlow's use of the term *paralinguistic restitution* indicates that he subsumes all forms of non-verbal communication under this heading (cf. e.g. 2003: 7). In their seminal work on "systems of prosodic and paralinguistic features in English", Crystal and Quirk (1964: 12) further subdivide the vocal means of communication into prosodic features (e.g. intonation contours) "which can fairly easily be integrated with other aspects of linguistic structure" and paralinguistic ones (e.g. voice), which are "remote from the possibility of integration with the linguistic structure proper". In their system, however, prosodic and paralinguistic features do not constitute discrete categories but a scale with many interrelations (cf. 1964: 63ff.). For a comparison of CMC to speech and the analysis of non-verbal communication in CMC in particular, only some of this set of features are of relevance. In addition, however, other vocal/auditory components as discussed by Crystal (cf. 1966: 96) play an important role, such as vocalisations (e.g. 'mhm') or hesitation (e.g. 'ɘːm'). Hence, the focus of the present analysis is on the distinction between vocal and non-vocal means of communication, the former being subsumed under the heading of *paralinguistics* and the latter under that of *kinesics*.

4.3.5.4 Absence of visual social and emotional cues

A comment posted online does not provide any information about the author's age, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance, clothing, social background and emotional state. In face-to-face communication, in contrast, this kind of information is provided automatically – albeit to varying degrees. It has therefore been argued that people make use of certain strategies to compensate for this lack when they communicate online (cf. e.g. Hancock 2004, Baym 2006, Byron and Baldridge 2007 and Claridge 2007). In text-based CMC, this can either be done by adding features to the message itself (e.g. emoticons to express emotions), by changing the message so that these aspects are included (e.g. by adapting the spelling or grammar to represent one's social background) or by making explicit or implicit identity claims.[102] Writers of letters to the editor find themselves in a similar situation: they can only use the written word to write themselves into being, i.e. to create and communicate a certain identity. How this is achieved in the two types of reader response and how features of identity construction may be used strategically will be explored in chapter 7 below.

4.3.6 Anonymous and private messaging

The two medium factors *anonymous* and *private messaging* introduced by Herring (2007) refer to the technological affordances of the individual forms of communication and can be grouped together since they have already been presented above. While online comment writers can hide behind their anonymous online identities, the names of the authors of letters to the editor are always made public. Since anonymity – together with the missing cues referred to above – has often been held responsible for aggressive behaviour and increased self-disclosure on the Internet (cf. e.g. Baron 1998, Herring 2007, Dürscheid 2007, Neurauter-Kessels 2011 and Moore et al. 2012), the comparison with the letters to the editor will show whether commenters on the Internet indeed reveal more about themselves and whether the debate is more aggressive online than offline.

Since both forms of communication are intended to allow readers to provide feedback that is accessible to the entire audience of the two newspapers, private messaging is not enabled. Unlike many other contexts of

[102] Profile pictures can also be considered a means of adding social information. However, this information is mediated, i.e. the members are best understood as using the profiles to construct a certain identity. This may have the effect that other users form a picture of the writer that is completely different from the one they would have formed if they had met in real life. However, one could argue that similar processes of identity construction are at work in text-based written interaction as well, or even any kind of interaction (cf. e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2005 and 2010).

CMC (e.g. Facebook), where users can choose between sending a message publicly or privately, the *Guardian* and the *Times* websites do not offer these options. Communication can thus only take place on the level of comment threads and is fully accessible to the researcher.

4.3.7 Filtering and quoting

Filtering and quoting are technical means available only in some forms of CMC. Some systems allow users to filter out messages from certain users, which makes it easier for them to ignore certain messages or interlocutors consistently; however, this option is not available in online comments. Every reader of the online version of the *Times* or the *Guardian* is presented with the same threads of comments, which contain each comment transmitted to the system and not subsequently deleted by a moderator. The only option available is to change either the maximum number of comments displayed, as on the *Guardian* website, or the order they appear in, as on the *Times* website.[103]

Quoting is a technical affordance that is probably most famous for its use in emails, since most email clients offer their users the optional setting of automatically inserting the header and the body of the email they are replying to above or below the text of their replies. If this setting is activated, successive strings of emails between two or more interlocutors gain coherence, since, despite the time gap between the initial email and the subsequent reply/replies, the interlocutors always have the entire thread of the written conversation at hand and can easily call to mind what was written before and even at what time. Quoting is also very popular in discussion forums; yet in this case, it is always a conscious choice. Instead of quoting entire posts, users usually select the relevant passage(s) from a previous post and then add their thoughts. While the comment section on the *Times* website does not offer the technical means for quoting, the *Guardian* website provides this option, which is used very similarly to quoting in discussion forums. Since the comments – just like the posts in most discussion forums – are automatically arranged in a rigid chronological order, ties between individual comments are easily lost, and adjacency pairs are very likely to be disrupted, as the analysis of the interactional patterns will show (see chapter 6 below).[104] To compensate for this lack of

[103] Since these are features of the medium factor *message format*, they will be discussed in more detail below (see 4.3.8).

[104] This lack of coherence has prompted the *Guardian* to restructure its comments section, as will be discussed in detail in 6.4.4 below. At the time of data collection, users still had to rely on linguistic means to establish coherence and signal ties between individual contributions. These means, including quoting, will be analysed in detail below (see 6.3.1).

coherence, comment writers often make use of the quoting function when directly addressing or referring back to previous comment writers or when wishing to comment directly on specific parts of the newspaper article. The parts of the message or article that a user may want to quote need to be copied manually and can then be inserted into the comment with the paste function. In order to identify the quoted text as a quote, the comment writer can either use the quote button above the comment entry field or manually enclose the quoted passage in the HTML tags <blockquote></blockquote>. The quoted text is then automatically indented, displayed in grey instead of black and clearly set off from the rest of the text by increased spacing before and after the quoted passage (see Figure 6 below).

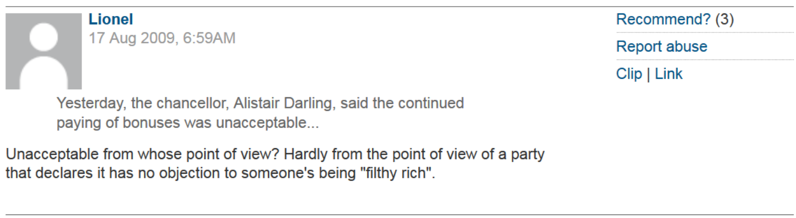


Figure 6 Use of the quote function on the *Guardian* website [CMC G06-046 c6]

Although there is no special quote function on the *Times* website, quotes can be inserted into the comments as well, simply by using copy and paste. However, they cannot be marked as quotes as nicely and distinctly as on the *Guardian* website, i.e. users have to either explicitly introduce their quote with "USERNAME wrote" or add quotation marks in order to set the text off from the rest of the comment. Such quotes are not only less salient but also more cumbersome to produce, which may be why they are far less frequent in this corpus (see 6.3.2.2 and 6.4.2.2.2 below). Indeed, quotes on the *Times* website are often not highlighted as such, i.e. they can only be identified as quotes if one has read the newspaper article and the whole thread of comments and recognises the wording or because the comment would make little sense otherwise.

Quoting is also fairly popular in letters to the editor. The quotations found in this genre, however, do not resemble those found in online comments but rather those found in newspaper articles or academic texts, i.e. the quoted passage is enclosed in quotation marks, integrated into the flow of the text and in most cases introduced or concluded by naming the author and/or the respective article, thus establishing a strong link between the letter to the editor and its initiation. This is very important, since unlike below-the-line comments, which appear directly below the respective article, letters to the editor are not published in the same paper as the text that triggered them. In this communicative situation, which has aptly been characterised as "dialogue under difficult conditions" ("Dialog unter erschwerten Bedingungen"; Bucher 1989: 293), bridging the time gap between the letter and its trigger is necessary to allow the readers to contextualise the contribution, and quoting is particularly well-suited for this purpose. However, it is not the only strategy used (see 6.3.1 below), and it may also serve additional functions, as will be illustrated in 6.3.2.1 below.

4.3.8 Message format

The last medium factor, i.e. message format, refers to the order of individual messages, the information that is automatically provided alongside the message and how the message is displayed (cf. Herring 2007: 17). Although the comments on the two websites look quite similar at first glance, they differ in appearance and functionality (see Figures 7 and 8 below).

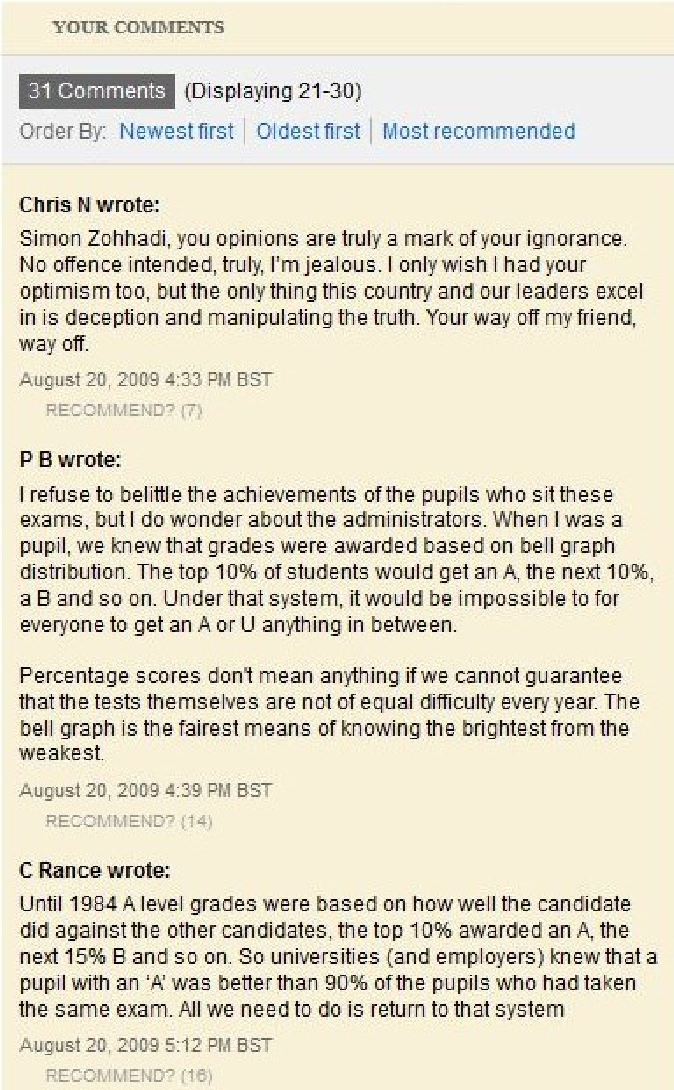
The first difference lies in the order in which the comments are displayed. While the default setting on the *Guardian* website is that of *oldest first*, the default setting on the *Times* website is *newest first*, i.e. the comments are displayed in reverse chronological order. On the *Guardian* website one can – if there are more than 50 comments – choose whether one wants to have only the first 50 displayed or all of them, and one can also directly jump to the latest comment.[105]

On the *Times* website, the order can be changed from *newest first* to *oldest first* or *most recommended* via a simple click. However, the maximum number of comments displayed at one time is always limited to ten, i.e. the readers have to 'turn pages' if they want to scan or read through the whole thread. This difference – small as it may seem – is expected to influence commenting behaviour because users are not likely to read all the comments before posting their own. Assuming that the majority focus on what is displayed directly below the article, users are most likely to read the first and thus oldest comments in the case of the *Guardian* and the newest, most recent ones in the case of the *Times.* According to Herring (2007: 17), the messages "on the 'top of the deck'" are not only more likely to be read but also more likely to be replied to or commented on.

On both websites, information about the absolute number of comments is provided at the top of the thread. Thus, users can see at first glance how many comments a particular article has triggered and may deduce from this its popularity, level of controversy, newsworthiness, quality etc.[106]

[105] Such functions are not set in stone and have changed several times over the past few years; the comment section of the *Guardian* looks substantially different now.

[106] This is not meant to imply that it is the articles with high levels of newsworthiness and journalistic quality that receive the greatest number of comments; as a matter of fact, one could



YOUR COMMENTS

31 Comments (Displaying 21-30)

Order By: Newest first | Oldest first | Most recommended

Chris N wrote:

Simon Zohhadi, you opinions are truly a mark of your ignorance. No offence intended, truly, I'm jealous. I only wish I had your optimism too, but the only thing this country and our leaders excel in is deception and manipulating the truth. Your way off my friend, way off.

August 20, 2009 4:33 PM BST

RECOMMEND? (7)

P B wrote:

I refuse to belittle the achievements of the pupils who sit these exams, but I do wonder about the administrators. When I was a pupil, we knew that grades were awarded based on bell graph distribution. The top 10% of students would get an A, the next 10%, a B and so on. Under that system, it would be impossible to for everyone to get an A or U anything in between.

Percentage scores don't mean anything if we cannot guarantee that the tests themselves are not of equal difficulty every year. The bell graph is the fairest means of knowing the brightest from the weakest.

August 20, 2009 4:39 PM BST

RECOMMEND? (14)

C Rance wrote:

Until 1984 A level grades were based on how well the candidate did against the other candidates, the top 10% awarded an A, the next 15% B and so on. So universities (and employers) knew that a pupil with an 'A' was better than 90% of the pupils who had taken the same exam. All we need to do is return to that system

August 20, 2009 5:12 PM BST

RECOMMEND? (16)

Figure 7 The comment section on the *Times* website

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even argue that the reverse is true. Nevertheless, information about the number of comments is likely to be one of the factors influencing readers in their decisions whether to devote their attention to a text or not.

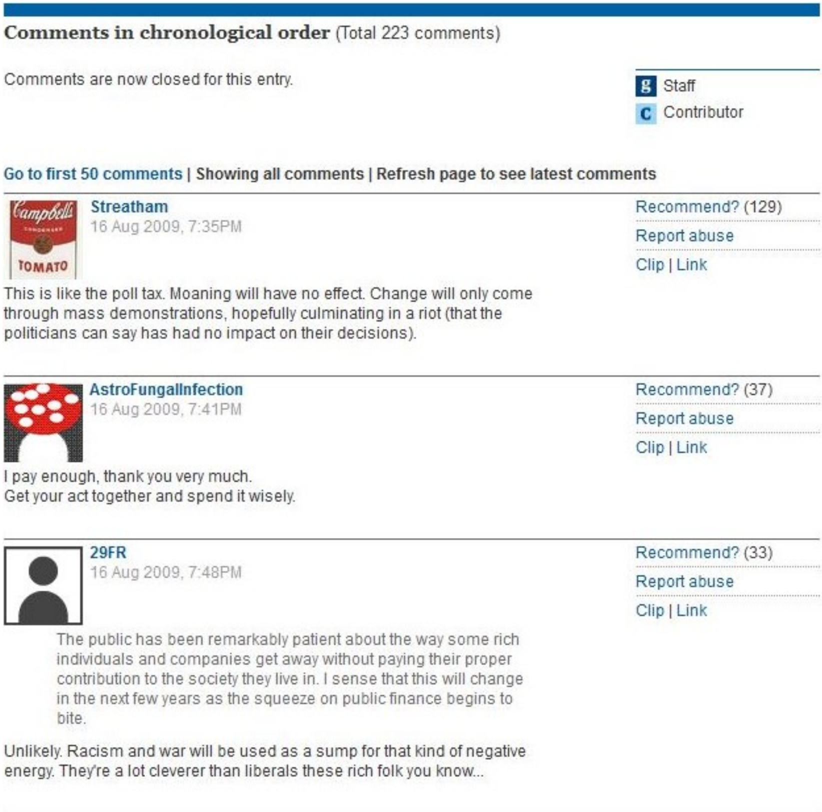

Figure 8 The comment section on the *Guardian* website

In the case of the *Guardian*, the number of comments an article has received is also displayed together with its headline and sometimes also the name of the journalist in the right-hand column of the website, where suggestions for further reading are given (see Figure 9 below). Under 'Latest from SECTION', users can even choose to have their recommendations ordered by *most viewed*, *latest* or *most commented*, which again suggests that the *Guardian* considers it important to inform readers about the number of comments articles have triggered.

On the level of individual contributions, the two websites are fairly similar in terms of the information that is automatically attached. In both cases, the username of the contributor is provided together with information about the time at which the comment was submitted and the number of times it has been recommended by other readers. Yet even if the same content is provided, the exact layout differs, with comments on the *Times* website being introduced by 'USERNAME wrote:' in bold print, while on the *Guardian* website the username is simply displayed in bold in the first line of the comment. In addition, the time stamps and the number of recommendations occupy different positions on the two websites, i.e. below or to the right-hand side of the body of the comment (see Figures 7 and 8 above).

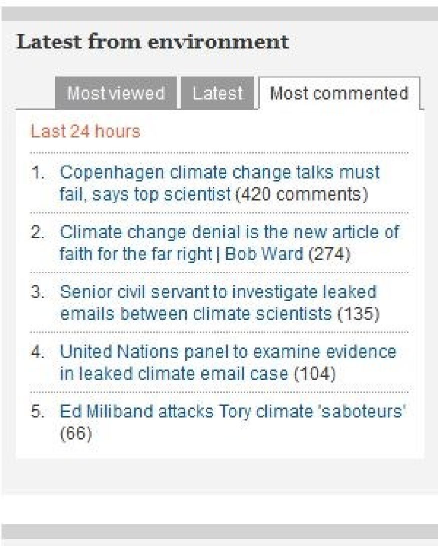

Figure 9 Suggestions for further reading ordered by *most commented* on the *Guardian* website

In comparison to these subtle, yet not unimportant differences in layout, the differences in functionality are far more striking. In the case of the *Guardian*, the username is a link that leads to the profiles of the respective users, where more information about them and their past activities on the platform can be accessed. This profile can also be called up by clicking on the profile picture next to the username, a feature that does not exist on the *Times* website as it does not contain user profiles. A function both comment sections share is that of recommending other users' comments. Readers, even those who are not registered and therefore not members of the community, can recommend any comment simply by pressing a button called *Recommend?* on both websites to vote for the comment and thus highlight it as worthy of attention. How many times a comment has been recommended is displayed below the comment in the case of the *Times* and to its right in the case of the *Guardian*.

In addition to this shared function, the *Guardian* website offers its users the options to *report abuse*, *link* and *clip*, with the first two options being available to all readers and only the last being reserved for community members. The *report abuse* function allows readers to report offensive comments and was implemented to involve all members of the community and even non-registered users in "maintaining an appropriate and stimulating environment".[107] On pressing the respective button on the right-hand side of the comment, directly below the *Recommend?* button, a window with a drop-down menu pops up, asking users to specify why they perceive this comment as problematic (see Figure 10 below).

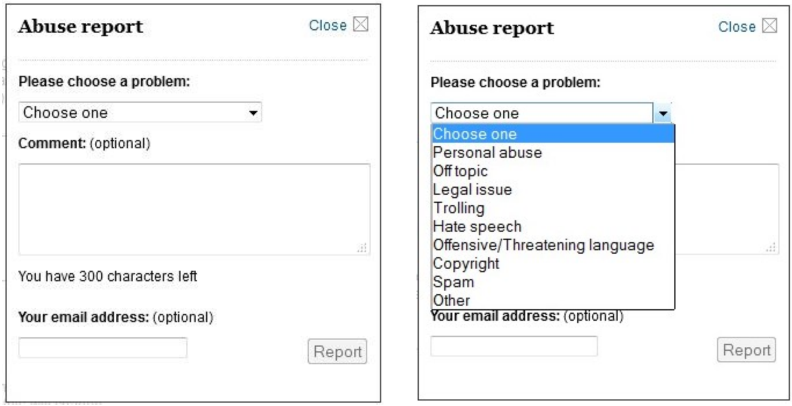

Figure 10 Abuse report on the *Guardian* website

The options provided range from *personal abuse*, *off topic*, *legal issue*, *trolling*, *hate speech*, *offensive/threatening language* to *copyright*, *spam* and *other*. Comments that have been reported enter the moderators' report queue, and if they decide that a comment effectively contravenes the community standards, the body of the comment is removed from the thread and replaced by a notification that this comment has been deleted (see Figure 11 below).[108]

[107] According to the *Guardian* community FAQs, which can be accessed via https://www.-theguardian.com/community-faqs#314 (last accessed January 20, 2017).

[108] The fact that deleted comments leave traces is very helpful when it comes to analysing individual threads in terms of politeness (see chapter 7). Interestingly, in the *Guardian* sub-corpus, only 21 traces of deleted comments could be found. To be able to compare the written and computer-mediated corpora more easily, 21 additional comments were added to the *Guardian* sub-corpus to replace the deleted ones.

Figure 11 Deleted comment on the *Guardian* website

The *link* function creates a permanent, direct link to an individual comment as opposed to the link to the whole website (including the article and the complete comments thread) displayed in the address bar of the browser. If the site is accessed via this link, the page is displayed in such a way that the comment chosen is at its top, which makes such links ideal if readers want to refer not just to the site in general but to particular contents on it. The *clip* function allows registered users to add comments to their so-called clippings page, which is like a scrapbook of saved content from the *Guardian* website.

The additional functions of having a profile and reporting, clipping and linking comments provided on the *Guardian* website are all related to the idea of community that lies behind this comment section. Readers are not just offered the opportunity to post isolated comments; they are also invited to support the moderators in maintaining community standards, to participate in spreading the news and encouraging and upholding the discussion and to engage more deeply with the content of the newspaper by creating their own personal archive in the form of clippings. It remains to be seen whether offering such functions results in higher levels of participation and interactivity, two of the key features of CMC and web 2.0.

The above has shown that in terms of medium factors, the two media in question display a number of similarities but also substantial differences. The analysis will reveal in what way and to what extent these manifest themselves in the individual linguistic products and what role is played by the so-called situation factors (i.e. *participation structure*, *participant characteristics*, *topic or theme*, *tone*, *activity*, *norms* and *code*, cf. Herring 2007). Since these cannot be analysed for the corpus in general but only for smaller groups of texts, they will be explored in more detail in the discussion of the particularities encountered.

4.4 Advantages and limitations of the data set

The present corpora were selected with great care and so as to make it possible to address the set of research questions outlined above. Akinnaso's (1982) review of empirical studies comparing speech and writing, his discussion of their advantages and shortcomings and his suggestions for future research proved to be particularly valuable and insightful in the present data selection process. Although more than thirty years have passed since the publication of this paper, his criticism is still applicable to many comparisons of speech and writing or CMC and writing undertaken today, and much is to be gained if his suggestions are taken into consideration. Nevertheless, the present data set also has some limitations, which need to be addressed briefly in the following.

4.4.1 Comparability and scope

The greatest advantage of the data set lies in the fact that the same communicative task is performed in different media and that strong parallels exist in the topics discussed, the context and purpose of the communicative exchange and the communicative situation (cf. Akinnaso 1982: 109ff.). In both corpora, the interlocutors do not know each other and produce their contribution for an 'overhearing audience'. The only channel available for communication is the written one, i.e. printed text or text displayed on a screen. Even if the individuals who posted the comments are not the same as those who wrote the letters, they are at least readers of the same newspapers and frequently react to the same trigger, i.e. the same newspaper article.[109] In addition, the large number of participants in both forms of reader response rules out the possibility that the data simply represent the idiosyncrasies of individual people or groups of people (cf. 1982: 103).

Despite these advantages concerning the interlocutors studied, it needs to be kept in mind that the media analysed do not provide demographic information about their users. As a result, sociolinguistic background information is lacking and caution is necessary when assessing certain linguistic structures. Since both the *Guardian* and the *Times* have a broad international readership, the authors of online comments may not live in the UK and may not even be native speakers. While this may also be the case in the letters, inferences about a letter writer's background can be drawn more easily, since they can be based on the additional information provided in the signature lines (e.g. names and places of residence).

Another important factor in which the two forms of communication differ substantially is that of editorial control (see 4.2.2.2 above). Whereas it is up to the editors to decide which and how many of the great number of letters to publish, every single comment a reader chooses to make can be found online instantly. Some comments may be deleted afterwards if they do not abide by the community standards, yet the control exercised by the

[109] Exceptions are, of course, those reader contributions written in reaction to previous letters and comments (see 6.3.2 below).

editorial board is much greater in the case of letters than in that of comments. Letters sent to the editor may be shortened and – as stated explicitly on the *Guardian* website – even edited before publication.[110]

The differences in the degree of editorial control described above have two major implications for the research design. First, while the online platforms represent nearly the full range of reactions users have shown in response to the respective newspaper articles, the readers of the newspapers are presented with a selection of contributions only, which may not be an adequate representation of the reactions received.[111] Second, in the case of comments, the readers are presented with precisely what the author has written, whereas the letter sent to the editor may look different from what is subsequently published in the newspaper. Despite these limitations, however, it is argued that as long as such differences and their possible implications are kept in mind throughout the analysis and carefully considered in the discussion, they neither hamper the analysis nor challenge the findings and conclusions.[112]

4.4.2 Observer's paradox and research ethics

In addition to the strengths presented above, the data sets offer the great advantage of making it possible to study naturally-occurring discourse while avoiding the *Observer's Paradox* "that has traditionally plagued research in the social sciences" (Herring 1996b: 5).[113] The comment and letter writers are certainly aware of their audience and the public nature of the discussion when submitting their contributions, yet not of the presence of a researcher interested in their communicative or linguistic habits (cf. Neurauter-Kessels 2011: 193f.). The interaction takes place in the same form as it always does and provides non-elicited, authentic data.[114]

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[110] http://www.theguardian.com/tone/letters; (last accessed March 24, 2014).

[111] Online readers are not always presented with the full range of reactions since comments may be deleted by a moderator. While it is only possible to tell whether comments have been deleted on the *Times* website if users complain about their comments or other users' comments having disappeared, the moderator's activities are clearly documented on the *Guardian* website (see 4.3.8 above).

[112] To round of the present comparison, the editors' criteria for selecting letters for publication will be explored in chapter 8 below.

[113] The role of researchers as observers and the dilemma they face when having to observe people in order to find out how they interact when they are not being observed was first discussed by Labov (cf. e.g. 1970: 32 and 1972: 209).

[114] Unfortunately, this point still needs stressing since even in some fairly recent studies such considerations are lacking. Baron (2010: 3), for instance, whose analysis of IM has the goal of "furthering the ongoing discussion of whether IM discourse more closely resembles speech or writing", asked 'student experimenters' to initiate conversations with people on their buddy list to collect her data. Not only did the 22 student experimenters ask for permission to save the

Since both the letters and comments are published on the newspaper websites and therefore exist in a freely accessible digital form, collecting data samples that are large enough to be representative is comparatively easy. Owing to its digital nature, i.e. the fact that it does not have to be transcribed and that corpora can easily be compiled, CMC in general lends itself especially well to linguistic investigation (cf. e.g. Herring 1996b). However, in this medium in particular, it can be quite a challenge to circumvent the observer's paradox and to comply with research ethics at the same time. If the comment writers are not aware of the researcher at the moment of interaction and not even informed about the fact that their contributions are part of a data set for linguistic investigation afterwards, is it still ethically responsible to use the material? Does the fact that the interactions take place in public automatically justify analysing the data and publishing the results? Moreover, if the data are quoted in a publication, should the interlocutors be anonymised in order to protect their privacy?

Since the Internet is not only a very special source of data but also a fairly recent phenomenon, questions of research ethics and appropriate methods of data collection are still being debated (cf. e.g. Markham and Buchanan 2012 as well as Bolander and Locher 2014). In fact, they are likely to remain a topic of animated discussion for some time to come, and rightly so. Given the complexity of the Internet and its ever-evolving nature, a thorough discussion of the topic in general is clearly beyond the scope of the present analysis. Nevertheless, the ethical considerations behind a particular research project must always be laid open (cf. e.g. Barton and Lee 2013: 274f. and Bolander and Locher 2014: 18), as will be done in the following.

The present study follows previous research on online comments and letters to the editor (cf. Neurauter-Kessels 2011 as well as Landert and Jucker 2011) in considering it ethically responsible to collect and use the data on the grounds that the contributions are public and thus accessible to everybody.[115] As Neurauter-Kessels (2011: 193f.) argues in the case of the *Guardian Online*, *The Daily Telegraph Online* and *Times Online*:

conversations for a research project at the beginning of each conversation, the majority of the conversations in the male sub-corpus took place between the same two participants (cf. 2010: 8). Considering the small number of participants and the fact that they were clearly aware of being observed, the data set is anything but representative and precludes drawing conclusions about the relationship between IM and speech or gender variation. While it needs to be acknowledged that IM is a form of CMC which, because of its private nature, is fairly difficult to access for scholarly research, using unbalanced corpora with data whose authenticity cannot be guaranteed runs the risk of distorting the picture even in small-scale case studies.

[115] While Neurauter-Kessels (2011: 193f.) directly addresses the topic of research ethics and states her reasons for proceeding the way she does (see below), Landert and Jucker (2011) do not broach the issue. In their examples, however, the interlocutors are not anonymised either,

> it is safe to say that we are dealing here with a [sic] unrestricted public space on these online media sites and users are aware that they are operating in a public place and are faced with a potentially large and anonymous audience attending the speech event.

This view is fairly wide-spread in CMC research and goes back to Herring (1996c), who draws a clear-cut distinction between public and private forms of communication. She considers studying public, i.e. open-access, groups, ethically justifiable, arguing that "[p]ublic interaction is repeatable for any reasonable and nonmalicious purpose" (1996c: 166). To confront the criticism that Internet users may not perceive the communicative setting as public and must therefore be protected, she uses the analogy of private individuals talking on the radio. Even if they, just as users of the Internet or – as in the present study – writers of letters to the editor, cannot see their audience or know who is part of it, the "public nature and the conventions of broadcasting are understood by all normal, educated adults in industrialized societies" (1996c: 166). According to Herring (1996c: 166), it would be 'ludicrous' to argue that they might perceive their participation on the radio as private, as is often the case with comparable forms of CMC. While she acknowledges that "such a widespread understanding of the public nature of CMC has not yet been achieved" (1996c: 166), she contends that it cannot be solely the responsibility of the researcher to protect people's privacy. In a way, this anticipates the argument that whether something is private or public should not just be measured in terms of access but also in terms of content, since it is undoubtedly true that more and more private aspects are entering the public sphere (cf. e.g. Dürscheid 2007, Landert and Jucker 2011 or Bolander and Locher 2014). Thus, while a site may be publicly accessible, its content can still be private in terms of the topics discussed and vice versa. Yet can it really be argued that people who willingly give away private information in public must be protected under all circumstances? Obviously, there is no right or wrong answer to this question; ethical decisions should always be taken with respect to individual contexts and technologies (cf. Markham and Buchanan 2012). In the case of teenagers posting photos or comments on Facebook without having the slightest idea who has access to them, the answer will most certainly be in the positive, given the great vulnerability of this user group and their lack of knowledge or awareness. However, the users of the forms of communica-

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i.e. the full names and usernames of some contributors to the *Times* and *Times Online* are given. The nature of the data makes it highly unlikely that the interactants were asked to give their consent once the corpus had been compiled, and the authors of the study can be assumed to have stated it explicitly had they made the effort to contact them. Thus, they do not seem to consider using such publicly available data an infringement of people's privacy.

tion under investigation in the present analysis are typically adults, who should have enough media competence and awareness to know that their contribution will be published and thus made accessible to a large audience. If they decide to relate personal incidents or to disclose private information in their letters or comments, it can be assumed that they are aware that they are sharing private content on a public platform. In such cases of deliberate choice and awareness, why should researchers not be entitled to use the data? Since the interaction investigated in the present study takes place on public platforms available to anybody who has access to the two newspapers and the Internet and since the interactants can be expected to be aware of the public nature of their contribution, it is considered safe to use the data while respecting research ethics. As in Neurauter-Kessels (2011) and Landert and Jucker (2011), names and usernames will not be anonymised in verbatim quotations; yet they will only be provided if necessary. In the vast majority of cases, reader contributions will be quoted in excerpts only, without signature lines and usernames. While it is in line with the editorial policy of the studies published in Herring (1996a) to use pseudonyms only for non-publicly accessible data and not for open-access sites (e.g. Listservs), the reason for not anonymising the data in the present study is also of a practical nature. The content published by the *Guardian* both online and in print is still available on the *Guardian* website; therefore, omitting the name or username does not really fulfil its purpose, since the author of any letter or comment can be easily identified by typing parts of the comment or letter into Google and thus locating the entire contribution. Anonymising the data in the quotations used in publication would thus merely be a “pro forma act” (Bolander and Locher 2014: 24).

All in all, the data sets not only lend themselves to the aims of the present study in terms of comparability, they also offer the great advantage of constituting authentic data, and their use for linguistic research can be considered ethically acceptable. While some factors concerning the comparability of the individual forms of communication seem to weaken the strength of the data sets, it is argued that, as long as these factors are carefully considered in the analysis and the discussion of the findings, their impact is neither dramatic nor damaging. All in all, the advantages described above by far outweigh any such limitations.

5 Linguistic features of CMC

As outlined above (see chapter 2), the present analysis starts by focusing on surface-level structures and addresses the common claim that the language used to communicate on the Internet is marked by a number of characteristics that set it apart from the language used in other contexts. Yet before the individual linguistic characteristics that have been called typical of CMC can be discussed, some preliminary considerations are necessary.

5.1 Preliminaries

5.1.1 Common core vs. family resemblances

Despite the many interesting facets of computer-mediated communication that have been studied in a wide range of disciplines and from various angles, the question still remains how precisely language is used in such forms of communication as opposed to other, non-mediated forms. While the initial belief that there is a common core of linguistic features unique to and shared across all contexts of CMC has been abandoned, terms such as *netspeak* and *language of the Internet*, which strongly suggest such a distinctive and homogeneous character, are still in widespread use in public discourse. When describing the characteristics of CMC, it is certainly best not to assume that these constitute a *common core* in the sense of the term used by Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 16ff.; see 3.2.1 above), but rather to conceive of the different forms of CMC as displaying on the linguistic level what Wittgenstein (1953: 32) calls *family resemblances* (*Familienähnlichkeiten*).[116] This accounts for the fact that even though there may be a pool of features that users typically draw on in certain forms of CMC, there are no distinctive features that are exclusive to CMC and at the same time common to all the forms of communication subsumed under this heading. Thus, instead of sharing a set of necessary conditions, different forms of CMC may be similar in some respect but distinct in others; however, they are all connected by a series of overlapping features. Therefore, individual forms of CMC are similar to games, the example used by Wittgenstein (1953: 32) to introduce the concept of *family resemblances*, in that they, too, form "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing".

[116] Wittgenstein (cf. 1953: 31ff.) asks his readers to describe what is common to all games and leads them to the conclusion that there is not a single characteristic all games share, since not all of them are competitive, not all are played for amusement, not all have a winner, etc. Nevertheless, there are clearly similarities and relationships between individual games, just as there are similarities and relationships between the individual members of a family. Like a family, games form a network, and individual games exhibit *family resemblances*.

5.1.2 Drawing on the pool of linguistic features

Even though the overgeneralising tendencies that marked the early years of research into CMC have been overcome, analysing how language is adapted to the CMC context and the affordances and constraints of the respective form of communication as well as the communicative situation still lies at the heart of a great number of linguistic studies into CMC. As touched on above, the decisive step was that away from the concept of *netspeak*, thus shifting the focus to the investigation of individual communicative situations and their specific characteristics. However, CMC research should not merely consist of isolated case studies focusing on specific, closely-defined and limited contexts of use, since the overall aim is still to 'get the bigger picture' of the CMC landscape by contrasting findings against other, similar studies. Existing research indicates that several linguistic particularities can be observed across different computer-mediated contexts, thus forming a pool of linguistic features users can, but do not have to, draw on. In order to describe the characteristic traits of an individual form of communication and to be able to position it in the vast field of synchronous and asynchronous forms of CMC, it is extremely helpful to examine which features of this combined set of linguistic characteristics are used in the context studied and what their exact properties are. Doing so not only shows in what ways the form of communication analysed is similar to or different from other forms of communication, it can also illustrate how and to what extent external factors, e.g. the setting or function of the communicative event, influence language use. To allow for such a comparison in the present study, a catalogue of the features commonly ascribed to computer-mediated language has been compiled on the basis of a thorough literature review.[117] Since the boundaries between quasi-synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication are no longer considered to be as clear-cut as was once the case, studies analysing both types of CMC have been included.

5.1.3 Previous research and constructing a catalogue

The level of detail in which the individual characteristics of language use in CMC contexts have been studied varies to a considerable degree. Some studies focus on one particular form of CMC[118] while others distinguish

[117] The individual studies used will either be named or briefly presented in the individual subsections below.
[118] Werry (1996) and Thaler (2003) analyse IRC, Lewin and Donner (2002) bulletin boards and Landert and Jucker (2011) online newspaper comments.

between different forms and compare them to each other;[119] other studies also distinguish between different forms but do not strictly uphold this distinction when discussing individual features,[120] and some papers even do not differentiate at all between different forms of CMC[121] or only distinguish between quasi-synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication.[122] For the present purpose, it is indeed relevant to consider which features have been observed most frequently in which form of CMC, since only then can the discourse type studied be put into its wider context. However, to avoid being guided by preconceived ideas about the features which are most likely to be found, the catalogue is built solely on the basis of the linguistic properties in isolation, irrespective of the communicative situation or form of CMC they have been encountered in or called typical of. This methodological decision also determines the structure of the following sections: the entire catalogue of CMC features is presented step by step, even if some features may turn out to play only a minor role. The discussion of each CMC feature thus starts on a theoretical level before moving on to the presentation of the results of the analysis. These findings are then compared to those of previous research and, most importantly, used for comparing the online comments to the corpus of letters to the editor.

The studies taken as the basis for constructing the catalogue not only differ in the degree to which the features are studied in a detailed and systematic way, their categorisation techniques also diverge to a considerable extent. While some researchers content themselves with simply presenting the individual characteristic traits without grouping them according to any consistent system, others try to construct taxonomies. However, this is not only done to varying degrees but also on the basis of different types of subcategories. While some researchers (e.g. Herring 2012) make use of the traditional levels of linguistic analysis, i.e. morphology and syntax supplemented by typography and orthography, others (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2007b) adopt a functional perspective and classify the characteristics encountered according to the techniques employed by the interlocutors, i.e. *strategies of linguistic economy* (*Verfahren sprachlicher Ökonomie*), *strategies compensating for missing mimetic and kinesic cues* (*mimetisch-kinesische Kompensierungsverfahren*) and *strategies of oral discourse imitation* (*Versprechsprachlichung*). Both systems have their justification and can, in fact, be considered to be two sides of the same coin,

[119] This is the approach adopted, amongst others, by Crystal (2001), Frehner (2008) and Dürscheid et al. (2010).
[120] E.g. Maynor (1994) and Thurlow (2001).
[121] E.g. Schlobinski (2009) or Herring (2012).
[122] E.g. Thurlow (2001).

the one being incomplete without the other. Combining them, however, is not an easy task: there is no one-to-one relationship between form and function and thus, necessarily, considerable overlap between the individual categories. Some characteristics on the syntactic or graphological level, for instance, can be attributed to strategies of linguistic economy, while others are used to compensate for missing visual or auditory cues. Whereas the former allow users to save time, the latter are not chosen for this purpose and may even turn out to be more time-consuming. Things become even more complicated if stylistic or pragmatic features are included in the taxonomy, since stylistic traits can be found on the lexical, morphological and syntactic level as well as in typography and orthography; from a functional perspective, they can serve distinct functions or even combinations of functions.[123]

It is therefore best to devise a taxonomy consisting of two interrelated levels: one that groups the features according to their status in linguistic analysis and one that includes functional aspects. This is also how the present analysis is structured. The individual features are presented step by step according to the level of linguistic analysis they belong to, starting with graphological features (see 5.2) before moving on to lexical and morphological features (see 5.3) and finally to syntactic ones (see 5.4). Despite this categorisation along formal lines, each section contains a detailed discussion of functional aspects and also highlights the various links between individual features, categories and functions in an attempt to capture the complexity of the linguistic characteristics of CMC both from a formal and a functional perspective.

5.2 Graphological deviation

Probably the most eye-catching and therefore most frequently mentioned features of CMC discourse can be found on the graphological level, i.e. orthography and typography. Although great differences exist between different forms of CMC, the widespread use of certain forms of communi-

[123] Thaler (2003), for instance, distinguishes between (a) orthographic and morpho-syntactic, (b) pragmatic and (c) lexical characteristics. Among the pragmatic characteristics of her French chat corpus, she names the following: lack of T/V distinction, emulation of oral features and compensation strategies like those encountered by Androutsopoulos (2007b). Even though this subdivision looks familiar and even sound at first glance, it is marred by the fact that formal and functional features are unjustifiably mixed, since she subdivides her so-called pragmatic features along functional lines but excludes functional aspects from her other two categories. Yet reduced punctuation, reduced morpho-syntax and lacking capitalisation – just to mention three of the features in her first group – also serve a function, i.e. that of economy and text entry reduction. While Thaler acknowledges this in her discussion, her taxonomy obscures this important distinction.

cation (above all instant messaging and text messaging) has led to the popular perception of non-standard spellings as one of the prototypical features of CMC as such. Accounts of the peculiar nature of CMC spelling and its detrimental influence on language usually include examples to illustrate its distinctive and even cryptic nature. These are often artificially constructed and slightly or even wildly exaggerated, as the following headline of an article in the *Daily Telegraph*: "1 dA wil Nglsh B ritN lIk this?" (Cohen 2001).[124] Imitating the language of text messaging, the journalist has obviously crammed any deviation from the orthographic norm he could possibly think of into this sentence to make it as far removed from standard spelling as possible without taking into consideration whether users would actually produce such a sentence and – if they did – in which context and which form of CMC. The case of a Scottish schoolgirl who allegedly handed in an essay[125] written entirely using SMS-style abbreviations of the sort used in the newspaper headline above and the fact that this story was reported in more than a dozen newspapers and on various news websites (cf. Thurlow 2006) show that these features are commonly represented in the media as clear signs of the detrimental influence of CMC on the linguistic abilities of today's youth.[126] Since orthography is one of the basic literacy skills and since deviations on the level of spelling stand out at first glance, it is not surprising that such examples are used to underline the

[124] This is one of the articles in Thurlow's (2006) study into the framing of CMD in public discourse, which was briefly presented above (see 1.2.1).

[125] Several slightly different versions of this alleged essay exist. The BBC News website provides the following version and also suggests a translation:

"My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :- kids FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc Bt my Ps wr so {:-/ BC o 9/11 tht they dcdd 2 stay in SCO & spnd 2wks up N. Up N, WUCIWUG - O. I ws vvv brd in MON. O bt baas & ^^^^^. AAR8, my Ps wr :-) -- they sd ICBW, & tht they wr ha-p 4 the pc&qt…IDTS!! I wntd 2 go hm ASAP, 2C my M8s again. 2day, I cam bk 2 skool. I feel v O:-) BC I hv dn all my hm wrk. Now its BAU."

"My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place, but my parents were so worried becaue [sic] of September 11th that they decided we would stay in Scotland and spend two weeks up noth [sic]. Up north, what you see is what you get - nothing. I was extremely bored in the middle of nowhere. Nothing but sheep and mountains. At any rate, my parents were happy - they said it could be worse, and that they were happy for the peace and quiet. I don't thnk [sic] so! I wanted to go home as soon as possible, to see my mates again. Today I came back to school. I feel very saintly because I have done all my homework. Now it's business as usual." (http://www.xtec.cat/~nbrichs/profes/worksheet/txting.htm; last accessed January 20, 2017).

[126] In an interview for the website *The Visual Thesaurus* given in 2008 (The Visual Thesaurus 2008), Crystal also attributes the general public concern about the detrimental influence of modern technologies (and sending text messages in particular) on language to this 2003 news story, which he calls a "hoax". For the full interview see http://www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/wc/david-crystal-on-the-myth-of-texting/ (last accessed January 20, 2017).

novelty and distinctiveness of language use in CMC contexts. Leaving aside these accounts of CMC spelling in public discourse, the following sections will focus on the linguistic evidence as reported in previous research.

5.2.1 Terminology

Given the large number of terms referring to graphological features, such as *graphetics*, *graphology*, *orthography*, *spelling*, *graphostylistics*, *typography* and the synonymous German terms *Graphematik* and *Graphemik*, which do not seem to have a straightforward morphological equivalent in English, it is not surprising that their use in research on this subject is far from consistent. While the majority of terminological idiosyncrasies are of little consequence, such inconsistencies become problematic if the terms are used without reflection or consideration. Therefore, any serious exploration of the features covered in what follows needs to bring to light all underlying tacit assumptions and thus begin by addressing terminological issues.

5.2.1.1 Graphetics vs. graphology

According to Crystal (cf. 2003: 187), the terms *graphetics* and *graphology* are used analogously to *phonetics* and *phonology*, whereas the German terms *Graphematik* and *Graphemik* are defined by Bußmann (cf. 2002: 264) as the study of graphemes, i.e. the smallest distinctive units of the writing system, and contrasted with *Graphetik*. This implies that *Graphematik* and *Graphemik* are synonymous with *graphology*, thus avoiding the German term *Graphologie* being used with two distinct meanings, as is the case in English, where, according to the *OED*, *graphology* is used in its more general meaning to refer to the study of handwriting, and in its linguistic meaning to "[t]he study of written and printed symbols and of writing systems".[127] Although *Graphematik* is translated by *graphemics* in the English version of Bußmann's dictionary (cf. Bußmann et al. 1996: 589), this term is rarely used in the literature, which is why preference will be given to *graphology* in the present thesis. The term referred to in the title of the present section, i.e. *graphological deviation*, is thus used here in the linguistic sense, denoting "the study of the systems of symbols that have been devised to communicate language in written form" (Crystal 2003: 196). It serves as a cover term for the orthographical features of capitalisation (see 5.2.3), punctuation (see 5.2.4) and spelling (see 5.2.5), features of typography (see 5.2.7) and further graphic means of expression (see 5.2.8).

[127] "graphology, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 20 January 2017.

5.2.1.2 Orthography and spelling

The terms *orthography* and *spelling* are generally used interchangeably to describe the rules governing the writing system of a language, and it might feel slightly forced to differentiate between the two. However, in the present thesis, *orthography* will be used as a hyperonym covering capitalisation, punctuation and spelling; *spelling* will be used to describe the orthographic rules operating on the word or phrase level (cf. e.g. Coulmas 1996 and Finch 2005).

5.2.1.3 Typography

According to Herring (2012: 2), "in text-based CMC, typography refers primarily to the use of nonalphabetic keyboard symbols such as numbers, punctuation, and special symbols such as <, $, and @". Therefore, she groups not only repeated punctuation (see 5.2.4 below) and non-standard capitalisation (see 5.2.3 below) under this heading but also letter and number homophone spellings (e.g. 'l8er' for 'later', see 5.2.5 below), while at the same time admitting that "[t]his latter usage is also sometimes classified as non-standard spelling; indeed, there is considerable overlap between non-standard typography and non-standard orthography in CMC, and the two often co-occur" (2012: 2). Whereas Herring (2012) appears to differentiate between orthography and typography solely on the basis of whether alphabetic or non-alphabetic symbols are used, a different approach will be adopted in the present analysis. Since capitalisation and punctuation in particular are part of the historically evolved writing conventions and thus orthographic features and since letter and number homophone spellings are not influenced by their visual appearance but by the phonetic characteristics of the letter or number used in substitution (and thus a matter of phoneme-grapheme correspondence and therefore orthography), these features are all addressed under the heading of *orthography*. It could even be argued that the term *typography* is not altogether suited to refer to any of these features, since, in the strict sense of the term, *typography* refers to the characteristics of font types, spatial organisation and page layout (cf. Crystal 2003: 192 and Dürscheid 2012: 207ff.) and not primarily to the use of non-alphabetic or – as they are often called, typographic (cf. e.g. Thurlow 2003: 7 and Crystal 2008b: 37) – symbols. In the present analysis, *typography* will thus be restricted to matters of type and layout. Since these features only play a role in very specific forms of CMC, they will be addressed only briefly below (see 5.2.7).

5.2.1.4 Graphostylistics

When it comes to describing the different types of deviation from the orthographic norm encountered in computer-mediated discourse, the term *graphostylistics* is sometimes used, but again the range of features grouped under this category varies. Whereas Schlobinski and Siever (2005) employ it to describe all kinds of deviation from standard orthography, including the iteration of letters and punctuation marks, homophone spellings, the representation of non-verbal elements (e.g. laughter) and the creative use of graphic means of expression (e.g. emoticons), Androutsopoulos (2007b) uses the term to cover only those deviations from the orthographic norm that do not represent features of spoken language and are thus what Crystal (2001: 164) calls "sources of visual distinctiveness".[128]

In more general terms, *graphostylistics* is a sub-discipline of stylistics. As the name suggests, it is the systematic study of how graphic elements can be employed to achieve a stylistic effect (cf. Dürscheid 2012: 220). When defined in this way, *graphostylistics* includes not only features of orthography but also those of typography and other graphic means of expression – after all, these are often used for stylistic purposes. In light of the diverging classifications mentioned above, this leads to the conclusion that if the representation of spoken-language features in CMC is considered a stylistic device, it can indeed be discussed as a graphostylistic strategy. Thus, it all boils down to one's definition of *style* and how broad or narrow one takes it to be. Since the discussion of the characteristics in the present study is structured according to formal categories (see 5.1.3 above), *graphostylistic devices* are not discussed as an individual category but rather as one of the functions graphology can fulfil. However, since several functions of graphological deviation can be identified in the present data (e.g. to save time or to compensate for missing visual or aural cues), only those features that do not seem to fulfil first and foremost any of these functions qualify for being discussed as graphostylistic elements (see e.g. 5.2.3.3.5 below). This avoids attributing too much to matters of stylistic choice and throwing anything into the stylistic wastebasket.

5.2.2 Framework and typology

The difficulties encountered when constructing a taxonomic system of the features characteristic of CMC (see 5.1.3 above) also arise on the graphological level. Again, the degree to which the orthographic peculiarities encountered are described in a systematic way differs markedly, and

[128] Androutsopoulos (2007b: 83) uses the example of 'cu' for 'see you'.

unfortunately, only a small number of detailed studies with a special focus on spelling, capitalisation and punctuation exist.[129] The framework for the present analysis is thus built not only on the basis of studies analysing those features in CMC but also includes two studies focusing on non-standard orthography in other types of text. While the first, Davies (1987), is an older but with respect to the typology used far from dated study on non-standard spelling in trade names, slogans and advertisements, the second, Androutsopoulos (2000), focuses on non-standard spellings in German fanzines.

If one concentrates on the studies that not only have a clear focus on orthography but also move beyond simply listing and discussing the particularities encountered in isolation,[130] the approaches adopted can again be arranged into three groups. Firstly, a functional perspective can be adopted, and the deviations from standard spelling can be grouped according to the motivation behind their use. This is done by Shortis (2007: 7), who distinguishes between "features for economy and text entry reduction" and "features for giving the respelling a simulation of spoken language" for instance. Secondly, the different types of deviations can be grouped along formal lines, as done by Thurlow (2003), who lists, among others, *shortenings*, *contractions*, *G clippings*, *acronyms* and *letter/number homophones*. A similar approach is adopted by Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan (2005), who describe in detail the different types of *truncation* and other spelling conventions in what they call *cyber-orthography*. Despite developing a framework based on what he calls *motivation*, Davies (1987) also belongs to this second group since he groups motivations according to the level of linguistic analysis. Thus, he distinguishes between (a) *graphological*, (b) *phonological* and (c) *morphological-semantic motivations*. However, the functions that the non-standard spellings fulfil within any of these categories as well as the effects they achieve can be manifold, ranging from simplification and elaboration to emphasising pronunciation on a visual level. Compared to Shortis (2007), the typology used by Davies (1987) is therefore more formal than functional not only on the surface level, even though the term *motivation* is used in the nomenclature.[131] In the first two groups, the researchers

[129] Among these rank (even if not focusing exclusively on orthography) Thurlow (2003), Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan (2005), Shortis (2007), Shaw (2008) and Lyddy et al. (2014).

[130] As done in Shaw (2008), who lists, among others, *clippings*, *abbreviations*, *expressive respellings*, *representation of spoken forms* and *regularisation of irregular spellings* without grouping them or integrating them into a taxonomy.

[131] It needs to be stressed that Davies (1987) is justified in calling the three categories of his typology *motivations*, since in the first category, for instance, the motivation behind the deviation from standard spelling is indeed a graphological one, i.e. the spelling is modified to achieve a certain visual impact. However, the impact the strategies discussed may have on the

thus build their taxonomies either on the basis of functional or formal characteristics and – depending on the approach adopted – mention the formal types and the effects of the deviations only when discussing the individual characteristics. Androutsopoulos (2000), in contrast, goes a step further and thus constitutes the third type of approach, which is also the one adopted in the present study. He clearly distinguishes between a formal analysis on the one hand, in which he proceeds according to what he calls *spelling types*, i.e. formal characteristics, and a functional analysis on the other, in which he discusses *patterns of spelling usage*, i.e. why deviations and combinations of deviations are employed in his corpus and what effect this has on the texts under discussion. Following this example, the typology of the present analysis is based on formal categories and constitutes a collection of the particularities uncovered by previous research on the levels of orthography (i.e. capitalisation, punctuation and spelling), typography and further graphic means of expression. On the basis of these findings, the formal properties and possible functions of each of these features are discussed in detail before their occurrence in the corpus is analysed. The discussion is rounded off with an examination of the patterns identified in the present data and an evaluation of the strategies used (see 5.2.9 below).

5.2.3 Capitalisation

Although nouns are no longer capitalised in English, capitalisation is still one of the basic features of orthography and follows clear rules that tend to be respected. Even if less proficient writers might be unsure about whether to capitalise certain adjectives or acronyms, most seem to follow basic rules (e.g. starting sentences with a capital letter and capitalising the first letter of proper nouns or the personal pronoun *I*) irrespective of whether the text produced is a written report or a private letter. In CMC, however, adherence to these rules is far less widespread. Despite considerable differences not only between individual users but also forms of communication, deviations from standard capitalisation can be grouped into two categories with clearly distinguishable functions.

5.2.3.1 Absence of capital letters

On the one hand, there seems to be a tendency to avoid capital letters in general, as observed in many CMC contexts (cf. e.g. Maynor 1994: 49ff.,

graphological, phonological or what Davies (1987: 55) calls *morphological-semantic* level is not yet the ultimate function or the desired effect, which can be, among others, that of shortening elements, indicating ambiguity, adding an exotic touch or additional layers of meaning.

Thurlow 2001: 288, Crystal 2006: 90f. and Herring 2012), which leads Crystal (2006: 92) to speak of a "lower-case default mentality". Research suggests that the motivation behind this strategy is economy. When typing on a keyboard, the interlocutor is required to hit an additional key (i.e. the shift key) to produce a capital letter. While this does not represent a challenge for a skilled touch typist, the position of the shift key and the fact that it has to be pressed at the same time as the respective letter key mean that the physical and cognitive effort when typing in mixed case is significantly greater for most people than when typing in lower case only. Given that what most users appreciate about communicating via new media formats is the fact that it is 'quick and easy', it comes as no surprise that this extra effort is often avoided, especially since a lack of capitalisation neither inhibits understanding nor significantly reduces readability. Thus, in order to save a keystroke (and, hence, time and effort), a considerable number of writers do not use capitals at all or do so only very rarely. However, this is often done inconsistently, and there is considerable variation not only between different forms of communication and users but also within texts written by the same user. This strongly indicates that several other external factors (e.g. the purpose of the communicative event or the social status of the addressee) can easily override time considerations and thus lead users who do not use capital letters in some contexts to adhere more firmly to the standard rules of capitalisation in others. Unfortunately, this is often overlooked or left uncommented in discussions of CMC features. The majority of studies merely name missing capitalisation as one of the prototypical features of language use influenced by economic considerations, without discussing the topic in any more detail. While time constraints and the question as to whether a message is revised and edited before being sent certainly play an important role, other factors that may influence the use of capital letters include the communicative situation and purpose, the durability of the message, i.e. how long the message will be visible to others, and formality features.[132] In an informal, laid-back communicative atmosphere, the use of capitalisation might be perceived as too formal or even stiff. In order to avoid the impression that a given text has been too carefully crafted, capital letters might thus be omitted on purpose.

While this view is helpful in acknowledging that speed or ease of production is not the only motivation for omitting capitalisation, Maynor

[132] When producing a text for a blog for instance, users are probably more likely to spend more time revising and editing the text since it will be visible to a potentially large number of readers over an extended period of time. When chatting with strangers in IRC, in contrast, the necessity to produce answers fairly quickly and the fact that the messages scroll off the screen in a matter of minutes or even seconds may encourage them to ignore capitalisation for the sake of producing a speedy response.

(1994: 49) even goes as far as to say that capital letters are avoided as part of "attempts to make writing more like speech. Since capitalisation, for example, does not exist in speech, it is often stripped from computer conversations". However, this line of argumentation does not seem very plausible; after all, the absence of capitalisation does not automatically make a message more speech-like. Rather, it makes the electronic message appear somewhat more direct, spontaneous, effortless or even sloppy, as a scribbled note would compared to neat handwriting or even calligraphy. Thus, Maynor's statement only holds true if writing is conceived of as always being carefully crafted and formal and speech as always being direct and informal. Yet, in addition to this untenable overgeneralisation, Maynor's argument is also undermined by the fact that omitting a feature from written language that does not exist in spoken language does not automatically make the written words appear more like speech. The blank spaces marking word boundaries on the page or screen, for instance, do not exist in speech either, where there is hardly any segmentation between lexical units, yet omitting them would not give the text a speech-like character but rather make it illegible. Thus, while the statement that capital letters are avoided in CMC in order to make it look more like speech cannot be supported as such, the omission of capital letters can be used not only as a way of saving time and effort but also to make the message fit a more relaxed communicative style.

When looking at features such as capitalisation, not only the user's intent but also the technical means used to produce the message must be considered. In terms of time constraints and the effort involved in producing capital letters, there is a considerable difference between typing on a traditional computer keyboard on the one hand and the touchscreen of a tablet or even smartphone on the other. Owing to recent technological developments, however, the form of communication can no longer be taken as an indicator of the way in which the message is generated. Emails, for instance, can be produced nowadays via the touchscreens of smartphones and tablets or even via voice recognition technology, which of course strongly influences the use of capital letters.[133] In addition, many devices now include auto-correction features which might automatically start sentences with a capital letter even if the user does not intend to do so or normally would not make an

[133] Research into the differences in text production between keypads and touchscreens is still in its infancy, but studies such as Kent and Johnson's (2012) comparison of text messages produced with those two devices have shown that the type of phone used indeed influences features such as capitalisation, punctuation and spelling. Student surveys conducted during four seminars on computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) held at the University of Heidelberg between 2013 and 2016 also suggest that individual users may behave differently depending, among other things, on the device used to compose the message.

effort to do so.[134] Thus, the argument that producing capital letters is more time-consuming does not necessarily apply to all means of text production, and integrated dictionaries and auto-correction features may exert considerable influence on orthography in general and capitalisation in particular. In the long run, this may even lead to a reverse trend, i.e. a return to more standardised forms of capitalisation owing to the constant increase in the use of auto-correction and speech recognition technology.[135] Any discussion of the reasons underlying the use or absence of capitalisation must thus consider such technological affordances and developments. The fundamental advantage of the present data is that because of the time of data collection and the format studied, the technological possibilities and limitations of text entry are well known and can be considered to be mostly homogeneous.[136]

5.2.3.2 Overuse of capital letters

Even though capital letters are often omitted in CMC for economic or stylistic reasons, this does not mean that they are absent altogether. Aside from those deviations from standard capitalisation that merely consist of the omission of capital letters in words or positions that – according to standard orthography – require initial capitals, non-standard capitalisation can also be found in the sense that capitals are used in positions where they would not normally occur in standard orthography. Several studies have reported that entire words or sentences are capitalised in CMC in order to add more stress and emphasis (cf. e.g. Werry 1996, Thurlow 2001, Hård af Segerstad 2002, Lewin and Donner 2002, Carter and McCarthy 2006, Landert and Jucker 2011 and Herring 2012). Since stress and emphasis are realised by pitch, volume, intonation and prosody in spoken communication, i.e. features that are absent in the written channel, using capitalisation as a means of expressing emphasis is usually considered a compensation strategy for the

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[134] In most smartphones a so-called *AutoCaps* function can be enabled in the text entry settings; if this is done, the beginnings of new lines, sentences and certain words with an entry in the built-in dictionary (such as *I* or *American*) are capitalised automatically, just as when typing a text in auto-correction mode in word processors on personal computers.

[135] Since today's children become accustomed to using all these relatively new technological devices from early age onwards, future generations can be expected to be much more skilled in handling keyboards or touchpads of all kinds; producing capital letters will therefore be no more of an effort for them than it is now for professional or highly skilled touch typists.

[136] As smartphones were still comparatively rare in 2009, most comment writers of the present corpus can be assumed to have accessed the newspaper websites on a computer with a normal keyboard. Today, in contrast, many people seem to use the *Guardian* app on their mobile devices instead of accessing the website. It can thus be assumed that a considerable number of the comments posted nowadays are not produced on a traditional keyboard.

missing auditory cues in written interaction (cf. Herring 2012). There are of course syntactic means for emphasising certain words or longer parts of a sentence in writing as well, e.g. using cleft structures, adding words such as *do*, *very*, *indeed* or making use of repetition (cf. Swan 2004: 182ff.), yet assigning particular stress to a word or phrase is most easily and naturally achieved by prosodic means (cf. Callies 2009: 3), which explains why this highly effective feature of spoken interaction is imitated via graphological means in written texts.[137]

In handwriting, the most common ways of emphasising certain elements are probably underlining and letter size. In electronically produced texts, several methods are available (e.g. font type, size and colour, highlighting, underlining, bold print or italics), depending on the software or form of communication used. However, many forms of CMC do not contain options to format one's text, and even in those that do (e.g. email and some discussion boards), the majority of users tend to write their messages in plain text only, without adding underlining or bold print. Nevertheless, many users seem to want to be able to draw special attention to certain parts of their texts and thus make use of features to represent stress that can be produced without the help of word editors or without knowing the respective HTML code. Among these features, capitalisation is by far the most common one. Spacing, i.e. adding a space between every letter of the word in question (e.g. v e r y), and asterisks, i.e. enclosing the word in question in asterisks (e.g. *very*), are sometimes employed for the same purpose (cf. Crystal 2006: 92). Capitalisation is most likely preferred over the other means because it is the least cumbersome and most easily recognisable method.

In such cases, the considerations of time and economy discussed above are overridden by the desire to highlight certain parts of the message. Since using capital letters is the easiest and most efficient way of achieving this effect, the additional keystroke effort involved is accepted as being necessary. That capital letters are used to imitate vocal features of spoken language is indirectly confirmed by the fact that *netiquette*[138] guides

[137] Interestingly, most of the words used to express the concept of drawing attention to a certain element within a message have their origin either in the domain of speech (*to stress* or *to emphasise*) or writing (*to highlight* or *to underline*) but can be used interchangeably, i.e. speakers can talk about wanting to underline what they just said and authors can write about the need to stress a certain point. The concept of emphasis is thus central to human communication and it is little surprising that various means for communicating more than the semantic meaning of an utterance have developed in the different media.

[138] Netiquette guides are virtual handbooks listing appropriate behaviour and rules of conduct in CMC. The *OED* defines *netiquette* as "[a]n informal code of practice regulating the behaviour of Internet users when using email, bulletin boards, chat rooms, newsgroups, etc."; "netiquette, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 20 January 2017.

strongly advise against writing entire messages in capitals, explaining that this is considered shouting in CMC and thus constitutes impolite behaviour:

> Here's some basic rules of Netiquette that you should know and follow:
> Never communicate in **ALL CAPITAL LETTERS**. On the Net, this is *shouting* and it's considered rude. Without being able to see expressions or hear voices, there aren't many ways to express strong opinions in Net correspondence; so ALL CAPS has been designated for this purpose.[139]

Interestingly, this quotation directly refers to the non-verbal, paralinguistic and kinesic properties of spoken interaction that are absent in writing, i.e. prosodic features (e.g. intonation, stress and tone of voice) and body language as well as facial expression, arguing that capital letters have come to be used in CMC to compensate for those missing cues. According to Crystal (2006: 92), the reason for this phenomenon is directly linked to the general lack of capitalisation described above, as he argues that "the lower-case default mentality means that any use of capitalization is a strongly marked form of communication". Thus, owing to the predominant absence of standard capitalisation, upper case letters were able to adopt a new function, i.e. that of adding emphasis.

A similar effect can be achieved by using alternating upper and lower case within a word. This strategy is usually combined with that of reduplicating letters (cf. 5.2.5 below) and serves to imitate drawn-out pronunciation and changes in intonation (cf. e.g. Werry 1996 and Herring 2012). Compared to the no-caps or all-caps strategies, however, it is quite rare. Another peculiarity concerning capitalisation sometimes mentioned in this context is that of *camel case*, i.e. medial capitals (cf. e.g. Crystal 2001, Greiffenstern 2010 and Herring 2012).[140] However, medial capitals are predominantly used in product or brand names (e.g. *iPhone*, *YouTube*, *PowerPoint* or *eBay*), and their use in other compounds or words is extremely rare, which indicates that this form of capitalisation is a feature of word formation in the lexical field of new media and technology and not a characteristic of language use in CMC per se.[141]

Yet even though deviation from standard capitalisation is often named as one of the prototypical characteristics of CMC, this claim is usually not

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[139] This quotation is taken from an online class "for librarians with little or no net experience" offered by the library of the University of South Carolina Beaufort (Chamberlain and Mitchell 2000; see http://www.sc.edu/beaufort/library/BCK2SKOL/bck2skol/fall/lesson11.html; last accessed March 10, 2017; emphasis in the original).

[140] This spelling particularity is sometimes also labelled *bicapitalisation* or *BiCaps* (cf. Crystal 2001: 93).

[141] For the often neglected but highly important distinction between the language used to talk *about* new media/the Internet and language use *in* new media/*on* the Internet see 5.3.1 below.

supported with empirical evidence. In the following, the use of capitalisation in the corpus of online comments will be discussed in detail both in terms of formal and functional characteristics.

5.2.3.3 The use of capitalisation in the online comments

The manual coding of all 1,000 online comments for non-standard capitalisation has proven quite revealing, as they do not match the expectations one might have about CMC. With only 149 comments revealing any deviation from standard capitalisation, the vast majority of comments, i.e. 85%, are completely conform to Standard English as far as capitalisation is concerned (see Figure 12 below).

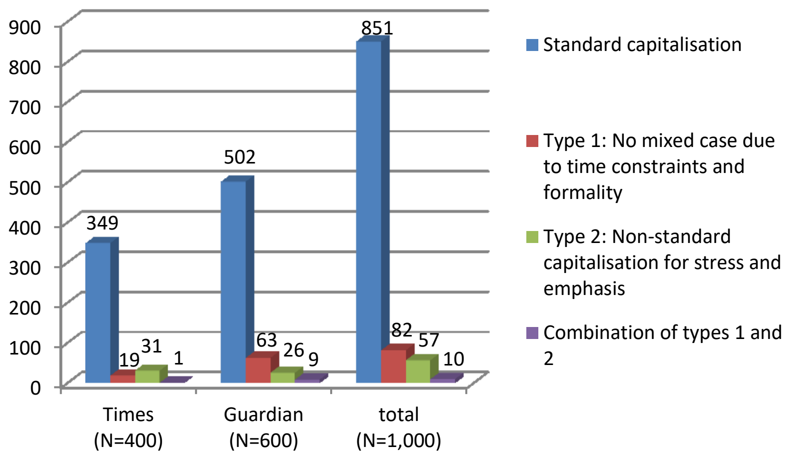

Figure 12 Capitalisation in the CMC corpus (per comments)

As outlined above, deviations from the norms of capitalisation can be grouped into two kinds: those that can be attributed to time constraints and formality on the one hand and those used as a means of adding stress and emphasis on the other. Of the 149 comments coded as containing features of non-standard capitalisation, 82 are of the former kind and 57 of the latter, with 10 comments belonging to both groups at the same time (see Table 4 below).

Table 4 Capitalisation in the CMC corpus (per comments)[142]

	Times (N=400)		Guardian (N=600)		total (N=1000)	
Standard capitalisation	349	87.3%	502	83.7%	851	85.1%
Type 1: No mixed case due to time constraints and formality	19	4.8%	63	10.5%	82	8.2%
Type 2: Non-standard capitalisation for stress and emphasis	31	7.8%	26	4.3%	57	5.7%
Combination of types 1 and 2	1	0.3%	9	1.5%	10	1.0%
totals	**400**		**600**		**1000**	

5.2.3.3.1 No mixed case: time constraints and formality

In 92 comments, the encountered deviations from the norms of capitalisation can be attributed to the conscious or unconscious attempt to minimise the typing effort, save time or create an informal communicative atmosphere.[143] In theory, users have two options: they can either write in lower case only or use the caps lock function to produce only upper-case letters. The fact that none of the users opted for the second possibility strongly suggests that entire words or even sentences typed in upper-case letters carry additional meaning, as will be discussed below. While it is already quite astonishing that only nine per cent of the comments do not use mixed case, a closer look at these 92 comments reveals that in more than half of the comments, missing capitalisation is not a consistent feature and thus more likely the result of a slip of the keyboard or less careful typing than a conscious choice (see Table 5 below).

In ten comments, the only capital letter missing is that of the very first word of the comment, and in another 19, standard capitalisation is used in the entire comment apart from one or – in the case of longer contributions – two instances.

[142] All percentages in the present thesis have been rounded and thus may not equal exactly 100.0%.
[143] While this is the only deviation from standard capitalisation in 82 of these 92 comments, ten comments also contain occurrences of non-standard capitalisation for stress and emphasis.

Table 5 Non-standard capitalisation type 1 (per comments)

	Times (N=20)		Guardian (N=72)		total (N=92)	
inconsistent use	6	30.0%	15	20.8%	21	22.8%
just one or two slips of the keyboard	6	30.0%	13	18.1%	19	20.7%
only first word of the entire comment	3	15.0%	7	9.7%	10	10.9%
no caps throughout	4	20.0%	28	38.9%	32	34.8%
no caps apart from acronyms/titles	1	5.0%	9	12.5%	10	10.9%
all caps	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
totals	**20**		**72**		**92**	

Only 32 comments do not contain a single capital letter, and another ten are written in lower case only but do contain capitals in the case of what could be called titles (e.g. 'God' and 'Home Secretary') and acronyms or initialisms (e.g. 'UK' and 'NHS'). In the remaining 21 comments, the use of capital letters needs to be considered inconsistent, as it follows no discernible pattern. Interestingly, the 42 comments in which no capitals are used throughout or only for titles and acronyms were composed by 24 authors only, with one single user being responsible for 13 of the comments.[144] It can thus be concluded that in the present corpus, consistent use of lower case only is quite rare and limited to a very small number of users. Table 5 above not only reveals that there are fewer comments with deviations from standard capitalisation in the *Times* sub-corpus (20, i.e. 5%) than in the *Guardian* one (72, i.e. 12%) but also that the largest difference in distribution lies in the two categories *no caps throughout* and *no caps apart from acronyms/titles*. These strategies are far more frequent in the *Guardian* corpus than in that of the *Times*, and of the 24 authors not using capitals, 20 belong to the former and only four to the latter. Interestingly, the *Guardian* user profiles reveal that several of the commenters writing only in lower case are frequent contributors, with more than 1,000 comments submitted by the beginning of 2015. However, in all but two cases, the absence of capital letters is not a consistent feature of the users' comment histories, as many of their more recent comments conform to the rules of standard

[144] This particular user (*hermionegingold*) is one of the most active users in the corpus and his/her profile reveals that by the beginning of 2015, the total number of comments posted on the *Guardian* website was already higher than 20,000, the total absence of capitalisation being a consistent characteristic.

capitalisation.[145] While the numbers are far too small to draw any conclusions, it is noteworthy that even though consistent and systematic deviation is above all to be found in constant and frequent users of the *Guardian* website, who can be considered to have developed a fairly strong feeling of belonging to the newspaper's online community, it is by no means a characteristic or consistent feature of such users, and there might even be a trend towards more standard capitalisation.

Leaving these differences aside, the data show that most writers of online comments stick to the rules of capitalisation even if typos occur. The fact that inconsistent use combined with occasional slips of the keyboard form 55% of the cases of non-standard capitalisation suggests that capitalisation per se has not yet been abandoned, even though some users seem to be less concerned about missing or inconsistent capitalisation and may alternate between 'I' and 'i' within the same comment. While it is impossible to tell whether they did not notice that they produced a typo or whether they noticed but did not take the time to correct the mistake, it can still be concluded that not all users read and edit their texts before hitting the *post* button.

All in all, the findings show that the "lower-case default mentality" proclaimed by Crystal (2006: 92) does not hold for reader comments on newspaper websites (see 5.2.3.1 above). While time constraints may certainly play a role (i.e. writers of online comments are not under as much pressure to produce a quick response as are interlocutors in a more synchronous form of communication), it is probably the communicative event and its purpose that influence the users in their choice. The data suggest that the *Guardian* and the *Times* websites are considered media outlets that stand for a certain level of quality and that the users feel that their contributions should also meet certain standards, especially as they will be displayed for an indeterminate period of time.[146] Unfortunately, it is impossible to say anything about the users themselves, yet the social status of the addressee or rather the provider of the service (i.e. the media institution) and the durability of the message can be considered to exert some influence over such formal features as capitalisation.

[145] These two cases are the two most active users (*hermionegingold* and *JohnnieGoat*) with more than 20,000 and 6,000 comments respectively at the beginning of 2015.

[146] This impression is supported by a number of meta-comments in which users show sensitivity to matters of spelling (see 7.3.4.2.3 for the discussion of such an example).

5.2.3.3.2 Non-standard capitalisation for stress and emphasis

5.2.3.3.2.1 Distribution and scope

Non-standard capitalisation as a means of adding stress and emphasis to particular parts of a contribution is used in a total of 67 comments (including ten comments in which both types of deviation are combined, see Figure 12 above). As some of these contain more than one such occurrence, 93 stretches of discourse were coded for this feature in total. These instances can consist of single words, two successive words forming a unit, longer stretches of discourse or entire sentences.[147] As Figure 13 shows, in the vast majority of cases, i.e. 83.9%, users opt to capitalise single words only (e.g. '… which is why there HAD to be bailouts.' [CMC G06-046 c3]).

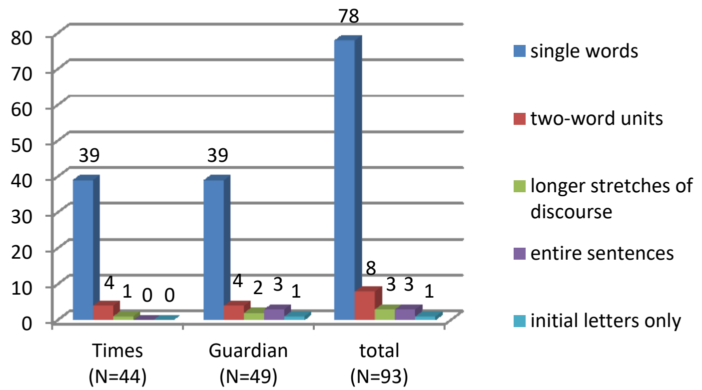

Figure 13 Capitalisation for stress and emphasis in the comments (N=93)

5.2.3.3.2.2 Other visual means of emphasis

As outlined above (see 5.2.7), the *Guardian* website offers its users some options for typographical modification that can be used to achieve the same

[147] Figure 13 contains an additional category called *initial letters only*, which occurred only once but was still included for the sake of completeness. In this case, non-standard capitalisation is used to denote a certain group of people: 'some Wikipedia pieces attract many People With Very Strong Beliefs' [CMC G08-037_1 c7]. As only the initial letters of a successive string of words are capitalised, this use stands out from the rest but can nevertheless be considered added emphasis. Through the use of initial capitals, the author treats the people talked about as if they were an established or official group, and by putting them on the same level with organisations, religious groups or nationalities (the only cases in which proper nouns for groups are spelt with an initial capital letter in English (cf. Swan 2004: 553)), he/she draws the reader's attention to this part of the sentence.

effect as capitalisation, i.e. italics and boldface. This is why non-standard capitalisation for emphasis is less frequent than the other type in the *Guardian* corpus but not in the *Times* corpus (see Figure 12 above), where such means are not available.

In addition to italics and boldface, emphasis can be added to words by placing them between asterisks (e.g. ‘They don’t *have* to.’ [CMC G07-067 c20]) or underscores (e.g. ‘Unless our planet’s crust is synthesising at least five _cubic kilometres_ of new oil a year’; [CMC T07-022 c10]). As this can be achieved with the help of the keyboard, the latter group of options is also available on the *Times* website. However, this usage is quite rare in both corpora, and the method of emphasising a word by adding spaces between its letters discussed above could not be found at all.

Compared to the use of capitalisation (see Figure 13 above), the other visual means of adding emphasis vary far more in scope, as Figure 14 below illustrates.[148]

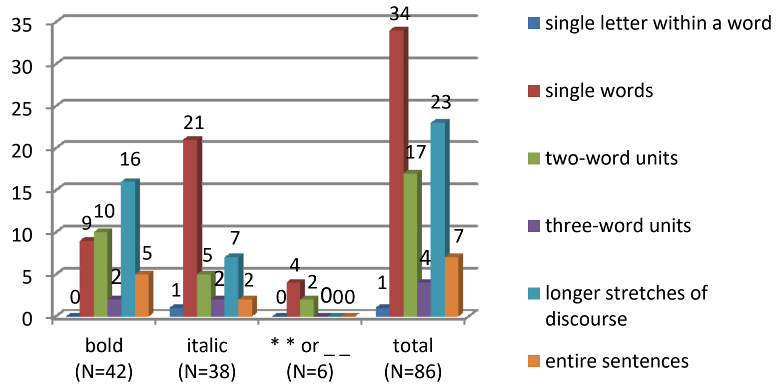

Figure 14 Other visual means for adding emphasis in the comments (N=86)

While capitalisation is used above all for single words (83.9% of the cases, see Figure 13 above), the other visual means of adding emphasis are also

[148] Since boldface and italics are only available on the *Guardian* website, Figure 14 does not present the figures for the *Guardian* and the *Times* websites individually. Of the 86 occurrences in total, only three belong to the *Times* corpus: two instances of a single word placed between asterisks and one of a compound noun placed between underscores. The instance of a single italic letter within a word included in Figure 14 constitutes an attempt to draw attention to the user’s wordplay with the words *Afghanistan* and *Satan*: ‘The reason the US and UK armed forces are in Afghanis*a*tan is to be debt collectors for the oil companies’ [CMC G09-017a c5]. It is the only occurrence of this kind and was included merely for the sake of completeness.

frequently used for longer stretches of discourse (27%) and two-word units (20%), although single words are emphasised most often (40%). However, there seems to be a difference between the use of italics and boldface, as the former is used for single words in 55% of the cases and for longer stretches of discourse in only 18%, whereas the latter is used most often for longer stretches of discourse, i.e. in 38% of the cases. Since the number of commenters using these features is fairly small, this difference may simply be the result of personal preferences.

Although it is possible to combine the use of boldface and italics (e.g. 'I know, let's just stop ***men*** having anything to do with children!!!' [CMC G10-023 c12]) or capitalisation and either of the other visual means for adding emphasis (e.g. '**SINK IT!!**" [CMC G06-M13 c19]), this is very rare.

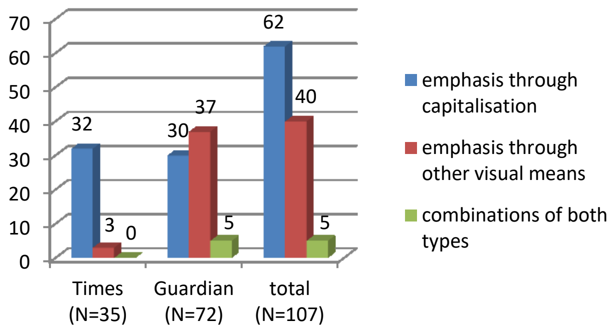

Figure 15 Stress and emphasis through different visual means (per comments; N=107)

In the entire corpus, there are only two combinations of boldface and italics, one of capitalisation and boldface, one of capitalisation and asterisks and one of italics and asterisks. The same holds true on the level of comments, i.e. if there are multiple occurrences of added emphasis within the same comment, they are usually of the same type. Of the 107 comments in which means of adding stress and emphasis are used, only in five does the author make use of capitalisation as well as one of the other visual means (see Figure 15 above).[149]

[149] Two of these comments (CMC G06-060 c10 and CMC G07-067 c20) are contributions by enraged authors who use these different types of visual emphasis in combination with emotionally laden language (e.g. exclamations and taboo words). Interestingly, these comments received comparatively few recommendations (six in both cases). In another posting (CMC G10-001-4 c10), the combination is used as a stylistic device to emphasise the headline '**NEWS FLASH**', and in comment CMC G06-M13 c19, which will be discussed in more detail below (see 5.2.3.3.3.1), as an intertextual reference. In the remaining comment (CMC

The data clearly reveal that in general, users choose one option and avoid combining different ones, as a random over-use of such features is more likely to limit the expressive force of the comment than add vigour.

While the overall frequency of adding emphasis to stretches of discourse via capitalisation on the one hand and via other visual means on the other is fairly balanced (with 93 occurrences of the former and 86 occurrences of the latter), the distribution across comments differs, with 67 comments containing capitalisation but only 45 using any of the other means. However, this discrepancy can be accounted for by the simple fact that one single comment (CMC G06-046 c2), consisting of a wild mixture of boldface and italics, is responsible for 13 of the occurrences of boldface and six of those of italics. The comment in question is very heated: an infuriated user discusses at length the bonus scandal in the banking sector, using both boldface and italics (often within the same sentence) without any discernible difference.[150] If this comment were excluded from the analysis, the ratios of occurrences to comments in the cases of capitalisation and other visual means of emphasis would be fairly similar (i.e. 1.39:1.52).

5.2.3.3.3 Forms and functions of emphasis

5.2.3.3.3.1 Shouting

As outlined above (see 5.2.3.2 and 5.2.3.3.2), capitalisation and the other visual means of adding emphasis may be employed to mimic features of spoken language that are absent in writing. Yet although the use of capitals in CMC is commonly associated with shouting and impolite behaviour, this usage is extremely rare in the present corpus; only four such occurrences in a total number of three comments could be found. In one of them, capitalisation could even be regarded as a stylistic marker of intertextuality rather than a mere indicator of an exclamatory voice. Like the comment discussed above, the comment in question is an enraged reaction to the bonus scandal,

G10-086 c4), boldface is used to add emphasis to a word in a direct quote, while capital letters are used for emphasising the same word in the author's own text.

[150] Interestingly, as with the other passionate contributions in which different methods of emphasising are used in combination, this comment received comparatively few (i.e. nine) recommendations. This is particularly noteworthy as the comment is directly reacted and referred to in four of the comments following it. Thus, although the comment is pushed to the centre of the debate, which makes it very likely that many users read or at least notice it, it is only recommended by a few readers. While its length (with 681 words it is one of the longest comments, see 8.2 below) may certainly play a role here as well (the longer the comment, the less likely it is to receive recommendations), such rants are usually not recommended. It goes without saying that this type of irritated, critical contribution using various means to display emotions does not have an equivalent in the letters corpus, where the editors act as gatekeepers. For a discussion of the editors' selection criteria see chapter 8 below.

and the author vents his/her anger by plotting to put all the people he/she considers responsible (politicians, the Financial Services Authority and bankers) into a boat and to sink it.[151]

(2) […] When this ship, with all its distinguished passengers, reaches the middle of the ocean - **SINK IT!!**
"GOTCHA" !
Our lads sink FSA & Bankers
People singing and dancing on the UK streets!
Can anyone suggest a more progressive solution?
[CMC G06-M13 c19]

While the exclamation marks, the imperative form *sink it* and the interjection *gotcha* (imitating the casual pronunciation of *got you*) clearly add to the exclamatory force of the parts written in capital letters, these features are also reminiscent of the headline style of certain newspapers – as are capital letters. Instead of simply shouting, the commenter uses capitalisation (for the headline) and italics (for the lead) in combination with the wording (*gotcha* and *our lads sink*) not only to mimic the style of tabloid newspaper headlines in general but also to allude to the infamous GOTCHA headline published on the title page of the *Sun* during the Falkland war in 1982, after the Argentine Navy cruiser General Belgrano was sunk by the Royal Navy.


THE Sun
QE2 IS SET TO SAIL FOR WAR
We told you first
GOTCHA
Our lads sink gunboat and hole cruiser
SUNK
CRIPPLED
UNION BOYCOTTS WAR
BATTLE FOR THE ISLANDS
£50,000 BINGO! Today's lucky numbers are on Page 20

Figure 16 The full front cover of the *Sun*, May 4, 1982[152]

[151] The original spelling, including not only misspellings but also the use of italics or bold letters, punctuation and line breaks, is retained in all examples. Omissions are marked by […], and additional information may be added in small capitals in square brackets when necessary. 'CMC' stands for the corpus of comments and 'NEWS' for that of letters to the editor, and the respective newspaper or newspaper website is identified by the letters 'G' and 'T'. Only the text produced by the reader is quoted, i.e. the signature lines in letters to the editor and the automatically generated information attached to online comments are excluded.
[152] Source of the image: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Sun_%28Gotcha%29.png (last accessed March 20, 2017.

In this case, capitalisation is thus used not only – and not even primarily – to represent shouting but rather functions as a stylistic device consciously employed to establish an intertextual relationship (also indicated by the quotation marks around the word *gotcha*) with a news scandal dating back almost thirty years.

As this is a special case, only two *Guardian* comments remain in which entire sentences are capitalised and in which the function of capitalisation can be considered that of representing a raised voice full of anger – especially since it occurs in combination with the use of vocabulary commonly considered offensive or impolite.[153]

(3) […] It's such Freudian bollocks to assume that by digging up what's left of their [I.E. ARTISTS'] no-so-great lives, we" come to a better understanding of their work: IT DOESN'T FUCKING WORK LIKE THAT.
And with all due response […] [CMC G06-060 c10]

(4) It will be the same shxt agaiin The right to peaceful protest in your country is long over, since Tatcher and the miner's stike in the 80's. BIG BROTHER IS NOW RUNNING THE SHOW. i will still be comming over from Ireland for the protest (hope I don't get treated like a animal like the last G20. [CMC G06-086 c4]

The use of capitalisation to vent one's feelings – a feature usually considered to be typical of CMC – is thus extremely rare in the present corpus. In the clear majority of cases, it is only single words that are capitalised, i.e. capitalisation is employed not to represent shouting but to mimic the prosodic means used in spoken language to highlight specific elements of an utterance and to draw special attention to certain pieces of information. In these cases, capitalisation and the other visual means of emphasis described above thus represent *marked focus*.

5.2.3.3.3.2 Information highlighting and focus

In unmarked English sentences, the point of focus, i.e. the part of the message that constitutes what Quirk et al. (1985: 1355) call its *highpoint*, is on the last open-class lexical item of a clause – a principle commonly referred to as the *principle of end focus* (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 897). This means that the last lexical item of a clause is usually attributed most attention, which is marked by prosodic prominence in speech: the focus

[153] The numerous typographical mistakes also point to the commenters' emotional involvement and the fact that the comments were probably not reread before being posted. While 'shxt' in (4) is most likely respelt in order to avoid censorship, the remaining deviations in spelling and punctuation (e.g. omitting some punctuation marks and words, typing 'response' instead of 'respect', hitting the letter *i* twice in 'again') do not appear to be intentional. For a discussion of profanity and strategies to avoid censorship see 5.2.5.5 and 5.3.3 below.

contains the intonation nucleus (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 1363). In terms of information flow, English sentences typically follow the principle that given information, i.e. information considered to be known to the addressee or at least recoverable from the preceding discourse or context, precedes new information (cf. 1985: 1360). In light of the principle of end focus, this entails that it is usually the new information (and thus the most relevant part of a message) that receives prosodic prominence, i.e. contains the focus of the message. If speakers wish to adjust the focus in a sentence, they can do so by placing the intonation nucleus elsewhere. In the example sentence 'I am painting my living room blue.' adopted from Quirk et al. (1985: 1365), the speaker can make any part of the sentence the focal item by shifting the intonation nucleus from 'blue' to any other clause constituent.[154] If a speaker chooses to do so, this serves as an indicator that the most important part of the message is not the information provided by 'blue' (the default interpretation according to the principle of end focus), but whatever item that carries the intonation nucleus. In such cases, Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 1365ff.) speak of *marked focus*, which is often, but not exclusively, used to mark a contrast or a correction of a previous remark or question in the discourse (e.g. 'No, I am painting MY living room blue and not my parents'.').[155]

Quirk et al. (1985: 1369) also draw attention to the fact that while marked focus is easily realised by prosodic means in spoken language, this is more complicated in written language: "[i]n writing, the comparable effect can often be conveyed only by expansion or rather elaborate paraphrase, but sometimes typographical devices are invoked, especially italics". This is the case in the following example from the present corpus:

(5) It doesn't really matter *why* the proportion of A grades is increasing. […] [CMC G07-005 c8]

As outlined above, many forms of CMC do not provide the option to format one's text, which is why capitalisation is frequently used to achieve the same effect. Thus, when a reader comments on the *Guardian* website 'Also the last paragraph says the conservatives MIGHT reverse it, not that they will.' [CMC G10-086 c4], he/she uses capitalisation to represent the (in this case clearly marked) focus of the message. When read out loud, the intonation nucleus would most certainly lie on the modal auxiliary *might* and not the last lexical unit (i.e. *reverse*). In this example, the marked focus has an obvious contrastive function, which the author even makes explicit by

[154] Living room is a compound noun and thus considered a unit, i.e. only the first part of the compound can carry the intonation nucleus.
[155] Small capital letters are used here to indicate the intonation nucleus in spoken language.

adding 'not that they will'. In contrast to such cases of explicit contrast, where the two opposing elements are clearly identified, "implicit contrast holds when the relevant alternative is implied and contextually salient, but not explicitly mentioned" (Callies 2009: 23). This is the case in (6), where the contrast between adults, on the one hand, and children or adolescents, on the other, is clearly evoked by the context, even though the author mentions only the former but not the latter.

(6) For the most part, as others have said on here, alcohol is a part of an ADULT lifestyle. […] [CMC T09-042 c12]

Yet not all cases of marked focus are contrastive, which is why, in their chapter on theme, focus and information processing, Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 1353ff.) distinguish between *contrastive* and what they call *emotive emphasis*. In the latter case, the marked focus simply represents a "means of giving a unit purely emotive emphasis" (1985: 1414), as in 'I AM glad!' (1985: 125). The same applies to the utterance 'Mary WILL be pleased.' (1985: 1415), in which *will* is stressed in order to express the speaker's enthusiasm and not necessarily to mark the contrast between this particular statement and utterances like 'Mary won't be pleased.'. Since in the examples above, it is the usually unstressed auxiliary verb that receives prosodic prominence, Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 1415) speak of *emphatic operators* in such cases and contend that the emotions conveyed can also be those of concern, sympathy or even petulance.

Emotive emphasis is thus defined as a type of emphasis that is not contrastive in nature. However, it is not only in this type that emotions are conveyed; they often also play a significant role in contrastive emphasis. It is therefore best to avoid the term *emotive* and follow Biber et al. (1999: 897), who distinguish between *intensification* and *contrast* as types of emphasis: "[t]he terms intensification and contrast apply to special cases of emphasis arising when elements are in focus".[156]

However, the distinction between contrastive and non-contrastive emphasis – whatever the latter may be called – is a matter of great dispute, as contrast has often been considered central to the concept of focus (e.g. by Bolinger 1961, Halliday 1967 and Lambrecht 1994). This disagreement does not only concern focus expressed by prosodic prominence (or typo-

[156] This does not avoid the problem that *intensification*, just like *emotive emphasis*, is defined as emphasis without contrast; however, the terminology is at least more neutral. While this may be regarded as a terminological subtlety of only minor importance, it is not the only one. The vast body of work on information structure and highlighting produced over the past decades has made this area of linguistics one in which the numerous subtle and less subtle differences in terminology and concepts pose a great challenge. For a good overview of the major concepts, approaches and terminological differences see Miller (2006) and Callies (2009).

graphic means in the case of written language) but also lexico-grammatical focusing devices (e.g. emphatic *do*) or syntactic means of information highlighting, i.e. so-called focus constructions (e.g. inversion or cleft sentences). In the case of prosodic and lexico-grammatical devices, the examples provided by those who argue that there also exists a purely emotive/intensifying function of marked focus tend to be very similar or even identical. Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 1415), Huddleston and Pullum (cf. 2002: 98), Leech and Svartvik (cf. 2002: 159ff.) and Swan (cf. 2004: 182ff.) all use examples of emphatic operators, e.g. 'I DO think you could be a bit more tolerant.' or 'I AM pleased you can join us.' (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 98) to support their claim that marked focus is not necessarily contrastive, without further elaborating on the topic.[157] In the case of syntactic means, similar examples are even used to argue opposing viewpoints. Miller (2006: 206; emphasis in the original), drawing on Chafe (1976), contends that "[t]he speaker or writer of a text that begins *It was in 1966 that I first went to Moscow* makes *1966* salient and implicitly contrasts it with all the other years the audience might have in mind.", while Callies (2009: 46; emphasis in the original) claims that his very similar example reproduced as (7) below "clearly do[es] not represent contrastive, but rather intensifying use[s] of the *it*-cleft".[158]

(7) They trooped off into the night, short of food and water, but incredibly a freak rainstorm burst, turning the desert into a lake. It was <u>at this stage</u> that the intensive training in navigation burst off. (Callies 2009: 46)

Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of the present thesis to offer a more detailed discussion of the opposing viewpoints and the ensuing debate, which has been going on for several decades already. In fact, much seems to speak in favour of a gradient view of contrast as proposed, among others, by Molnár (2002), and this is also the approach adopted in the present analysis. In following Callies (2009), a distinction will be drawn between contrastive and non-contrastive focus, the former being subdivided into explicit and implicit contrast. In contrast to Callies (2009), however, contrastive and non-contrastive (i.e. intensifying) focus will be considered as forming the

[157] Working with the London-Lund Corpus, Nevalainen and Rissanen (1986: 42) offer a more detailed discussion of non-contrastive uses of *do*-support in spoken conversation and suggest that it can be used, for instance, for "introducing a new discourse topic" or for "rounding off or summarizing a topic". They conclude that *do*-support often has a cohesive function on the level of discourse organisation and claim that "the emotive colouring assigned to DO by Quirk *et al.*" is "perhaps more typical of the world of fiction than of the real-life conversations of the type recorded for the Survey of English Usage" (1986: 47f.; emphasis in the original).

[158] Despite calling this example contrastive, Miller (2006) claims that highlighting can be both contrastive and non-contrastive (cf. also Weinert and Miller 1996).

two opposing poles of a continuum, i.e. the contrastive force of marked focus can be more or less prominent. According to Chafe (1976: 34), contrast necessarily involves that “a limited number of candidates is available in the addressee’s mind”, from which only one is chosen while the others are excluded. It is precisely this definition that forms not only the basis of the distinction between explicit and implicit contrast but also that of non-contrastive and contrastive focus drawn in the present thesis. As outlined above, explicit contrast holds if the alternatives are explicitly mentioned in the discourse, implicit contrast if they are only evoked but not named (cf. Callies 2009: 23). In the latter case, the contrast can be more or less salient, depending on how limited and prominent the set of possible candidates is. As Hetland (2003: 25) rightly points out, “the smaller the set of alternatives, the stronger the feeling of contrast”.[159] In ‘This suggests to me that the current pay rate is *above* the free market rate.’ [CMC T06-030.2 c1], the contrast is clearly implicit, yet as *above* and *below* form a binary pair, the set of alternatives is limited to only one possible candidate, which makes the contrast fairly strong. The intensity of the contrastive effect is thus not primarily a matter of explicitness but rather determined by the number of possible alternatives. The more there are, the weaker the purely contrastive force becomes and, in consequence, the stronger the merely intensifying, non-contrastive function grows. The gradient view of contrast adopted in the present thesis thus takes *implicit contrastive focus* and *intensifying focus* as the two opposing poles of a continuum, with many gradations possible in between. The position of marked focus on this cline is determined by the number of alternatives the item in focus has and how salient they are in the given context. In the case of binary pairs, the force is above all contrastive (just as it is in explicit contrastive focus), but as soon as more alternatives can be added, the contrastive force begins to lose its strength and is gradually replaced by an intensifying/emotive function, as in the following example taken from a comment posted below an article about the government’s reaction to the bonus scandal:

(8) […] This being the same Lord Myners [A POLITICIAN PROMISING A CRACK DOWN ON BANKS] who was either looking the other way, suffering an outbreak of ‘naievty’ or just plain incompetent as Fred aka ‘the Shred’ Goodwin [AT THE TIME CEO OF THE ROYAL BANK OF SCOTLAND] and his cronies trousered themselves ENORMOUS wads of cash at the demise of RBS. […] [CMC G06-M13 c16]

Possible alternatives for the highlighted element (i.e. *enormous*) in this case include all adjectives that can be used to premodify the noun phrase *wads of*

[159] A similar idea was already expressed by Bolinger (cf. 1961: 87).

cash to describe its size, number and/or weight. The set encompasses the antonyms of *enormous*, e.g. *tiny*, *small* (which, though theoretically possible, are contextually less likely), adjectives such as *big, large, thick, fat, heavy, considerable* and *significant,* as well as near-synonyms of *enormous*, e.g. *great, huge*, *massive, immense, numerous* and *excessive.* Given this vast range of alternatives, the premodifying adjective *enormous* can be argued to be not primarily highlighted to establish a clear contrast with any of these items (i.e. the set of possible candidates the interlocutors might have in mind) but rather to draw special attention to the premodifier used, i.e. to emphasise its lexical meaning.

It has to be stressed at this point that possible alternatives need to be considered in context; that is to say, not every word that could theoretically (or in other contexts) stand in a paradigmatic relationship with the item in focus (e.g. because it is its antonym or one of its co-hyponyms) automatically belongs to the set of possible candidates activated in a given comment. In the example above, one could thus argue that the comment writer presupposes that everybody knows that the sums of money in question are extremely large (as this is why there was a scandal in the first place) and that the emphasis is therefore not used to select one alternative, i.e. *enormous*, to the exclusions of others, e.g. *small* or *big*, but to highlight the word *enormous* as such and, by doing so, to express the author's exasperation.[160]

The degree of contrast in marked focus is thus smaller if the set of possible candidates is fairly large and does not have clear boundaries and/or if these alternatives are not (made) relevant in the given context. In the example above, it is knowledge of the textual and historical context that allows one to draw conclusions about the author's presuppositions. In other cases, less background knowledge is necessary to delineate the set of possible alternatives, as the text itself gives important clues. This is the case in (9) below, where, as in (8) above, there is a discrepancy between the theoretically possible set of alternatives and those activated in the particular context. The comment is part of a debate about asylum seekers in the UK and constitutes a personal attack on a previous commenter who claimed that 'They should be sent back at once […] None of these countries is dangerous as they say.' [CMC G08-074-75 c12].

(9) […] I'm not going to say that I *hope* you get caught in internecine violence in one of these countries without access to a British embassy; but it would be fitting. […] [CMC G08-074-75 c14]

[160] Examples like this one illustrate why the term *emotive* is sometimes used to denote non-contrastive focus (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985).

It is argued here that even though *believe* and *think* are – just like the verb *hope* emphasised in the comment – mental state verbs and thus possible alternatives, this does not automatically mean that the author intends to contrast *hope* with any of these in this particular context. Instead, the author highlights the verb *hope* in order to draw special attention to the deontic modality (in this case: volition) expressed by it. Talking about the desirability of the addressee getting caught in internecine violence constitutes of course a face-threatening act, which is mitigated only superficially by negation ('I'm not going to say') and given special prominence by emphasising the verb *hope*, which not only expresses the writer's anticipation and wish, but which is also commonly used in insults and personal attacks (i.e. in structures like 'I hope you' + undesirable/unpleasant experience). The italics are thus used to underline these aspects of the lexical item in question and, by virtue of doing so, lend greater force to the threat. At the same time, however, they are used to protect the face of the comment writer, as by emphasising the aspect of volition and simultaneously negating it ('I'm not going to say'), he/she poses as somebody who would not wish such a fate on anyone despite the fact that 'it would be fitting'.[161] In this context, a contrast between *hope* on the one hand and alternatives such as *believe*, *think* or *fear* on the other is not implied, which is also indicated by the fact that the utterance 'I'm not going to say that I *hope* you get caught, but that I *think/believe/fear* you get caught' does not make any sense under the given circumstances.[162] In comments like these, where a more or less clear set of

[161] The elliptical construction 'but it would be fitting' is ambiguous in this context, as there are two possible interpretations: (a) 'but it would be fitting for you to get caught' and (b) 'but it would be fitting (for me) to say that'. In the first case, which is the one considered to be more likely, a contrast is established between what the author hopes (or rather does not hope) on the one hand, and what he/she deems a well-deserved or at least in some respect appropriate fate for the addressee on the other. This contrast, however, is not only implicit (owing to the elliptical structure and the existence of an alternative interpretation) but also differs from the types of contrast investigated in the present thesis in that it does not just involve the item that is in focus (i.e. *hope*) but the entire proposition, contrasting 'I hope you get caught' or even 'I'm not going to say that I hope you get caught' with '(I think) it would be fitting (for you to get caught)'.

[162] Chafe (1976: 35) suggests a similar procedure: "[a]s a rule of thumb for testing whether a sentence is contrastive we can ask whether the phrase 'rather than (instead of, not)…' can be felicitously inserted after the focus", which is not the case in the present example. One could of course argue that the aspect of volition emphasised in this context is what distinguishes the verb *hope* from the other mental state verbs mentioned above and that the emotive/intensifying function can thus only be realised because this contrast exists in the interlocutors' mental lexicons. In a similar vein, one could argue that the lexical meaning of *enormous* in the previous example can only be emphasised because it is part of a semantic field that also includes items such as *small* and *big,* which stand in contrast to it. If one adopts this position, the emotive/intensifying function of information highlighting is nothing but the effect of implicit contrastive focus, and contrast is the direct and automatic, i.e. context-independent

relevant alternatives for the item in focus is either not discernible or not relevant in the given context or when the set of possible alternatives is fairly large, the focus is considered as leaning towards the non-contrastive end of the continuum, i.e. as fulfilling a predominantly intensifying function.

In order to describe in detail how authors of online comments make use of marked focus, all instances in which a single word is emphasised – be it via capitalisation (N=78) or via the other visual means presented above (N=34) – need to be examined and categorised. The approach introduced above consists of the following stages of analysis: the distinction between explicit and implicit contrast in the first step and, in the case of the latter, an estimation of the degree of contrastive force in the second step. In order to be able to describe and categorise the items more easily, the cline of contrast was subdivided into the following three major categories: *clear contrast*, *slight contrastive force* and *predominantly intensifying function*.

5.2.3.3.4 Marked focus in the corpus of comments

5.2.3.3.4.1 Explicit contrast

Only in 14 occurrences is emphasis used to mark explicit contrast, and these occurrences can be nicely subdivided according to the word class and function of the item in focus. The distribution is fairly equal, with verbs and premodifiers of noun phrases being used slightly more often (i.e. five times each) than adverbs of negation (i.e. four times). Examples (10) and (11) below illustrate the use of explicit contrastive focus with verbs.

(10) […] Context will play a role, but public opinion *should* not. […] [CMC G07-083 c10]

(11) […] But then we all know you like to belittle the Scots given any chance, so of course this couldn't be a principled Scottish decision alone...oh no, it *has* to be part of a dodgy conspiracy. […] [CMC G07-083 c14]

Interestingly, the verbs contrasted are all auxiliaries (*should*, *have* and *might*, which occurs twice) or have a very broad meaning (*do*, used here as a full verb).

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result of the semantic relationships holding between individual units in the lexicon. While this does not seem implausible from a cognitive point of view, it precludes the distinction between examples like the ones discussed above and utterances like 'I certainly HOPE he'll make it' (in reaction to a question about the likelihood of somebody winning the race), where the alternatives *believe* and *think* are clearly possible and contextually relevant and where the speaker can thus be assumed to have chosen *hope* to the exclusion of the other alternatives, the emphasis clearly signalling the contrast. In the example under discussion here, however, the alternative verbs only play a role in the mental lexicon and not in the textual and situational context of the comment.

In three cases, the item in focus is an adjective used to premodify a noun phrase (12), and in two cases, *all* is used as a determiner (see (13) and (14) below).[163]

(12) […] Releasing Magrahi on compassionate grounds was one way of avoiding his appeal with fresh evidence, eg the Maltese tailor, a key witness at the original trial, in fact the ONLY witness, being paid $3 million by the CIA and granted permanent residence in Australia. […] [CMC G07-083 c17]

(13) The BBC's invite has come about as a result of the BNP agreeing to open up its membership to British citizens of ALL ethnicities, replacing its former "All-White" membership policy. […] [CMC G09-033-37 c19]

(14) […] it needs to be in ALL football, not just referring to whoever shouts loudest in particular games […] [CMC T08-004 c10]

As the examples above illustrate, explicit contrast can, on the one hand, be realised by a one-to-one correspondence between the item in focus and its alternative: 'will play a role' vs. 'should not (play a role)' in (10), 'couldn't be' vs. 'has to be' in (11) and 'key witness' vs. 'only witness' in (12). On the other hand, the alternative can also consist of a determiner used in combination with a different noun phrase: 'all ethnicities' vs. 'All-White membership' in (13) and 'all football' vs. 'particular games' in (14). What the examples share, however, is the explicit mentioning of the alternative against which the item in focus is contrasted.

In the remaining four occurrences of explicit contrast, the highlighted element is the adverb of negation *not*. In this last group, two types can be distinguished, depending on the scope of contrast. In (15), the verb phrase negated by *not* (i.e. copular *be* and the predicative complement *synonymous*) remains the same (i.e. 'is synonymous' vs. 'is not (synonymous)') whereas in (16), only the negated auxiliary verb remains the same and a different main verb is used (i.e. 'we will not solve' vs. 'we will only make').

(15) […] Ultimately the BBC is synonymous globally with quality and impartiality and Murdoch broadcast media simply is **not**. [CMC G08-104 c4]

(16) […] If we continue to "solve" the world food shortage we will NOT solve the problem, we will only make the eventual mass starvation several orders of magnitude worse. […] [CMC T10-025 c19]

In such structures, the second occurrence of the auxiliary verb can also be omitted, as is the case in (17), where 'is not to make' is contrasted with '(is) to stimulate':

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[163] Since the function fulfilled by modifiers and determiners is similar, they were grouped together here.

(17) […] British universities seem to have forgotten the actual purpose of higher education, which is NOT to make money out of mass education but to stimulate innovation and learning. […] [CMC T10-003 c1][164]

Examples (15) and (17) have shown that ellipses are not uncommon in contrastive constructions with the negator *not*. Example (18) below takes this shortening process a step further and consists of a positive clause, in this case an exclamative, to which an isolated *not* is simply attached.

(18) […] Wow, what friends you are. NOT. [CMC T10-005 c5]

This structure is certainly more frequent in spoken interaction than in writing and comparable to what Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 812) call "unintegrated final *not*" and illustrate with the following examples:

(19) %I'm so glad those old people came to the party…not!

(20) %Obviously the government is going to tell us the whole truth…not!

As can be seen, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 812) even mark their examples with %, the symbol for "grammatical in some dialect(s) only", arguing that

> [t]his construction is found mainly in younger-generation speech (popularised and perhaps originated by characters in an American television comedy sketch) but is occasionally echoed in recent journalistic writing. As a humorous way to signal irony or insincerity, a final emphatic *not* is added following a clause, retracting the assertion made.

In terms of contrast, (18) is considered to belong to the group of explicit contrast, as the alternative, in this case the exclamative 'what friends you are', is stated before it is negated by unintegrated final *not*. In speech, the contrastive effect achieved by putting the emphasis on the adverb of negation is usually heightened by a fairly long pause before *not*, thus allowing the addressee enough time to process the assertion before it is retracted.

164 Examples (16) and (17) are best considered borderline cases, as the explicit contrast does not hold between the negator and its positive alternative (i.e. the un-negated verb phrase, e.g. *solve the problem*) but between the entire negated verb phrase (*will not solve the problem* and *is not to make money*) and a second, alternative verb phrase (*will only make* and *is to stimulate*). Thus, although an alternative for the entire verb phrase is mentioned explicitly, only the negator *not* is highlighted. This means that in addition to this explicit contrast, an implicit one is established between the negative and the implied positive, making these examples also cases of emphatic polarity (i.e. implicit contrast), which will be discussed in more detail below (see 5.2.3.3.4.2).

This pause is represented by the use of the full stop in (18) and that of '…' in (19) and (20).[165]

All in all, marked focus with explicit contrast is used in a variety of structures, indicated by both capitalisation and other visual means of emphasis. The overall occurrence of this feature, however, is far from being as high as that of clear implicit contrast.

5.2.3.3.4.2 Clear implicit contrast

Capitalisation (N=31) and the other visual means (N=20) are used for marked focus with an implicit but nevertheless clear contrastive force on 51 occasions in total, thus forming the largest group of marked focus. The focus position can be occupied by a range of different word classes, fulfilling various functions in the sentence (see Table 6 below), which makes the description and classification slightly more complicated than in the case of explicit contrast.

Table 6 Clear implicit contrast (N=51)

noun phrases	15
verbs	13
pronouns	9
adverb of negation *not*	5
miscellaneous	9
total	**51**

[165] There is a slight difference between (18) and the examples discussed by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 812), reproduced as (19) and (20) above, as in the latter two, *not* is clearly unintegrated, i.e. it would occupy a different position if integrated into the sentence (e.g. 'Obviously the government is not going to …'). In (18), however, *not* cannot be considered completely unintegrated, as the syntactic structure is different: in exclamations of the type 'What a …', the finite verb is pushed to clause-final position because the exclamative phrase is fronted, as in 'What a mistake they made!' (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 920). In (18), the verb in question happens to be the copula *be*, as opposed to a lexical verb (as the verb *make* in the mistake-example above). Since English employs post-auxiliary negation, with post-verbal negation only being used in what Horn (2001: 190; emphasis in the original) calls "relic expressions (*I know not, She loves me not*)", this entails that when negating the clause, *not* is simply added after *are*. Unlike in examples with lexical verbs, the insertion of periphrastic *do* is not required (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 799). Leaving aside for a moment the fact that what-exclamatives do not exist in negated form, this means that in (18), *not* occupies its normal position and is therefore not as clearly unintegrated as it is in (19) and (20). However, the full stop placed between *not* and the clause, together with the non-existence of negated what-exclamatives, strongly indicates that *not* is intended to stand on its own, just as in the examples provided by Huddleston and Pullum (cf. 2002: 812).

Marked focus is used most frequently (N=15) within noun phrases, where it can be placed on the head (N=4; see (21) below), on adjectives premodifying the noun (N=6; see (22) below) or on determiners and predeterminers (N=5; see (23) below).

(21) […] I know, let's just stop ***men*** having anything to do with children!!! […] [CMC G10-023-25 c12]

(22) […] Evans [CHRIS EVANS, RADIO BROADCASTER] may well bring in a large audience but one thing is for sure – as with the drivetime show, it sure as hell won't be the *same* audience. […] [CMC G09-076 c16]

(23) […] Oh i see you mean if BOTH parents bring in money , Less poverty ! […] [CMC G10-001-4 c3]

In all three examples, the alternative element is not explicitly mentioned but can be retrieved easily from the context (i.e. *women*, *different* and *one*, respectively) and can thus be considered to be present in the interlocutors' minds.

The second largest group of marked focus for implicit contrast is that of verbs (N=13). As was the case with explicit contrast, in the vast majority of instances, the verb in focus is an auxiliary or a copula; only three occurrences of lexical verbs could be found (*buy*, used twice, and *know*). Examples (24) and (25) illustrate that in the latter cases, the contextually relevant alternatives (*rent* and *believe*) can be easily recovered, even if only the sentence that contains the marked focus is considered.

(24) You don't need to *buy* two houses, do you? […] [CMC T06-030 c2]

(25) […] Like every religious person I've ever met, you claim to KNOW something you cannot possibly know. […] [CMC T07-005 c20]

In the context of the whole comment or even the newspaper article and the entire comment thread below it, there can be no doubt as to what the implied alternatives are, which is why these instances are ideal examples of implicit contrastive focus – in these cases indicated by asterisks and capitalisation.

The contrastive force is equally present in the three occurrences of the modal auxiliary *must* (N=1; see (26) below) and the semi-auxiliary *have to* (N=2; see (27) and (28) below).[166]

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[166] In (27), the focus would be on the emphasised item even without the additional emphasis marked by asterisks, i.e. *have* would be marked by prosodic prominence anyhow. However, the asterisks add even greater emphasis to the verb, thus constituting what Crystal (cf. 1969: 145f.) calls a *booster* or even *high booster.*

(26) […] This is why elected government MUST regulate the excesses of the casino culture that capitalism has become. […] [CMC G06-046 c3]

(27) […] So, all these people who have ISAs. Do they pay tax on the interest? They don't *have* to. […] [CMC G07-067 c20]

(28) […] The central banks know that there is still colossal toxic debts within the financial system, which is why there HAD to be bailouts. […] [CMC G06-046 c3]

In all three examples, the focus is on the expression of obligation (i.e. deontic modality), thus implicitly contrasting the elements in focus with other modal auxiliaries, i.e. *can* (ability), *could* (possibility) and *should* (advice), as well as *want to*, which, despite not being a modal auxiliary, can still express modality, i.e. volition in this case.[167]

The remaining verbs with marked focus belong to what Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 124), as well as Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 98), call *emphatic positives*, which "serve[s] to contrast the positive with a corresponding negative proposition that has been expressed or implicated in the preceding discourse". In such sentences, the stress is placed on the auxiliary; if the sentence in question does not contain one, a *do*-support construction is required. Such cases of marked focus thus belong to the group that Quirk et al. (1985: 124) call *emphatic operators*. Although both grammars argue that in some cases, *emphatic operators* or *emphatic positives* are not used for contrast but "may be used just to indicate the strength of one's beliefs or feelings" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 98), such a distinction cannot be drawn in any clear-cut way in the present data. Even though the comment writer in (29) below could be considered to express the same kind of enthusiasm Quirk et al. argue is expressed by the speaker in (30), who "is not [here] implying that someone has suggested that she will *not* be pleased" (1985: 1415; emphasis in the original), it is more likely that the comment writer intends to contrast the stated positive proposition with the corresponding implicated negative one that whoever is referred to by the personal pronoun *you* will *not* reap rewards.[168]

[167] For an overview of the discussion of the modal status of *want to* see Verplaetse (2003).

[168] Such interpretations are obviously context-dependent. While little to no context is usually provided in grammars, which makes the discussion of the quoted examples fairly difficult, the newspaper article to which the comment writer in (23) reacts strongly supports the assumption that this is a case of emphatic polarity expressing an implicit contrast: the article in question was written by Lily Allen, a young English singer and songwriter, complaining and warning in her headline that "file sharing will strangle new talent" (Allen 2009). The comment writer can be assumed to pick up on this metaphor with his/her marked focus construction, thus implicitly contrasting the concept of *strangling new talent* with that of *reaping rewards*. The use of marked focus has therefore not only a contrastive but also a coherence-signalling function.

(29) […] If youre good enough, you WILL reap rewards, just not overnight. […] [CMC T10-039 c19]

(30) Mary WILL be pleased. (Quirk et al. 1985: 1415)

Quirk et al. (1985: 1415) argue that while shifting the intonation nucleus is often sufficient in speech, in writing, emphasising adverbials (e.g. *indeed*, *really*, or *certainly*) are "especially helpful […] since they draw attention to the need to supply operator-stress". Such adverbials can indeed be found in the CMC corpus; yet in all the cases of operator stress, the emphasis is expressed via visual means only, as in (31), (32) and (33) below.

(31) […] Alcohol in moderation IS a normal part of life for most adults, and i'll raise my glass to that. [CMC T09-042 c6]

(32) […] I guess it IS a good analogy! [CMC G07-115-17 c15]

(33) […] The school **does** take many local children; during my pre-selection visit to the school, I was actually quite worried about this. […] [CMC G07-101 c7]

In the cases of emphatic polarity, the users have thus opted to adopt and solely rely on a strategy commonly used in spoken interaction instead of choosing the lexical means that fulfil the same purpose in written language. Operator stress is used here to support people who have made similar statements before and to distance the comment writers from the views held by their respective opponents, e.g. the commenter stating 'Hmmm. Can't say I care for the analogy, but …' [CMC G07-115-17 c3] in the thread from which (32) is taken.[169] Emphatic polarity – a strategy commonly used in oral communication – is thus mimicked in CMC to take a stance and to position oneself within the discourse community debating the topic.

Marked focus can also have an implicit contrastive force when added to pronouns (N=9). This contrast can be achieved not only in the case of personal pronouns (see (34) and (35) below) but also in that of indefinite pronouns (see (36) and (37) below).

(34) […] Though of course *you* had a grade A in English at A-level, right? [CMC G06-011-12 c13]

(35) […] What should concern us here in our cozy easy little Island is the suffering that WE are infliciting on the people of Afghanistan. […] [CMC G09-017a c10]

[169] The analogy in question is first suggested by the newspaper article itself, which reports that a "leading Conservative council is using the business model of budget airlines, Ryanair and easyJet, to inspire a radical reform of public service provision which is being seen as a blueprint for Tory government" (Booth 2009).

(36) […] There is **everything** wrong with the rich paying for preferential treatment. […] [CMC G07-115-17 c17]

(37) […] But we can't afford final salary pensions for ANYONE any longer. […] [CMC T07-055 c10]

In the first two cases, some contextual knowledge is necessary to identify the alternative against which the highlighted element is contrasted: in (34), in which a previous commenter complaining about the declining standards of education is directly addressed and attacked, *you* is contrasted not only with *the young* in general but also a particular child that this commenter belittles in his/her comment. In (35), an implicit contrast is established between *we* and *they/the others*, with the former standing for the people of Britain and the latter for an unspecified group of people bringing harm to Afghanistan. What the author makes relevant here is the role played by the Britons (i.e. they are not only the ones who help but also the ones who make people suffer, just like the unnamed others do), and via implicit contrast this can be achieved even without specifying exactly what the alternative element is (i.e. to whom the implied *they/the others* refers).

In the case of indefinite pronouns (see (36) and (37) above), the contrasted element can easily be determined, as these pronouns form sets with a limited number of candidates, i.e. *everything*, *something*, *anything*, *nothing* and *everyone*, *someone*, *anyone*, *no one* respectively (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 342).[170] However, as argued above, in the present thesis, implicit contrast is not considered the automatic consequence of placing marked focus on an item belonging to a closed set but as depending on the context and what the author makes relevant. Example (36) above constitutes a response to the question 'What's wrong with the rich paying for preferential treatment', posed by a previous commenter and inserted as direct quote into the comment [CMC G07-115-17 c17]. Marked focus is thus used to establish an implicit contrast between the implied 'nothing is wrong' of the direct quote and the author's own statement that 'everything is wrong'. In (37), the context reveals that the alternatives for *anyone* are nor just *someone* or *everyone*, i.e. the items from the closed-class set of words in our mental lexicon, but more specifically the 'frontline service delivery staff' on the one hand and the 'desk jockeys with inflated salaries' on the other, as these alternatives are mentioned in the preceding discourse.[171] By choosing to

[170] In contrast to Quirk et al. (cf. e.g. 1985: 342), Huddleston and Pullum (cf. e.g. 2002: 423) do not consider these items pronouns but compound determinatives – a distinction that is not relevant for the present purposes and can thus be ignored here.

[171] Although 'frontline service delivery staff' and 'desk jockeys with inflated salaries' are mentioned in the comment, (37) is not considered to belong to the group of explicit contrast, as the author does not establish a direct relationship between these alternatives and the contrasted

highlight *anyone*, the commenter reacts to the ongoing debate about who has and does not have a right to salary pensions, reinforcing the statement that neither the former, nor the latter, nor anybody else can be paid such pensions, thus lending more weight to his/her argument.

The last group of clear implicit contrast to be discussed here is that of highlighting the adverb of negation *not* (N=5) and by that means establishing emphatic polarity in negatives (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 98).

(38) […] But as Chris Keates [A BRITISH TRADE UNIONIST] has already proved, there are some rights that the union campaign for you *not* to have. […] [CMC G08-094 c19]

(39) […] No Wind Farms though – I'm not a Nimby, but they are NOT the answer and are just plain ugly. [CMC G09-051 c2]

(40) […] Filesharing does NOT stifle new talent, greed does. […] [CMC T10-039 c19]

As illustrated in these examples, the emphatic negative serves to establish a contrast between the negative statement made and its corresponding implied positive proposition. Marked focus is thus used to add emphasis to the point of view expressed, allowing the commenters to distance themselves from the implied positive proposition, which can either be a widely held but not explicitly expressed opinion (i.e. that windfarms are the answer to the threat posed by climate change), as in (39), or a point of view that is not only widespread but also evoked more or less directly in the thread of comments. This is the case in (38), a reader's reaction to a previous comment which, by challenging another commenter ('Join a Trades Union Ian [USER] and help fight for your rights' [CMC G08-094 c18]), indirectly claims that what unions do is to campaign/fight for the people to have certain rights. Emphatic polarity is thus used here to challenge this view as well as those who subscribe to it wholeheartedly. This interconnectedness is taken a step further in (40), in which the positive proposition is not only an implied or widespread opinion but happens to be almost identical to the title of the newspaper headline, i.e. Lily Allen's "file sharing will strangle new talent" already mentioned above (Allen 2009). Just as in (29) discussed above, where implicit contrast is used to allude to the metaphor in the headline of the newspaper article, the commenter in (40) can be considered to use marked focus to position himself/herself in relation to the views expressed

element with the help of linguistic means, as was the case in (15), (16) and (17) discussed above. Such examples further support the gradient view of contrast adopted in the present thesis, as the alternatives can be more or less easy to retrieve and might have been mentioned in the preceding discourse – even in the case of implicit contrast.

by Lily Allen, taking a clear stand via this indirect reference and establishing coherence at the same time.

As has been shown, implied contrast needs to be considered in context and is a powerful tool to position oneself with respect to the other opinions expressed and – equally important – to weave one's contribution not only into the evolving thread of comments but also into the public debate at large.

The remaining nine occurrences of marked focus with an implicit contrastive function form a miscellaneous group, including adverbs (41), conjunctions (42) and prepositions (43).

(41) […] NOW let them try to beat the party with the "Racist Stick" when Rajinder Singh stands for the BNP in the next elections […] [CMC G09-033-37 c19]

(42) […] It's a jolly difficult balance to strike, and as long as I'm working for someone else, I fear that it's nigh on impossible to be financially stable *and* healthy. [CMC G09-008 c9]

(43) […] This suggests to me that the current pay rate is *above* the free market rate. […] [CMC T06-030.2 c1]

What they share, however, is the fact that the contrasted alternatives can be recovered easily from the wider context (e.g. in (41), *now* is contrasted with the time *before* the event discussed in the newspaper article took place) or even the immediate context of the sentence (e.g. *or* and *below* in (42) and (43) respectively).

Yet implicit contrast signalled by marked focus does not necessarily mean that there is an alternative linguistic item which could replace the item in focus by occupying exactly the same slot in the sentence; in some cases, the contrast is not established between individual words but between individual propositions, as has already been shown to be the case in emphatic polarity (see above). Quirk et al. (1985: 1372) hint at such occurrences in their chapter on operator focus, arguing that "the nucleus on auxiliaries such as *may*, *ought to*, and *could* often signals a contrast between the supposed real state of affairs, and a state of affairs thought desirable or likely". They illustrate such usage with the help of one example each, reproduced as (44), (45) and (46) below (1985: 1372):

(44) The opinion polls MAY be right [*ie* 'but I suspect they're not']

(45) My purse OUGHT to be here [*ie* 'but it probably isn't']

(46) She COULD drive you there [*ie* 'but I don't think she has the time']

The following two examples from the present corpus are similar in nature, despite not being instances of operator stress:

(47) It doesn't really matter *why* the proportion of A grades is increasing ['but it matters *that* it is increasing']. The problem is that a grade which used to signify excellence now only signifies membership of the upper quartile. […] [CMC G07-005 c8] [172]

(48) […] *If* there is evidence that Mossbourne excludes difficult children ['but I suspect there isn't'], and *if* it is the case that other schools do not have the resources to support them [but I doubt it is], then perhaps the government will actually begin to […] [CMC G07-101 c7]

In (47), the subordinate interrogative *why* is highlighted to create an implicit contrast between the subordinate interrogative clause introduced by *why* and a *that*-clause functioning as the direct object of the unnegated version of the verb phrase (i.e. 'It doesn't matter why …' vs. 'It matters that …'). The contrast is thus not simply established between different subordinators and hence subordinate clauses (declarative vs. interrogative, cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 1048ff.) but has repercussions on the entire sentence by changing the verb phrase from negative to positive. Since the contrast is implicit, certain inferential steps are necessary to arrive at the implied proposition, yet especially when provided with the textual context, the readers will have no problems to work out the underlying meaning: the comment is a reaction to several previous comments discussing and bemoaning the reasons for the sharp increase in A level grades. Instead of joining this emotional discussion, the comment writer matter-of-factly suggests two solutions. The marked focus placed on the subordinator *why* thus gives rise to the implicature that instead of spending their time speculating about unknown information (*why*), the other comment writers and society at large should accept the known information (*that*), discuss possible solutions and eventually take appropriate measures. Again, the marked focus is used to weave the contribution into the thread of comments and to position the commenter with regards to the stances adopted by the other contributors.

A similar strategy is used in (48) above. The conditional construction in this example, i.e. 'If there is evidence that …', is what Quirk et al. (1985: 1091) call an *open condition*, as "it leave[s] unresolved the question of the fulfilment or nonfulfilment of the condition", i.e. the speaker implicates that he/she does not know whether or not there is such evidence (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 741, who call this the *don't know implicature*). To change the construction into what Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 1091) call a *hypothetical*

[172] Following Quirk et al. (1985), the implied propositions have been added to the comments in square brackets.

condition and to what Huddleston and Pullum (cf. 2002: 748ff.) refer as *remote conditional*, i.e. in order to express the speaker's belief that the condition is unlikely or that it is not fulfilled, the verbs would have to be backshifted (i.e. 'If there was evidence that …') or even replaced by the past subjunctive form (i.e. 'If there were evidence that …'). While the former is more informal (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 1094 and Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 751), both give rise to the implicature 'but presumably there isn't'.[173] Choice of tense and mood in conditionals can thus be used to suggest different degrees of likelihood and to communicate the speaker's stance: according to the *OED*, "the subjunctive after *if* implies that the speaker guards himself from endorsing the truth or realization of the statement; it is consistent with his doubt of it".[174]

The comment writer in (48), however, opts for a different strategy to elicit a similar implicature: he/she uses the structure of an open condition to react to previous comments in which people have claimed or speculated that the statements in the conditional clauses are true (e.g. that the school Mossbourne does not accept so-called difficult children), which would normally give rise to the so-called *don't know implicature*; however, he/she chooses to highlight the two instances of *if* in the open conditions by putting them in italics, which can be considered to serve as a cautionary reminder to the readers that such statements are just presumptions and not confirmed facts – a strategy that is clearly taken over from spoken communication, where vocal emphasis is sometimes used to achieve a similar effect. Especially when viewed in the context of the whole contribution, in which the commenter provides a positive assessment of the school based on personal experience, the marked focus placed on *if* not only establishes a contrast between conditional constructions (*If P then Q*) on the one hand and simple propositions (*P*) on the other but also between the presumptions voiced by previous comment writers and the comment writer's doubt of their validity. Thus, in spite of using an open conditional construction, the comment writer still manages to communicate his/her doubt of the truth of the protasis with the help of implicit contrast. The effect achieved is similar to that of using a hypothetical/remote construction: in both cases, the truth of the protasis is challenged. In addition to this challenge, however, (48) also contains a cautionary meta-comment that the discussion should not be based on assumptions presented as facts, thus contributing to the coherence of the

[173] For a more detailed discussion of meaning and implicature in conditionals see Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 739ff.).
[174] "if, conj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 19 February 2017.

comment thread and clearly positioning the comment in the overall discourse.

As these examples have illustrated, contrastive focus is a more complex phenomenon than just a matter of replacing one lexical item with another. Marked focus can occupy a variety of positions within a sentence and often fulfils not only a contrastive function but also a coherence-creating one. Vocal and – as in the present data – visual emphasis has been shown to be a powerful tool to communicate more than is stated explicitly by means of establishing an implicit contrast between individual components of a sentence and possible alternatives or even between entire propositions. It is thus no wonder that this tool is also mimicked in writing, especially in such cases as (47) and (48), where the italics give rise to implicatures that could not have been generated as easily with the help of purely verbal means.

5.2.3.3.4.3 Predominantly intensifying function

In 28 occurrences of marked focus, the aim is not to establish an explicit or implicit contrast but simply to add special emphasis to a particular component of the sentence in question. This emotive/intensifying function is used most frequently with adjectives (N=9), followed by adverbs (N=7) and verbs (N=4). The remaining occurrences consist of nouns (N=3), conjunctions (N=2), determiners (N=2) and interjections (N=1). That such usage is not intended to be contrastive is illustrated by (49) and (50), where the focus is placed on premodifying adjectives.

(49) a HUUUUGE climate camp.
darn you, you greenies, what are you up to now? [CMC G06-086 c17]

(50) Again, what an incredibly poor, sad, depressing, stupid and plain WRONG idea.... for so many reasons, it doesn't even need to be explained why.. […] [CMC G07-115-17 c19]

While, in both cases, one could make a list of semantically related adjectives (e.g. *tiny*, *small*, *big* in the former and *good, excellent, valuable, original*, *fresh* in the latter), the intention behind capitalising the adjectives does not seem to be to activate these alternatives in the interlocutors' minds but to intensify the lexical meaning of the item in question (see 5.2.3.3.3.2 above). In (49), this effect is further strengthened by reduplicating the letter *u* and thus imitating a drawn-out pronunciation (see 5.2.5.2 below) and in (50) by the preceding enumeration of negative attributes (*poor*, *sad*, *depressing* and *stupid*), which are then summarised by the capitalised, more general attributive adjective *wrong*. Visual means of emphasis can also be used in one-word sentences, as exemplified by the following two comments:

(51) the divine bette davis [AN AMERICAN ACTRESS] without a cigarette would be like revolting katie price [A TV PERSONALITY] without publicity. UNTHINKABLE! [CMC G11-018 c3]

(52) […] **this will merely create a stigma, recorded for posterity, that can follow the child around well into adulthood!** *Brilliant*. […] [CMC G10-086 c11]

In (51), emphasis is added to the punchline of the jocular comparison of two celebrities, presented as a verbless exclamatory statement. In (52), the emphasis is placed on the sarcastic evaluation of the effects that the measures proposed in the newspaper article are likely to have, thus stressing – via the use of italics – that these effects are anything but *brilliant*.[175]

In addition to this intensifying function, highlighting adjectives can also have an intertextual and thus coherence-creating function when the adjective in question has already occurred in the previous discourse (N=3). In (53) below, for instance, the comment writer picks up the adjective *thick* used by the comment writer he/she is directly addressing in his/her post. In order to make clear that this derogatory term is the one used by the previous commenter, the word is first placed between single quotation marks. These are frequently used in the corpus not only to indicate direct quotes but also when the authors wish to distance themselves from either the meaning expressed by the terms in question or the people who choose to phrase it in this particular way.[176] The comment writer then strongly attacks the positive face of the previous contributor by using the same derogatory adjective to describe not the neighbours' daughter but the previous commenter himself/herself. This second use of *thick*, this time italicised, as the predicative complement of 'makes your bleating on' not only intensifies the face threat but also highlights the link between this use of the term and the previous ones, thus showing that the commenter is being beaten with his/her own weapon.

(53) […] Add to the typo your complete lack of knowledge of punctuation. Somewhat makes your bleating on about your neighbours' daughter being 'thick' kind of... well, *thick*, don't you think? […] [CMC G06-011-12 c13]

Interestingly, the attack is further intensified by the use of '…' and the discourse marker *well*, both of which serve to represent hesitation and thus

[175] Examples (51) and (52) are cases of one-word sentences; discussing them as instances of marked focus is, admittedly, stretching the concept slightly. However, the visual emphasis achieved is comparable to that established by marked focus, which is why these examples were not excluded from the analysis.

[176] This highly intriguing strategy of using so-called *scare quotes* will be discussed in more detail below (see 6.3.2.1.1).

slightly postpone the delivery of the face threat. Just like pauses, which are often placed before punchlines in jokes to build up tension and add emphasis, these strategies are used here to add further force to the attack, i.e. the *punch*line of the face-threatening act, in the most literal sense of the term.[177]

In (54) below, as well as (49) above, reproduced here as (55) for ease of reference, the capitalised word also constitutes an intertextual reference: the newspaper headline in the comment thread of (48) reads “BBC launches hunt for ‘older female newsreader’ after ageism row” (Foster 2009), and in the newspaper article of (55), activists are described as “planning to construct a huge campsite” (Lewis 2009).

(54) This search itsself is AGEIST! [CMC T11-067 c3]

(55) a HUUUUGE climate camp.
darn you, you greenies, what are you up to now? [CMC G06-086 c17]

Capitalisation in these examples thus fulfils several functions at the same time: it establishes coherence by indicating that the expression highlighted has been taken over from the previous discourse (intertextual function). In addition, it draws special attention to the underlying concepts of the adjectives *ageist* and *huge* and – especially in combination with the exclamation mark in (54) and the reduplication of the letter *u* in (55) – expresses the author’s irritation and ridicule respectively. In (55), which is quoted here in its entirety, the commenter goes even a step further than simply establishing an intertextual link and echoes the newspaper article in the elliptical construction used to open the comment, thus expressing his/her emotional detachment from the group of people/events talked about. This first line is not a direct quote from the article but rather a pseudo-quote, and the emphasis placed on the premodifying adjective, combined with the prosodic spelling, adds a ridiculing but not blatantly offensive tone, which is also present in the second line of the comment.[178] As in the other non-contrastive uses of marked focus, the visual emphasis directs the reader’s attention to the wording as well as the underlying concept and, by virtue of doing so, adds further layers of meaning.

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[177] See 5.2.8.1 below for a discussion of hesitation phenomena and the representation of paralinguistic features in CMC.

[178] Pseudo-quotes are all instances in which somebody else’s voice is used to express an idea. They differ from quotes in that the words used are not necessarily those used by a particular person or group of people but words that are usually attributed to them and thus put into their mouths. Such quotes are sometimes also called *scare quotes* (see 6.3.2.1.1 below). Example (55) is considered a pseudo-quote since the comment writer uses a construction that is different from, though semantically equivalent with, the one used by the author of the newspaper article.

The intensifying function as opposed to a contrastive one is also apparent in those cases in which the item in focus is an adverb (N=7), as in (56) to (58):

(56) Thank goodness - getting rid of him is LONG overdue! [CMC G09-076 c14]

(57) […] You are SOO dim. […] [CMC T06-018.1 c18]

(58) […] but don't come looking for support or sympathy from other fans when some Italian, Portuguese or Spanish player drops like a sack of spuds in the box and the resultant penalty gets you kicked out of the Champions League or consigns you to 4th place in the league - AGAIN! […] [CMC T08-004 c12]

In each of these examples, capitalisation is not meant to establish a contrast between the item in focus and an alternative adverb but simply to intensify it. The commenters' wish to add special emphasis is also apparent in the use of exclamation marks in (56) and (58) and the reduplication of the letter *o* in (57). In many cases, the comment writers use this strategy to further underline their exasperation, as in the reproof in (59):

(59) Oh for goodness sake, Don't people **still** not know the difference between tax avoidance and tax evasion? [CMC G07-067 c8]

This usage is also to be found with verbs and nouns, as in (60) and (61), which aptly illustrate that in such cases, the register is often fairly informal.

(60) […] That so STINKS of art "we" approve of ... […] [CMC G06-060 c10]

(61) […] Oh well done , Must have taken a bloody AGE to work that one out ! […] [CMC G10-001-04 c3]

While no contrast is implied in these examples, the intensifying function is coupled with a slight contrastive force in the following category of marked focus.

5.2.3.3.4.4 Slight contrastive force

The reason for adding an additional category (N=7) lying between marked focus indicating a clear implicit contrast on the one hand (see 5.2.3.3.4.2 above) and marked focus having a predominantly intensifying function on the other (see 5.2.3.3.4.3 above) is best illustrated with the help of (62). In this comment, the user reacts to a newspaper article ending in the words "[t]hat is not Brown's style. He condemns himself to an agonised deviousness whose sole virtue is honesty" (Jenkins 2009).

(62) Gordon Brown HONEST!!! Come off it. The only reason he hasn't lied about his and his Government's involvement in releasing Megrahi is because he hasn't said anything at all. […] [CMC G07-083 c11]

By capitalising *honest* in an elliptical exclamation with three exclamation marks, the user not only establishes a strong intertextual relationship between the newspaper article ending in the word *honesty* and the comment but also draws special attention to this particular word in order to express his/her utter disbelief and irritation. The implicit reproach 'How can you describe him as honest' is emphasised further by the expression 'come off it', commonly used in spoken language "for telling someone that you do not believe them or that what they are saying is stupid".[179] Yet in addition to this intensifying/emotive function, emphasising the word *honest* and thus challenging the author's evaluation also evokes the antonym *dishonest*, especially in combination with the subsequent use of the verb *to lie* belonging to the same semantic field.

A comparison with (54) above, reproduced as (63) below for ease of reference, should make the reason for distinguishing between these two uses clear. In both cases, the word capitalised is taken from the newspaper article, and it is used in an exclamation to underline the commenter's disbelief and irritation. However, while the emphasis placed on *honest* in combination with the verb *to lie* also has a contrastive force, stressing the word *ageist* does not evoke a clear contrasting attribute but rather emphasises its lexical content and thus intensifies the general concept of unfairness.

(63) This search itsself is AGEIST! [CMC T11-067 c3]

The combination of intensification and slight contrastive force is also evident in the last example to be discussed here (64). In this comment from a thread on the topic of euthanasia, the word *never* spelled in capital letters strongly emphasises the commentator's unwillingness to experience a certain situation again (i.e. the state of being completely helpless and reliant on the care of others caused by a severe medical condition).

(64) […] I will NEVER go through that again, and I have made provisions to assure that it never happens again. […] [CMC T11-032 c3]

Had the comment writer used capitalised *not* instead of *never*, he/she would have simply created a clear implicit contrast by establishing what Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 98) call emphatic polarity in negatives (see 5.2.3.3.4.2 above). The use of capitalised *never*, however, serves not so much to contrast it with other quantifying adverbs (e.g. *always*, *frequently*, *usually*, *often*, *sometimes*, *occasionally*, *seldom*, *rarely*) but rather to inten-

[179] According to the definition provided by the *Macmillan Dictionary Online* (http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/come-off#come-off__20; last accessed February 9, 2017).

sify the negation and present the user's decision as resolute and irreversible. The utterance could thus be rephrased as 'I will definitely/absolutely not go through that again' rather than 'On no occasion/at no time will I go through that again'. The set of quantifying adverbs being fairly small, the contrastive force is not fully absent; however, it is far from being as strong as in the case of implicit contrast created by *not*.

The above has shown that shifting the focus by means of visual emphasis can serve various functions. In addition to creating intertextuality and coherence, marked focus can strengthen the utterance by drawing the reader's attention to a particular word, thus emphasising its lexical content. On the other hand, it can also express an explicit or implicit contrast or even represent a combination of intensification and implicit contrast. Yet not all comments in which a single word is emphasised are prototypical examples of marked focus. To make the discussion of capitalisation and other visual means of emphasis complete, one final category needs to be addressed: highlighting individual words for stylistic effect.

5.2.3.3.5 Capitalisation as a stylistic device

While multiple occurrences of capitalisation for added emphasis are fairly rare, there are two comments in the present corpus where capitalisation is employed consistently as a stylistic device structuring the text. In these cases, capitalisation is still used to draw the reader's attention to individual lexical items, yet its primary function is not to shift the focus. In the first comment, the user imitates newspaper style by presenting his/her comment as short news items preceded by a dateline specifying the place where the event reported occurred, using capital letters for nearly all place names:

(65) Meanwhile in PARIS FRANCE Prez Sarkozy warns all bankers of impending legislation of higher taxes on short-term bonuses. […]
TOKYO Japanese PM elect advocating new EU type economic zone for ASIA after the failure of western capitalism and the "catastrophic" Iraq war […] [CMC G06-M13 c2]

Thus capitalisation not only serves to highlight the place names but also to emulate the generic characteristics of news reporting (i.e. the dateline); hence, it is a stylistic feature signalling intertextuality. In the second case, the discourse markers 'YES' and 'NO' are capitalised consistently as the commenter relates a troublesome experience in a dialogic fashion: he/she both repeats – or rather mimics – questions asked by the new headmaster about his/her son's absence from school, including his/her answers. The commenter also adds questions readers might have (e.g. 'Did any of these unnecessary bullying tactics exist …') and immediately answers them (e.g. 'NO'), as illustrated by the following excerpt:

(66) […] Is our paperwork from new doctors at £30 return taxi ride away up to date - YES. Do we send letters of absence explaining why kid is off - YES. Do we act on advice of GP/Hospital - YES. […] Did any of these unnecessary bullying tactics exist before his [I.E. THE HEADMASTER'S] employment - NO. […] Does county agree with his behaviour - over the phone NO, on paper YES. […] [CMC G08-094 c8]

As these examples illustrate, capitalisation may not only highlight words that would receive vocal emphasis in spoken discourse, it can also be employed as a stylistic device with a text-structuring function. The most interesting finding, however, is that in the present corpus, capitalisation is hardly ever used for shouting or expressing anger. Instead, it is a strategic means to guide the reader's attention, establish coherence and intertextuality and add layers of meaning. All in all, it occurs rather sparingly, as overusing it would only limit its expressive force. Even if many popular descriptions of CMC paint a different picture, the present fine-grained analysis has clearly demonstrated that non-standard capitalisation, together with the other visual means of emphasis available, fulfils important functions that are usually performed by means of vocal emphasis in spoken discourse. In the written corpus, in contrast, such usage is completely absent, i.e. marked focus (or emphasis in general) is only signalled via syntactic means. The claim that CMC constitutes a blend of speech and writing thus has some justification when it comes to marking emphasis and guiding the reader's attention.

5.2.4 Punctuation

Just like in the case of capitalisation, the deviations from standard punctuation in CMC can be roughly divided into two more or less opposing groups. On the one hand, researchers comment on the apparent lack of punctuation marks (cf. e.g. Thurlow 2001) and on the other, they report high frequencies of multiple punctuation (cf. e.g. Landert and Jucker 2011 and Herring 2012). Again, two opposing forces seem to be at work: time constraints and considerations of formality on the one hand and the desire to make one's message more expressive on the other.

5.2.4.1 Non-standard punctuation and formality

As is the case with capitalisation, the majority of studies into CMC do not analyse punctuation in any great detail but merely mention in passing that punctuation marks are often absent in positions in which they would normally be required in other types of discourse (cf. e.g. Thurlow 2001: 288) or that the rules of punctuation are not always followed as strictly as in other settings, i.e. commas may be omitted or dashes may be used instead of semicolons (cf. e.g. Maynor 1994 as well as Baron and Ling 2011).[180] Lewin and Donner (2002) also comment on the fact that owing to the syntactic particularity of what they call *run-on sentences*, full stops are often lacking as well. Even if, at first glance, such non-observance of punctuation rules may seem quite startling, fairly similar phenomena are likely to be found in non-CMC texts that are similar with respect to formality as well as planning and revision. It is therefore argued that the apparent non-observance of punctuation rules is not a direct result of the communication being produced to be transmitted via computers but rather stems from the fact that in many cases, those texts are generated spontaneously, sent without having gone through lengthy revision and editing processes and rank rather low on the formality scale. In a hand-written note or letter, these missing punctuation marks would probably even pass unnoticed; only when such a text is seen in typed form does it strike the readers as unusual, since they still tend to be used to typed texts being carefully revised and edited and – in most cases – more formal in style. The rather lax handling of punctuation reported in previous CMC research thus appears to be directly linked to the low level of formality of the communicative situation and the fact that revision and editing processes are largely absent – either as a result of time constraints or because they are not considered particularly important.

5.2.4.2 Non-standard punctuation as an expressive strategy

Clearly, punctuation is not fully absent in CMC. Since punctuation marks fulfil the important function of structuring thoughts and breaking down a text into manageable chunks, thus making it easier to process the text as a whole, completely omitting them would be counterproductive in most cases.[181] Especially in texts with a fairly loose structure, punctuation marks are important signals guiding the reader. However, if it is borne in mind that the new media formats have created many novel writing occasions, many of

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[180] A welcome exception is Squires (2012), who examines the use of the apostrophe as a sociolinguistic variable in IM and discovers gender-related differences. In the present analysis, the use of the apostrophe is discussed as a feature of spelling rather than punctuation (see 5.2.5 below).

[181] Obviously, a writer's goal is not always to make the text easy to process. In interior monologues or streams of consciousness, for instance, the absence of punctuation serves an important stylistic function. However, this effect is usually not what writers want to achieve in non-fictional texts.

which have replaced a spoken conversation and not a written exchange (cf. Androutsopoulos 2011), this already hints at why punctuation marks have been found to be used in unusual ways in CMC environments. A good example is the widespread use of what is sometimes called *trailing dots*, i.e. '…', in all kinds of CMC (cf. e.g. Maynor 1994 and Baron 2000: 193). While the use of ellipsis ('…') to indicate omission is not uncommon in formal writing, its use in CMC is extended to indicate hesitation and pauses, just as in the representation of spoken interaction in fictional texts. In addition, it can be used to glue text fragments together or to indicate at the end of a text or text fragment that the discussion is not over yet (cf. e.g. Maynor 1994: 50 and Shortis 2007: 5).

In addition to the widespread use of trailing dots, numerous studies have reported the frequent use of multiple punctuation marks, such as '!?!?!?' (cf. e.g. Crystal 2001, Thurlow 2001, Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan 2005, Carter and McCarthy 2006, Landert and Jucker 2011 and Herring 2012). According to Squires (2010), this is one of the features enregistered as Internet language, i.e. such deviations from regular punctuation are perceived to be emblematic of computer-mediated discourse and give it its distinctive character.[182] Repeated punctuation is usually regarded as a means of expressing the writer's mood and emotions (cf. e.g. Carter and McCarthy 2006 and Herring 2012) and a strategy to add emphasis (cf. e.g. Landert and Jucker 2011).

5.2.4.3 Non-standard punctuation and the spoken-written continuum

Unfortunately, the specific functions fulfilled by individual punctuation marks or combinations of punctuation marks in CMC contexts have not yet been analysed systematically. In most cases, the discussion consists merely in enumerating some deviations from the traditional rules without analysing the full inventory or clearly distinguishing between individual functions. In the case of trailing dots, however, such an approach can yield valuable insights and deserves integration into the analysis of the linguistic particularities of CMD. Those studies that have looked more deeply into the topic of punctuation tend to establish a link between its use in CMC and the question of where to position CMC on the scale of literacy and orality. Werry (1996), for instance, claims that punctuation can be employed to compensate for the lack of paralinguistic cues and to give the text a spoken-like feeling, for example by using full stops and hyphens to indicate pauses. A similar point is made by Maynor (1994: 50):

[182] Squires (2010) employs the concept of *enregisterment* as introduced by Agha (2003: 231), who defines it as "processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms".

> Punctuation also serves to add conversational touches to e-style: exclamation points are used more often in e-mail than in other kinds of writing; trailing dots signal that more is coming or at least that the topic is still open; dashes represent the less clearly defined sentence-endings that are often the norm in conversation; parentheses enclose conversational asides. […] Traditional writing, of course, has methods for indicating tone. E-style, however, is more direct – closer to the methods used in speech.

This illustrates nicely that apparently minor formal features such as punctuation marks are inextricably linked to wider questions of style and tone and thus also to the overarching concept of orality and literacy. Comparing the use of punctuation in the comments to that in the letters thus promises valuable insights.

5.2.4.4 The use of punctuation in the present corpora

As outlined above, deviations from standard punctuation have become emblematic of CMC, even if detailed analyses are still lacking. This lack of research is little surprising considering that "[p]unctuation is a completely underresearched feature in register studies" in general (Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016: 163).[183] It is safe to say that no other linguistic feature occurring with a similar frequency in the standard corpora has received so little attention.[184] However, most people would probably agree that even though punctuation is an obligatory feature if language is represented in written form (i.e. it usually cannot be omitted if a text is to remain understandable), its use varies according to the situational context in which the text occurs and the function it fulfils. On the basis of this assumption, Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016: 145) sets out to test whether it is "possible to make an informed guess about (or even recognise) the register of a text based solely on the punctuation marks occurring in that text". For this purpose, she uses three texts from highly conventionalised registers, which she presents as extracts in which everything apart from the punctuation marks and paragraph breaks was deleted. The first two texts, constituting excerpts from a spoken conversation and a drama (i.e. scripted speech), respectively, contain numerous colons as well as several question and exclamation marks, which makes them easily identifiable as dialogues. The third text, on the

[183] Sanchez-Stockhammer (cf. 2016: 142) bases her use of the term *register* on Biber and Conrad (2009: 6), who define it as "a variety associated with a particular situation of use". Registers exist on different levels of abstraction, i.e. some registers, such as academic writing, "can be subdivided into sub-registers such as social science, multi-disciplinary science and humanities" (Schubert 2016: 4). For a brief overview of register research and the relationship between *register* and *genre* see Schubert (2016).

[184] Nevertheless, some monographs on punctuation have been published, e.g. Meyer (1987), Nunberg (1990) and Patt (2013).

other hand, does not contain a single exclamation or question mark but makes use of a considerable number of colons and semicolons as well as round brackets instead. This clearly monologic text is an excerpt from a scientific research article.

Even if the differences between the texts are rather striking, this kind of exercise is reminiscent of Dimter's (1981) attempts to demonstrate that texts can be assigned to genre categories solely on the basis of grammatical and structural features (see 3.1.4.3.1 above). Yet while educated guesses are indeed possible and while some genres or registers can be ruled out fairly easily, the only reasonably founded conclusion to be drawn about the registers of the three texts is whether they are monologic or dialogic.[185] Nevertheless, this does not rule out the possibility that punctuation, in combination with other linguistic features, can be used to group similar texts into types, and certain genres may well be characterised by a particular use of punctuation marks.[186] In an attempt to demonstrate that "punctuation is indicative of register", Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016: 139) thus conducts a case study, comparing the use of punctuation marks in comics and academic texts. Even though not all of her expectations about the differences between the two types of texts are met, she comes to the conclusion that "it makes sense to introduce punctuation as an additional category in Biber's register model" (2016: 139).[187] While a detailed discussion of this study is beyond the scope of the present thesis, its findings offer a backdrop against which to interpret those of the present analysis. Thus, the discussion of the use of punctuation in the CMC corpus starts by looking at overall frequencies, contrasting the corpus of comments with that of letters.

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[185] Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016: 147) does not speak of monologic and dialogic texts, but claims that what emerges from her first two texts is the "oral dimension". However, a spoken monologue (e.g. a lecture or spoken narrative) would not contain as many colons (separating the names of the interlocutors from their utterances) if written down and is highly unlikely to be characterised by as many question and exclamation marks, despite being oral. Speaking of the use of punctuation in oral texts is of course problematic, as Sanchez-Stockhammer (cf. 2016: 140f.) acknowledges by reflecting on the relationship between punctuation and spoken language. Even though some uses may be prosodically motivated, e.g. certain commas marking the position in a sentence where speakers would normally pause when reading it out loud, Meyer (1987: 69) comes to the conclusion that "the relationship between punctuation and prosody is weak and unsystematic" (see also Quirk et al. 1985: 1606ff.). For an in-depth discussion see Patt (2013).

[186] A similar claim is made by Patt (2013: 126), who argues that punctuation "may also hint at […] the field of discourse a text is situated in".

[187] For a brief discussion of Biber's multidimension approach, in which he uses sets of lexico-grammatical features to compare groups of texts and distinguish individual types see 3.1.4.1 above.

5.2.4.4.1 Frequencies

The most striking differences between comics and academic texts identified by Sanchez-Stockhammer's (2016) case study are, on the one hand, the (almost) complete absence of (a) exclamation marks, (b) question marks, (c) suspension dots (i.e. …) and (d) apostrophes in academic texts and, on the other, the complete absence of (a) semicolons, (b) single quotation marks and (c) round brackets in comics. These findings are illustrated in Table 7 below, where shaded cells "indicate intra-group similarity and inter-group dissimilarity between comics and academic texts" (2016: 145).[188]

Table 7 Punctuation marks in comics and academic texts normalised per 1,000 words (Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016: 145)

	Comics			Academic texts		
	Batman	Super-man	Uncle Scrooge	Biber et al.	Juhasz et al.	Schnei-der
Full stops	78	50	4	53	69	24
Question marks	20	22	14	0	1	0
Exclamation marks	53	36	134	0	0	0
Commas	60	62	37	62	72	71
Semicolons	0	0	0	4	1	2
Colons	0	1	0	1	0	11
Dashes	16	3	0	1	0	1
Slashes	0	0	0	4	0	0
Suspension dots	40	43	18	0	0	1
Single quotation marks (pairs)	0	0	0	3	0	9
Double quotation marks (pairs)	2	5	1	0	0	1
Round brackets (pairs)	0	0	0	18	41	12
Square brackets (pairs)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Apostrophes	58	43	71	1	4	5

Since the corpora are fairly small and the number of texts is very limited, these results need to be interpreted with caution.[189] Moreover, corpora showing similarities from such a quantitative perspective may still differ in

[188] The academic texts analysed are excerpts from Biber et al. (1994), Juhasz et al. (2003) and Schneider (2003).
[189] The corpus of comics consists of 2,386 words while that of academic texts counts 3,032 words (cf. Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016: 154f.). The statistical tests performed revealed that the results are not significant "due to the small number of texts considered" (2016: 163).

terms of the function fulfilled by the punctuation mark in question. As Sanchez-Stockhammer (cf. 2016: 160) points out, the corpora hardly differ in the number of commas used, which is against her expectation that comics – in contrast to academic texts – contain only few commas "because the sentences in comics are presumably relatively short due to spatial restrictions" (2016: 155). A closer look at her data revealed, however, that the commas in comics fulfil very specific functions not present in academic texts, such as separating sentence-initial interjections or proper nouns with a vocative function from the remainder of the sentence (cf. 2016: 160).

While the present corpora are substantially larger than those used in this comparison of comics and academic texts, they exist in digital form, which means that the punctuation marks can be counted easily via lexical searches. However, such an automated analysis has its limitations. In the present case, for instance, the automatic count function in Maxqda identified 2,036 round brackets (opening and closing combined) in the corpus of letters and 2,681 in that of comments. Unfortunately, these findings are meaningless since the majority of brackets found in the letters contain contextualisation cues added by the editor (see 6.3.1.2 below), and a great number of those found in the corpus of comments are generated automatically, indicating the number of recommendations a particular comment has received (see 4.3.8 above). For a functional analysis, these occurrences would have to be excluded or at least assigned a special sub-category manually, which would be far too time-consuming. For this reason, the present analysis focuses only on those punctuation marks where the results of the automated searches are manageable in size (i.e. below 500), the additional manual analysis promising to reveal the underlying reasons for any differences or similarities discovered. Thus, full stops, commas, colons and round brackets are not discussed in any detail. Single quotation marks could not be differentiated from the formally identical apostrophes, which is why these two categories are excluded here as well.[190] Automated counts of quotation marks are equally problematic. According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1753), the two most important functions of quotation marks are to mark

[190] Even if the distinction was made manually and apostrophes were included in the analysis, the fact that in CMC, apostrophes are often omitted in cases where they are required or erroneously used in places where they are not would skew the results of any analysis focusing only on the apostrophes found. While Sanchez-Stockhammer (cf. 2016: 158) accounts for the stark difference in the use of apostrophes in her data (see Table 7 above) by arguing that in the comics, apostrophes are used as markers of informality (contractions, omissions and shortenings), simply counting the apostrophes used in the present corpora would not allow such a conclusion. It is thus considered far more enlightening to investigate not apostrophes in general but to focus on the deviations from standard usage mentioned above, which will be discussed as orthographic mistakes and typing errors in 5.2.5.6 below.

direct speech or quotations from written texts. However, American and British English differ in whether single or double quotation marks are preferred for this purpose, and “British manuals tend to favour single marks” (2002: 1753), thus adding to the problem regarding the differentiation between quotation mark and apostrophe mentioned above. Moreover, quotations in comments on the *Guardian* website are usually generated with the help of the quote function, which does not require quotation marks to identify the quoted text as a quote (see 4.3.7 above). For these reasons, the automated counts of double quotation marks reveal very little about the use of quotations in the two genres, which is why these figures will not be discussed any further here.[191] For the sake of completeness, Table 8 below summarises the results of the automated searches for those punctuation marks that are excluded from the discussion.[192]

Table 8 Punctuation marks in the comments and letters (automated counts)

	Absolute frequencies	
	comments	**letters**
Full stops	4,774	5,318
Commas	7,335	4,256
Colons	1,582	252
Single quotation marks and apostrophes	1,807	902
Double quotation marks	650	888
Round brackets (opening and closing combined)	2,681	2,036

Even if the present analysis is limited in that it does not consider all punctuation marks in detail, the discussion of the remaining ones is all the more fruitful as it includes functional aspects. In this round of analysis, the results of the automated searches were only taken as a starting point, and each entry in the hit list was checked manually. In the case of iterated question and/or exclamation marks, only the first mark was considered, as what matters at the present stage is the number of utterances ending in such

[191] However, since quoting others is a very interesting feature of reader response, the structure and function of quotes will be discussed in detail below (see 6.3.2 and 6.4.1.2).

[192] The great number of colons and commas in the comments can be attributed to the fact that they also appear in the automatically generated header, which includes a timestamp (in which a comma and a colon are used, see 4.3.8 above) and the poster’s username (which, on the *Times* website, has the structure ‘USERNAME wrote:’). Unfortunately, it was not possible to limit the automated search to the text generated by the poster.

marks, rather than the total number of marks used.[193] In a similar vein, all semicolons used in emoticons were excluded, as were slashes occurring in hyperlinks and suspension dots or any other punctuation mark that appeared in the headline of a newspaper article referred to (e.g. the headline 'In praise of…') instead of the reader contribution itself. The quantitative results of this manual round of coding are portrayed in Table 9 below.[194]

Table 9 Punctuation marks in the comments and letters (manual coding)

	Absolute frequencies		Normalised frequencies (per 10,000 words)	
	comments	**letters**	**comments**	**letters**
Question marks	484	425	55.6	33.7
Exclamation marks	214	23	24.6	1.8
Semicolons	89	132	10.2	10.5
Dashes	378	417	43.4	33.1
Slashes	90	21	10.3	1.7
Suspension dots	174	30	20.0	2.4
Square brackets (pairs)	11	12	1.3	1.0

While the corpora are fairly alike in the use of semicolons and square brackets, stark differences emerged in the use of exclamation and question marks, suspension dots and slashes, which is why these latter categories will be discussed in greater detail in individual chapters below. The categories with great similarities or only minor differences will be commented on briefly in the following, and the discussion will begin with those with the greatest similarities.

Square brackets are extremely rare in both corpora. All of the twelve occurrences in the letters are within direct quotes, where they are used to add information for clarity reasons (67). In the comments, their function is slightly more varied: five square brackets appear in quotes, but they may also function as standard parentheses (N=4) or to add a footnote (N=2). In the two latter cases, they provide additional, less essential information (68) or a comment on the main text (69) – functions that are normally fulfilled by round brackets, as (67) illustrates (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1748).

[193] However, the use of iterated punctuation marks will be discussed in a separate section (see 5.2.4.4.7 below).

[194] For better readability, the frequencies were normalised per 10,000 words rather than per 1,000 words as in Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016).

(67) Jackie Ashley anticipates an election result that “may destroy the [Labour] party as a major player for 10 or 20 years – perhaps for ever” (Comment, September 7). But just imagine (ludicrous, I know) if Labour won the 2010 election. […] [NEWS G09-015a]

(68) Perhaps they can find someone to represent their petition [always assuming they could afford the fees]. [CMC T09-020 c6]

(69) I have been listening to Wogan On & Off for 40yrs [shock] and he shall be certainly missed in this household. […] [CMC G09-076 c13][195]

The similarities between the corpora in the use of semicolons may be quite surprising, as this punctuation mark is usually associated with formal registers (cf. e.g. Meyer 1987: 24 and Patt 2013: 103). In the comic texts analysed by Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016: 160), they were not found at all, “presumably due to the fact that most of their uses require relatively long sentences”. However, in style manuals and grammar books, numerous examples of fairly short sentences can be found, which suggests that sentence length is not as important a factor as might be assumed.

(70) Truth ennobles man; learning adorns him. (Ritter 2003: 124)

(71) All students had to take a language; Sue took French. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1742)

As Table 9 above reveals, semicolons occur with almost identical frequency in the two corpora, and their major functions of coordination and elaboration (cf. 2002: 1742) are present in both types of reader response. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1743) argue that in cases of asyndetic coordination (compare (70) above to (72) and (73) below), the semicolon could be replaced by *and* and sometimes also *but*. In contrast, if the semicolon has an elaborative function (compare (71) above to (74) and (75) below), it “could be replaced by a colon but not by a comma” (2002: 1743).

(72) […] Not all boys play super-heroes; not all girls like dolls. […] [CMC T08-032 c11]

(73) […] Turing was a brilliant man, his treatment under the laws of the day was appalling; his suicide a tragedy. […] [NEWS T10-001.2]

(74) [...] I’m not opposed to banning ads, but I think there is a better way; let’s give kids alternative behaviours, like work, a decent education, and a sense of pride in themselves and their country. [...] [CMC T09-042 c18]

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[195] The commenter refers to the Irish radio broadcaster Sir Michael Terence Wogan and the announcement of his retirement. The word *shock* added in square brackets after the mentioning of the time span of 40 years expresses the feelings the commenter experienced upon realising how quickly time has passed and how old this makes him/her.

(75) […] It is even worse than that; too many of them are not even fit for purpose. […] [NEWS T08-043]

Meyer (1987: 24) notes that the semicolon can also be used in coordination to "set off non-clauses […] if more than two units are coordinated".[196] This usage is also present in both types of reader response and may lead to fairly long sentences, even if the examples above have illustrated that sentences containing a semicolon can also be surprisingly short.

(76) […] With the right personnel and technology resources in place, healthcare professionals can be supported in their decision making; have full view of patient history; and be alerted to allergies or potential adverse drug reactions. [NEWS T09-023.2]

(77) […] This situation suits three separate but related interest groups: the schools, which can use the passes to boost their position in the league tables; the government, which can use them to show how much education has 'improved' under its stewardship; and, last but not least, the examinations boards. […] [CMC G06-011-12 c17]

All in all, there is thus no striking difference between the two corpora in the use of this punctuation mark.[197] Even the distribution per contribution is fairly equal: the 132 semicolons found in the letters are distributed across 100 contributions, while the 89 semicolons found in the comments appear in 63.

For the sake of completeness it should be added that the use of punctuation marks does not always adhere to the rules laid out in grammar books or style manuals, even if the rules governing punctuation are generally not considered to be as strict as those governing other areas of grammar. The excerpt of a comment on MPs' salaries and allowances quoted in (78) below illustrates this point:

(78) […] Let's face it the real money is made from the stuff we never hear about the little perks; the free meals/trips. [CMC T06-030.2 c3]

Especially in light of the lack of punctuation marks in places where they would help the reader to break down the sentence into smaller chunks (i.e. after 'it' and 'about' respectively), the semicolon placed after 'perks' may seem a little strange. Even if it could be argued that 'the free meals/trips' is

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196 Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1740) discuss similar cases, arguing that "the semicolon is motivated by the length and complexity of the coordinates".

197 The only usage found in the comments but not the letters is that of opening a comment by addressing another commenter using a vocative followed by a semicolon, as in '@stevehill [USER]; during my lifetime there have been more …' [CMC G11-034 c20]. However, only three such occurrences could be found.

an elaboration of the more general noun phrase ‘little perks’, the sentence could also be punctuated in the following way:

(79) Let’s face it – the real money is made from the stuff we never hear about: the little perks, the free meals/trips.

In contrast to (78), (79) is far easier to process. This is partly due to the additional punctuation marks and partly to the replacement of the semicolon by a listing comma. Alternatively, the semicolon could be placed in a different position (i.e. after ‘let’s face it’ or after ‘about’, indicating its elaborative function). While the absence of punctuation marks in contexts where they are required will be addressed briefly below (see 5.2.4.4.6), such rare cases as the rather confusing semicolon in (78) do not have to be considered at the present stage, as they also occur occasionally in the letters and thus do not risk skewing the results completely. In (80), for instance, a weaker boundary than the semicolon seems a more appropriate means to separate the subordinate clause from the following main clause.

(80) […] And while these may not be the qualities best nurtured by A levels owing to the relentless pressure to “think within the exam box”; they can be demonstrated through other means such as work experience, citizenship and other interests and activities. […] [NEWS T07-011.1]

In the case of dashes, some differences can be noted, yet they are not as pronounced as in the categories to be discussed below.

Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016: 156) considers dashes on a par with brackets, expecting her academic texts to contain more brackets than dashes “because these represent the most and least formal punctuation marks indicating parenthesis according to Seely 2007: 84”. Yet while brackets always appear in pairs, enclosing what Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1748) call a *parenthesised element*, single dashes are possible. On the one hand, they appear in sentences in which the second dash is “superseded by or absorbed into an indicator that marks a higher-level boundary” (2002: 1751), e.g. a full stop or question mark, as in (81), which could be rephrased as (82).

(81) We could invite one of the ladies from next door – Miss Savage, for example. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1751)

(82) One of the ladies from next door – Miss Savage, for example – could be invited. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1751)

On the other hand, single dashes may be used to represent a pause or hesitation; since the dash is either surrounded by spaces or fairly long (in the case of the so-called em-dash), it “constitutes an obtrusive visual break” –

space representing time (Patt 2013: 106). Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1751) link this usage to emphasis, arguing that in (83) below, "the dash matches a prosodic pause in speech, serving to highlight the final complement". In a similar vein, Meyer (1987: 96) discusses examples in which the dash is used to "set off constructions in sentence final positions, making them appear as afterthoughts", as in (84) below.

(83) We've got to get her to change her mind; the question is – how? (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1751)

(84) I think all this could apply to [Charlie] Parker just as well, although, because of the nature of his music, it is not demonstrable – at least not conclusively. (Meyer 1987: 96)

Thus, while both single and paired dashes mark "an ostensible break or pause in the production of the text" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1750), the former cannot be replaced with parentheses – a fact that argues strongly in favour of investigating them separately. Table 10 below lists the findings of the manual analysis, in which two further categories were identified (*special* and *faulty use*); these will be discussed briefly below.[198]

Table 10 The use of dashes in the comments and letters

	Absolute frequencies		Normalised frequencies (per 10,000 words)	
	comments	letters	comments	letters
Paired dashes (number of parenthesised elements)	108 (54)	180 (90)	12.4 (6.2)	14.3 (7.1)
Single dashes	234	236	26.9	18.7
Special use	21	1	2.4	0.1
Faulty use	15	0	1.7	0
Total occurrences	378	417	43.4	33.1
Contributions	204	246	-	-

Even a brief glance at Table 10 above shows the importance of distinguishing between different functions and considering normalised frequencies. While the number of dashes found overall is fairly similar (378

[198] Huddleston and Pullum (cf. 2002: 1726) list four different dash characters, all of which could be found in the present data: three dashes varying in length (ranging from a mere hyphen via the en-dash to the em-dash, all with spaces on either side) and a sequence of two hyphens (--). Since the choice of character largely depends on the font used (cf. Patt 2013: 107), these individual usages will not be distinguished here.

in the comments and 417 in the letters), their frequency per 10,000 words differs, revealing dashes to be more common in the comments, even if more letters contain one. As briefly mentioned above, Sanchez-Stockhammer (cf. 2016: 156) considers dashes simply a less formal way of indicating an interpolation than parentheses, as do Quirk et al. (1985: 1629), who argue that in (85), "the inclusion is sufficiently informal an interruption to justify dashes rather than parentheses".

(85) At that time, the students -- goodness knows for what reason -- reversed their earlier, more moderate decision, and a big demonstration was planned. (Quirk et al. 1985: 1629)

However, the larger number in the comments is not caused by a greater frequency of paired dashes but rather by a larger number of single dashes (see Table 10 above). Since these cannot be replaced by round brackets, the greater overall number of dashes is not necessarily indicative of a less formal style compared to the letters. In fact, the number of dashes with parenthetical function is even slightly larger in the letters corpus.

Instead of simply viewing the choice between paired dashes and parentheses as a matter of formality, Huddleston and Pullum (cf. 2002: 1750f.) point to structural and functional differences. They argue, for instance, that parentheses present the parenthesised element as "inessential material that can be omitted without affecting the well-formedness and without any serious loss of information" (2002: 1748) and point out that this is often not the case when paired dashes are used (cf. 2002: 1751). Along similar lines, Meyer (1987: 95) argues that "[d]ashes make constructions more prominent in a variety of ways", while "[p]arentheses are used to indicate that they [sic] constructions they enclose are semantically unimportant in the context in which they occur" (1987: 66). In (86) below, both are found in the same sentence, and while the parentheses simply mark an aside that could be omitted, the dashes clearly draw attention to the material interpolated and thus foreground it.[199] This emphasising use of dashes is fairly frequent in both types of reader response (see (87) and (88) below).

(86) […] It is not the damage to the reputation of the NHS (important as that is), but the terrible harm to the most disadvantaged in the US — the poorest men and women, those who have just lost their jobs — with which we should be most concerned. […] [NEWS T06-005.1]

[199] For a detailed discussion of two versions of the same sentence (one with dashes and the other with parentheses) see Patt (2013: 107f.), and for a comparison of the effects produced when commas, dashes and parentheses are used to set off parenthetical clauses see Meyer (1987: 104).

(87) […] That said, I - along with all the others who worked hard, lived out of libraries, gave up our social lives etc - resent being labelled as “Dumb” or being told I was “spoon fed”. […] [CMC G06-011-12 c11]

(88) […] However, the ability to create credit – effectively out of thin air – was one of the great civilisational advances. […] [NEWS G06-088]

Yet while Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1751) claim that in contrast to parentheses, “[d]ashes cannot enclose […] a separate whole sentence”, such constructions can indeed be found in both the letters and the comments. In (89) and (90) below, the interpolation constitutes a complete sentence, which is used to address the reader directly as if it was an actor’s aside to the audience. Since this aside interrupts the contributor’s argumentation in the middle of the sentence, it is particularly prominent.

(89) […] The sole purpose of cheerleading seems to be to allow middle-aged men to watch adolescent girls in scanty clothing – perhaps someone could accordingly explain the point of boys’ cheerleading, which I had never heard of – whereas the retention of American spelling in film posters is only to be applauded. […] [NEWS G06-049]

(90) […] The fire that destroyed the library was not started by the British - don’t you love how the original did not make that clear - but by the Boxers who were trying to burn down the foreign legations in Beijing. […] [CMC G08-037.1 c1]

As interesting as these cases may be, they are extremely rare. However, some comments contain fairly long interpolations (91) or various dashes with differing functions, which may lead to structural problems. In (92) below, the first dash is a single one with elaborative function (replacing *namely* or *that is*), which is directly followed by an interpolation marked by dashes (‘currently …’), which, in turn, provides additional information about the noun phrase ‘Ken Bruce’.[200] The sentence in (93), in contrast, contains only two dashes, yet they do not constitute a set of paired ones but rather two single ones. The first, which had better be replaced by a full stop or colon, has an elaborative function, and the second marks an after-thought.[201] For this reason, the category of *faulty use* (N=15, see Table 10 above) was created: it includes uses that lead to ungrammatical or confusing

[200] Alternatively, one could interpret the first dash and the last one to constitute a set of paired dashes enclosing a parenthesised element which, in turn, contains a single dash with elaborative function.

[201] These functions of single dashes will be discussed in more detail below. In any case, (93) nicely illustrates the rather loose sentence structure sometimes found in the comments. The comma after ‘family’, for instance, also has an elaborative function and could be replaced by a colon or *that is*. Thus, what is punctuated as only one sentence consists in fact of several ones, strung together via dashes and commas, as will be discussed briefly below (5.4).

sentences and cases in which a dash is combined with a comma or suspension dots instead of a second one. Yet apart from these minor exceptions, the sentences in which paired dashes are used to set off parenthetical elements differ very little across the corpora.

(91) […] They should be returned to their country of origin - or the last country they arrived from, if like the majority of asylum seekers, they are lying about their origins to bluff their way past the immigration authorities - within hours of their case being rejected. [CMC G08-074-75 c5]

(92) Once again, Radio 2 is drifting further away from it's target audience - the people who fall between Wogan's [TERRY WOGAN, RADIO PRESENTER] age and that of Ken Bruce [RADIO PRESENTER] - currently the only man or R2 [ON RADIO 2] who can carry a show almost single-handed - in a continuing attempt, which I'd hoped would end with the departure of Lesley Douglas [FORMER RADIO EXECUTIVE], to make R2 into an annex of R1, and bring in a much younger audience. [CMC G09-076 c16]

(93) […] My children do very well at school - this is partly down to school and partly down to our general attitude as a family, it is normal to read, it is normal to get outside and it is normal to consume a balanced diet, this all combined with tons of extra curricula fun - of the sort which does not cost money. […] [CMC G08-094 c8]

While single dashes are more frequent than paired ones in both types of reader response, this corpus-internal difference is more marked in the CMC corpus, where only 54 utterances contain interpolations with dashes compared to 234 uses of single ones. Their absolute frequency is almost identical in the two corpora, yet when viewed in relation to the total number of words, single dashes turn out to be markedly more frequent in the comments. All in all, the single dash appears to be a fairly versatile punctuation mark, and its use in the present corpora is quite varied. Nevertheless, three major functions can be distinguished. In both corpora, sentences can be found in which the single dash has an elaborative function, comparable to that of a colon or supplementation indicators such as *namely* or *that is*, as in the examples below.

(94) Will ISA certificates serve as a form of identification – an ID card with a purpose? [NEWS G10-047]

(95) Sir, It seems that our Forces in Afganistan now have two enemies to fight — the Taleban and the MoD [MINISTRY OF DEFENCE]. [NEWS T07-044.4]

(96) […] Not everyone can live in a great area, close enough to a school that will give them what every child deserves - a decent education in a secure environment. […] [CMC G07-101 c7]

(97) […] Keith Bartley is doing what all people in his position do - empire-building. [CMC G08-094 c17]

In other cases, the dash simply marks a dramatic pause: in (98), (100) and (101) it could be replaced with a comma, in (99) and (102) with a full stop or exclamation mark. Yet even if this would not change the propositional content, the emphasising effect created by the dash would be lost in the process. As touched upon above, the space consumed by the dash represents the time elapsing before the utterance is finished (cf. Patt 2013: 106), the pause creating suspense and adding emphasis to what follows.

(98) […] The BNP might have the right to express its hateful views in a free society – but equally we have the right not to listen. [NEWS G09-035]

(99) […] Hang on – didn’t he meet Doctor Who? [NEWS G11-062]

(100) […] “A most extraordinary affair! I gave them their orders — and they wanted to stay to discuss them.” [NEWS T06-012]

(101) […] Either way you look at it -- it doesn’t look good. […] [CMC G07-035.2 c18]

(102) Thank goodness - getting rid of him is LONG overdue! [CMC G09-046 c14]

This visual representation of a prosodic pause is also of great importance in the following examples, where the dash is used to add an afterthought to the preceding utterance (cf. Meyer 1987: 96). Yet these cases are different from the ones above in that the dash could not be omitted or replaced without creating an ungrammatical sentence, as it is followed by what Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1350) call a *supplement*, i.e. “elements which occupy a position in linear sequence without being integrated into the syntactic structure of the sentence”.

(103) […] It needs cutting down to size — and soon. [NEWS T09-056.1]

(104) […] Each birth saved is a lifetime of emissions saved – more, in fact, when you consider the potential descendants of that child. [NEWS G08-067]

(105) Sounds good - unless you are reliant upon social services that work. […] [CMC G07-115-17 c5]

(106) […] There is nothing shameful about being a plumber or builder - quite the reverse in fact. [CMC G07-005 c6]

In addition to these uses, which can be found in both corpora, the letters and comments also differ in certain respects. First of all, a dash is sometimes used in the letters corpus to add an ascriptive noun phrase supplement (cf.

2002: 1358), as in (107) and (108). In these cases, the dash and the supplement could be replaced with a non-restrictive – or, in Huddleston and Pullum's terms – supplementary relative clause (e.g. '… grandchildren, which is an activity of which …'). This usage is not found in the comments.[202]

(107) […] I am grateful, however, for being reminded of another opportunity to shoot lines to my grandchildren — an activity of which I never tire. [NEWS T07-025]

(108) […] Other members are Indonesia, Nepal, Mozambique, Suriname and Thailand — also not former British colonies. […] [NEWS T08-057]

In contrast, the dash is sometimes used in the comments to indicate the beginning of a speaker's turn (e.g. when reacting to a direct quote, as in (109) below) or after another user's name to signal that the latter is addressed directly, as in (110) and (111) below (N=21).[203] A comparable use is found only once in the letters corpus (see (112) below, where the dash separates a vocative from the remainder of the sentence).

(109) [...] As for the the [QUOTE FROM OTHER USER] "fairly brutal interviews John Major's ministers had to deal with against the relatively easy ride given the current bunch." [QUOTE FROM OTHER USER] - well, the current bunch aren't given an easy ride. [...] [CMC G08-104 c19]

(110) Loulees [USER] - spot on. […] [CMC G10-001-04 c7]

(111) Andrew Brown [USER] - if that is really what you think then you have some major gaps in your education. […] [CMC T07-005 c8]

(112) […] Mr Grayling [THE SHADOW HOME SECRETARY] – you ain't seen nothing yet. [NEWS G07-058]

These minor particularities, however, are only partly responsible for the overall difference in frequency, which is rather caused by the considerable number of comments in which two main clauses are strung together with the help of a dash. This type of usage is generally not recommended in punctuation manuals and largely absent from the written corpus. It seems to be linked to the function of the dash outlined above: in the examples below, the dash represents a prosodic pause and thus adds emphasis while at the same time signalling that what is separated by the dash is closely connected. Using the dash saves the writers the effort of having to specify the logical

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[202] The only comparable example is (92), yet in this case the supplement is interpolated, i.e. it does not end the sentence.

[203] This use is related to that of the semicolon after another user's name commented on above (see footnote 197 on p. 161).

relationship holding between the items thus linked, making it more convenient than the use of coordination or subordination, as connectives or conjunctions are not required. Yet if these contributions were printed in a newspaper, the dash would likely be replaced with a semicolon in (113), with a full stop or an exclamation mark in (114) and with a question mark in (115). This does not mean, however, that this usage cannot be found at all in the letters; (116) is such an example, and in this case, the dash signals a relationship of cause and effect (or reason and result), i.e. it could be replaced by *hence*. Nevertheless, this type of dash is mainly found in the comments and thus at least partly accounts for the greater frequency of dashes in this corpus.

(113) […] I am not being facetious - cycling helmets have become the modern equivalent of St Christopher's Cross. [CMC T10-055 c13]

(114) What a ludicrously contrived scenario - for a start, I don't see many people suggesting that MPs shouldn't claim appropriate allowances at all. […] [CMC T06-030.2 c20]

(115) What's wrong with the rich paying for preferential treatment - this doesn't mean that everyone elses service has to suffer. […] [CMC G07-015-17 c12]

(116) […] The future is always uncertain and humanity is hugely resourceful – the world may well be a better place a century from now. […] [NEWS G06-095]

In summary, the analysis has shown the importance of distinguishing between paired and single dashes. Even if the dash is often associated with informality, it is used in 246 letters and serves a variety of clear functions. While dashes setting off parenthesised elements are slightly more frequent in the letters, the comments are characterised by a greater number of single dashes, some of which are used in functions largely absent in the letters corpus (i.e. to mark the beginning of a speaker's turn and to string main clauses together). Despite these differences, the contrast between the letters and the comments in the use of the dash is not as sharp as it is in the four punctuation marks to be discussed in the following, i.e. exclamation marks, suspension dots, slashes and question marks.

5.2.4.4.2 Exclamation marks

The most notable difference between the two corpora is the use of exclamation marks. While 214 utterances in the corpus of comments end in at least one exclamation mark, only 23 such utterances could be found in the letters.[204] According to Patt (2013: 102), question and exclamation marks – just like full stops – mark the end of a sentence; in addition, they also "serve as indicators of speech function, denoting the illocutionary force of interrogative […] and exclamatory speech acts". However, the use of exclamation marks is not just limited to exclamatives (117). They are also used to emphasise directive speech acts in imperative form (118) and to represent loud or shouted direct speech (119). Moreover, they are placed after interjections (120) and used in exclamations (121).[205]

(117) What nonsense they talk! (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1731)

(118) Leave me alone! (Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016: 148)

(119) He replied, 'I've never been so insulted in my life!' (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1734)

(120) Wow! (Norrick 2011: 248)

(121) They had come without any money! (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1734)

In this latter use, the exclamation mark "[p]uts special emphasis on the emotive content of a sentence and is thus found mainly outside academic or formal writing" (Agbaria 2011: 2448). This view seems to suggest that exclamation marks fulfil an important and legitimate function in certain registers and contexts; nevertheless, F. Scott Fitzgerald is often claimed to have demanded to "[c]ut out all these exclamation marks", arguing that "[a]n exclamation mark is like laughing at your own jokes" (as cited in Jeffries 2009: n.p.).[206]

Yet even though complaints about excessive use of exclamation marks seem to predate the era of the Internet, many people have commented on and sometimes also bemoaned the fact that this punctuation mark is experiencing a renaissance in CMC: "[t]exts, tweets and e-mails in particular are often littered with exclamation marks; sometimes to the extent that they have become a replacement for the full stop" (Waugh et al. 2016: 113; cf. also Jeffries 2009). Some not only associate such usage with emotionally-laden language, considering exclamation marks signs of excitability, but

[204] Exclamation marks were excluded if only found in the title of the newspaper article reacted to (three occurrences in the corpus of letters).

[205] In addition, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1734) discuss the use of exclamation marks in interrogatives in which "the illocutionary force is that of a statement", as in 'What does it matter, anyway!'.

[206] In a similar vein, Quirk et al. (1985: 1633) argue that "[t]he exclamation mark […] is more rarely used and indeed its excessive use is often taken as a sign of frivolous or immature writing. It is however quite normal in representing a sentence uttered with great emotive force, whether or not it has exclamative form".

also claim that women are more prone to use them than men (cf. e.g. Colley and Todd 2002).[207] Waseleski (2006), in contrast, dismisses such views as an oversimplification and performs a detailed functional analysis of exclamation marks and their gender-related use in electronic discussion groups instead. She comes to the conclusion that "exclamation points function most often to indicate friendliness and to emphasize intended statements of fact, but only infrequently as markers of excitability" (2006: 1013). Thus, even though the women in her study used more exclamation marks than the men, this difference was only notable in functions other than signalling excitability. Even if a detailed discussion of Waseleski's form of categorisation is beyond the scope of the present thesis, her study underscores the importance of a functional analysis.[208]

For the present purposes, the analysis was performed on the basis of the different uses and functions of exclamation marks presented above, i.e. by distinguishing the types of utterances ending in this punctuation mark.

Table 11 Types of utterances ending in exclamation mark(s)

	comments	letters
exclamation	159	13
directive	28	2
interjection	11	0
direct speech	9	6
exclamative	7	2
totals	214	23

As Table 11 above reveals, the most frequent function in both corpora is not to mark exclamatives but to add emotive force to sentences that normally end in a full stop, as in (122) and (123) below. In fact, exclamatives ending in exclamation marks are extremely rare: in both types of reader response, they are the least frequent type (see (124) and (125) below).[209]

[207] Another feature that Colley and Todd (2002) consider a marker of excitability is capitalisation.

[208] Rather than working with the notion of excitability, Tannen (2013: 105) points out that gender differences in the use of features such as (multiple) punctuation marks or reduplicated letters can be attributed to "differences regarding the display of enthusiasm patterned by gender". Women, she argues, have different assumptions and expectations than men. They perceive the use of greetings with several enthusiasm markers (e.g. 'Hiiii!!') the unmarked norm, fearing that a simple 'Hi' "comes across as cold, even sullen" (2013: 106).

[209] Interestingly, Meyer's (cf. 1987: 20) findings are similar: the majority of exclamation marks in his data are not used in exclamatives but in declarative sentences.

(122) If these surgeons consider that the evidence from a single private centre demonstrates problems with a sector as a whole, their understanding of methodology seems to be as flawed as their conclusions! […] [CMC T11-045 c5]

(123) It's rather the same as the illusion of choice over schools: you can choose any school you like – you just won't get in! [NEWS G11-017]

(124) […] What monstrous hypocrisy this Libya nonsense is! [NEWS G09-044]

(125) […] What a pity the excellent Vince Cable deemed himself too old to be leader! Soon, no doubt, he will be turning in his grave. [CMC G11-001 c8]

However, this does not mean that exclamatives are as rare as the figures above suggest. The manual coding revealed that the majority of exclamatives are simply not followed by an exclamation mark: this is the case in 19 comments and 17 letters (see (126) and (127) respectively).

(126) What a terrific argument. […] [CMC G10-056-59 c20]

(127) How annoying to hear the claims that the mayor of London and his deputy mayor have taken control of the Met. […] [NEWS G08-081]

While Quirk et al. (1985: 1634) claim that "sentences with exclamative form […] always end with an exclamation mark", Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1734) are more careful in their choice of words, arguing that in exclamative sentences "the exclamation mark is strongly preferred over a full stop". However, this rule or preference is not mirrored in the present data. Thus, despite common complaints about an over-use of exclamation marks in CMC, they are sometimes not used in contexts where they could be expected, both in the comments and the letters. A closer look at the present data might suggest that this is because exclamatives are often used in critical contributions. In (126) above, reproduced in contextualised form as (128) below, the exclamative seemingly praising the argument is obviously ironic, and the absence of the exclamation mark can be claimed to fulfil the function of representing an ironic undertone. The use of the full stop thus signals to the readers that they should not imagine the writer's voice to be full of excitement and praise but rather full of sarcasm.

(128) What a terrific argument. You've presented one reason why you think that it would be fair to make cuts in the public sector: […] This isn't backed up with any further argument or statistic. It's as if you just dictated the article into a dictaphone. [CMC G10-056-59 c20]

Thus, instead of using an exclamation mark to represent an agitated voice, i.e. showing his/her involvement, the user simply comments on the quality of the article with a dry, unemotional remark that stands in stark contrast to (124) above. However, the absence of an exclamation mark adding emotive force (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 1633) does not make the criticism any less severe; on the contrary, it makes it all the more sniping.

Yet as plausible as this interpretation may seem when (128) above is considered, the dataset is far too small to test the hypothesis that exclamation marks may be omitted in exclamatives to signal ironic or critical undertones. In fact, exclamation marks are sometimes also absent in cases where the letter or comment writers make their emotional involvement explicit or clearly praise the author or newspaper (see (129) and (130) below).

(129) Sir, Ms Crossley-Holland [AUTHOR] is to be admired for not having given up yet. How I empathise with her. My experience of […] [NEWS T07-043_2]

(130) […] What a joy to have the real Manchester Guardian back. Thank you. [NEWS G11-030]

Even if the case of exclamatives has illustrated the danger of being guided too much by surface-level characteristics, Table 11 above clearly shows that in both types of reader response, the largest number of exclamation marks is found in exclamations. Interestingly, this is also the use with the largest difference in frequency: while 159 such exclamations can be found in the comments, only 13 comparable examples could be identified in the letters, where the urge to lend emotive force to one's statement does not seem to be as strong (or where the editors may change the punctuation or simply choose not to publish such contributions). A closer look at the individual examples reveals that exclamations are above all found in comments criticising others, where they serve to underline the critic's exasperation (131), annoyance (132) or incredulity (133). In (134) the exclamation is used to reprimand other commenters indirectly, whereas the poster's judgement of the article commented on in (135) is openly unfavourable.

(131) […] Another victory for NuLab another nail in the coffin for Great Britain! […] [CMC G06-011-12 c9]

(132) […] This benefits system is insane! […] [CMC T08-059 c8]

(133) […] Aren't doctors supposed to treat our ailments rather than tell us how to live our lives? This is rather like my car mechanic telling me not to drive too much as I am increasing the chances of damaging my car! […] [CMC T09-042 c13]

(134) I am not sure i like these flippant comments! […] [CMC T06-001 c6]

(135) Rubbish! [CMC G09-061-62 c1]

Yet despite this close link to criticism (a move to be discussed in detail in 7.3 below), exclamations can also be used to show one's agreement or alignment, as in (136), where the commenter takes sides with and even defends the teachers criticised by others, or in (137), where a reduced exclamation is used to evaluate recent developments positively. In (138) and (139), the commenters relate personal experiences, the exclamation(s) underlining their emotional involvement and adding liveliness to the narration. While this choice of punctuation signals the writers' concerns about their diet (138) and age (139), it also adds to the jocular way in which their worries are presented and helps to create an informal, sympathetic atmosphere.

(136) [...] People train for years to get particular jobs, teachers included. Damn right they should stick up for themselves! [CMC G08-094 c16]

(137) Excellent!!! […] [CMC T06-046.1 c18]

(138) [...] The hardest time for me is in the evening ...in France it is illegal to barbie without a glasss of red in your hand ! Just one turns into a bottle or so ! Help ! [CMC G09-008 c17]

(139) i was in short trousers the first time i heard Terry [TERRY WOGAN, RADIO PRESENTER].now elastic waistbands are calling! my wife and son will miss his banter. […] [CMC G09-076 c7]

Commenters thus not only use exclamations to show their emotional involvement and let off steam, but also to add a personal touch to their contributions. Such exclamations are fairly informal, especially if they are syntactically reduced (see (131) and (135) to (137) above). This effect may be strengthened by the use of colloquial expressions (e.g. 'rubbish', 'to barbie' instead of 'to barbecue', 'damn right', 'stick up for', 'insane').

In the letters, this kind of usage is far rarer (13 vs. 159 occurrences) but not completely absent. In the examples below, the effect achieved is comparable to that discussed above, and in (143) the syntactically reduced exclamation is even combined with colloquial language ('to come over all', which here means 'to feel and behave like', and 'crap'), thus adding to the informality of the personal anecdote.[210]

(140) Sir, Some years ago I stated that I would not be ready for retirement until I could complete the times2 crossword daily and have a reasonable attempt at the main crossword.
I am 68 and still working! [NEWS T10-053]

[210] For a detailed discussion of matters of identity, personalisation and the move of relating personal experiences see 7.4 below.

(141) […] Expect to hear more about the WEA [WORKERS' EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION] in the near future. We've not gone away! [NEWS G10-112]

(142) […] And stop fuelling the ignorant stereotype that tower blocks are some sort of hell (when they actually have aspects of heaven!). [NEWS G06-066]

(143) I recently came over all Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and made hot-smoked fillets from freshly caught carp using a biscuit tin, a handful of oak sawdust and an open fire (Letters, 14 August). Not crap at all! [NEWS G06-005M][211]

The remaining uses of exclamation marks are not characterised by such a profound difference in frequency. In the corpus of comments, the second largest group consists of the category of directives (see (144) and (145) below), where the exclamation mark "may serve to impart a sense of urgency, and/or to give the directive the force of a command or entreaty, as opposed, say, to a request" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1734). In the letters, only two such utterances could be found (see (146) and (147) below).[212] If one follows Quirk et al. (1985: 1634), who claim that "[i]mperative sentences generally do not end with an exclamation mark unless they represent very peremptory and urgent commands", this absence could be interpreted as an indicator of the politeness constraints at work in letters to the editor.

(144) In other words, if you think Tories are going to be any different from Labour, think twice! […] [CMC G07-115-17 c20]

(145) Governments and civil servants are like children, they should be seen, but not heard.
Please let us live our lives without interference! [CMC G10-023-25 c17]

(146) […] It seems half the world can disappear underwater so long as a few people locally "turn to Christ" which, apparently, is our true priority. Help! [NEWS G09-006a]

(147) While I wholeheartedly agree with giving Alan Turing the recognition he deserves for his brilliant and life-saving work (PM's apology to codebreaker, 11 September), we should also be made aware of the people who sentenced him to the most horrifying of treatments and those who willingly carried it out. Name them! [NEWS G09-074]

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[211] Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, celebrity chef and author of several cookery books, is known for his back-to-basics approach to cooking. The wordplay with *carp*/*crap* is an indirect reference to previous letters to the editor in which similar jokes were made. This fairly brief (and, if viewed in isolation, rather enigmatic) letter is thus part of a string of letters – an intriguing phenomenon to be discussed in detail in 6.4.1.3 below.

[212] One of these occurrences is even syntactically reduced (146); it could thus also be interpreted as the reduced form of the declarative sentence 'I need help'.

Yet as was the case with exclamatives, the comparatively small number of directives ending in an exclamation mark reveals only little about the moves performed in reader contributions and the differences between the corpora. When only sentences ending in an exclamation mark are considered, the number of directives found in the comments clearly exceeds that in the letters. However, the directives thus identified are not necessarily commands but may also constitute pleas (see (145) above) or requests with a very low degree of imposition (see (148) below), i.e. cases where the requested or suggested act is beneficial to the hearer and not the speaker (cf. e.g. Ogiermann 2009: 50 and Trosborg 1995: 188). The difference between comments and letters illustrated by Table 11 above is thus not necessarily an indicator of differences in terms of politeness; for such claims, a far more detailed analysis is required. While matters of face and politeness will be discussed in detail in chapter 7 below, the following observations already illustrate the need to move beyond automated searches.

First of all, it is necessary to note that the directives above differ in regard to whom they address: while readers can appeal to other readers or people in general (see (144) and (146) above), they can also address public figures (145) or be rather vague (147).[213] In fact, only one of the directives ending in an exclamation mark found in the comments addresses the journalist, and in this case, the commenter is not performing a face-threatening act but offering praise and encouragement (148). In the letters, on the other hand, the move of asking the journalist to do something also exists – it is simply not realised with an imperative (N=5), let alone an imperative in combination with an exclamation mark (N=0). Instead, readers can also perform the directive speech acts of requesting or advising indirectly, e.g. by using *should* (149) or interrogatives (150) (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 939ff.). Since in indirect speech acts, punctuation marks tend to be chosen on the basis of syntax rather than pragmatic function (cf. Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016: 148f.), the directive in (150) ends in a question mark.

(148) After reading Polly’s article [REFERENCE TO A PREVIOUS ARTICLE BY A DIFFERENT AUTHOR, I.E. POLLY TOYNBEE], its nice to see a bit of sense in the Guardian.
The knives must be out for you Simon [AUTHOR]. Stick in there! [CMC G10-056-59 c18]

(149) Sir, Simon Barnes [AUTHOR] should look at the other side of the coin (“Want to commit crime? Come to England,” Aug 2). […] [NEWS T07-080]

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[213] Since the imperative verb does not provide any clues as to who is addressed, and since *you* can be used to address (a) the journalist, (b) the editor, (c) a previous contributor, (d) all readers or even be used impersonally (e), the number of vague directives is far greater in English than it would be in other languages, e.g. German.

(150) Thank you for your splendidly comprehensive chart of UK government spending (Where your money goes, 16 September). May we now have a parallel one for where the money comes from? [NEWS G10-082]

Thus, while the analysis based on exclamation marks suggests that directives are more frequent in comments than letters (28 vs. 2), a functional move analysis not based on surface structures (see 3.4.1 above) reveals them to be quite common in both corpora (156 occurrences in the comments and 135 in the letters). Despite this similarity, the corpora differ in the target of this move. Whereas in the letters, the largest proportion is directed at public figures, who are not necessarily identified by name (N=70; see (151) below), followed by other readers (N=40) and the journalist/newspaper (N=25), most of the directive moves found in the comments address other readers or people in general (N=108; see (152) below), and only 36 and 12 comments appeal to public figures and the journalist/newspaper respectively.

(151) […] And could one of the anonymous "experts" please say what is "modern" about seeking to screw more work out of people while holding down wages and sacking people? [NEWS G11-037]

(152) […] The only long-term solution is to slow down the world's consumption of all types of energy. Turn off the air conditioning, buy a hand propelled lawn mower. On yer bike! [CMC T07-022 c11]

This finding is fairly interesting, as it suggests that letter writers tend to use the newspaper as a platform to appeal to public figures, whereas the comment section is preferred for appealing to other newspaper readers.[214]

What the corpora have in common is that in both types of reader response, exclamation marks appear in combination with direct speech – be it when rendering somebody else's words (see (100) on p. 167 above), when putting words into somebody's mouth (153) or when imitating an interactive speech situation (154).

(153) […] Or perhaps I missed the bit in the gospels when Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery: "Go … and burn fossil fuels no more!" […] [NEWS G10-071]

(154) […] It is wrong to think that it is my life and I have right to end it. No! Not at all! My life […] [CMC T11-032 c18]

[214] Related differences between the two types of reader response will be discussed below when investigating the interactional patterns, including the origin and purpose of quotes (see chapter 6) and the targets and forms of criticism (see chapter 7).

In contrast, the corpora differ in the last use of this punctuation mark to be discussed here: while exclamation marks are sometimes used after interjections in the comments (N=11, see (155) to (157) below), such occurrences could not be found in the letters. Yet neither does this mean that interjections are not used in the letters, nor that interjections are always directly followed by an exclamation mark. In (158) below, the letter writer simply chooses to accompany *hurrah* by a full stop instead, and in (159), the interjection is separated by a comma from the following directive ending in a full stop.

(155) […] Many things about the British legal system baffle me, but this is by far the most troubling. My goodness! [CMC T06-004.1 c8]

(156) […] Joined up Government indeed - pshaw! [CMC T08-063 c6]

(157) [...] You see kissing relics, I feel, is much more comparable with looking for four leaf clovers, saying 'hello Mr. Magpie' when seeing only one of the damnable birds rather than the far luckier twosome, or carrying a rabbits foot in your pocket – yuk! [...] [CMC G11-034 c11]

(158) Sir, Hurrah. Rachel Sylvester tells us that our so-called "special relationship" with the United States is finally over ("Special Relationship. Passed away 2009. R.I.P.", Sept 1). And about time, too. […] [NEWS T09-018]

(159) […] For goodness sake, stop attacking the NHS, stop the privatisation, and let us get on with using our skills to care for patients. […] [NEWS G09-002]

It would thus be a premature conclusion to maintain that the absence of interjections followed by an exclamation mark in the letters corpus points to differences in formality. For such a claim, interjections in general (whether followed by an exclamation mark or not) need to be analysed, as will be done when addressing paralinguistic features (see 5.2.8.1 below).

In summary, the analysis has shown that the great difference in overall numbers (214 vs. 23) is above all caused by the comparatively frequent use of exclamations in the comments, where the exclamation mark is preferred over a full stop on 159 occasions, compared to only 13 in the letters. Thus, there seems to be a stronger urge to add emotive force, vigour and liveliness to one's contribution when commenting online, even if such usage is not completely absent in the letters. Unfortunately, it is not possible to say whether similar letters are sent to the editors but not printed or whether they are printed but only after the punctuation was amended. In any case, the exclamation mark is the punctuation mark with the highest divergence. Yet while this stylistic difference is fairly intriguing, the data also show that the exclamation mark has not yet become a replacement for the full stop as some have claimed (cf. e.g. Waugh et al. 2016 and Jeffries 2009). Thus, even though the commenters show a significantly stronger tendency to make use of the emotive potential of the exclamation mark than the letter writers, the full stop runs no risk of becoming obsolete. Most interestingly, though, its status is sometimes also challenged by the next punctuation mark to be discussed here, i.e. suspension dots.

5.2.4.4.3 Suspension dots

Numerous names exist for the punctuation mark consisting of a set of three full stops (…): *suspension dots* (e.g. Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016), *trailing dots* (e.g. Maynor 1994), *ellipsis points* (e.g. Huddleston and Pullum 2002), *ellipsis marks* (e.g. Ong 2011) or simply *ellipsis* (e.g. Woods 2005). Despite the multitude of names, this punctuation mark usually receives only little attention: neither Meyer (1987) nor Nunberg (1990) discusses it, and of the grammars consulted, only Huddleston and Pullum (cf. 2002: 1756) mention it when commenting briefly on how to mark alterations to quoted matter. In her comparative study, however, Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016: 161) finds that the "difference in frequency between the use of suspension dots in comics and academic texts is far more pronounced than expected". As anticipated, they are employed in the latter to signal omissions (i.e. the function commented on by Huddleston and Pullum 2002), yet only used sparingly since the three authors analysed prefer to quote fairly short excerpts, thus avoiding alterations. In the former, on the other hand, they are quite frequent because they are used to signal that two or more speech bubbles or panels belong together. Every utterance thus separated requires two sets of suspension dots: one at the end of the first part and another at the beginning of the second one, thus doubling the number of occurrences.

As Table 9 above illustrates, the difference between letters and comments is also very striking: 174 occurrences could be found in the comments, compared to only 30 in the letters – the normalised frequencies pointing to an even greater divergence. This quantitative difference is coupled with a formal one: while the suspension dots in the letters always consist of a set of three dots, their number may vary substantially in the corpus of comments, the longest sequence counting 18 individual dots.[215] Moreover, the dots in the comments may not be flanked by spaces (160) as they usually – but not always – are in the letters. This finding, together with the example below, points to the existence of substantial functional differences, as briefly touched on above (see 5.2.4.2).

[215] Some sets of just two dots can also be found. While one could argue that these cases represent typing errors (i.e. the full stop key was unintentionally hit twice), the context speaks in favour of categorising them as suspension dots.

(160) […] I'll happily admit that in my last year of teaching, I made my A Level group take a solomn vow never to enter an profession that involved dealing with the great British public.............enough said. [CMC G08-094 c14]

In addition to the function of marking omissions in quoted material mentioned by Huddleston and Pullum (cf. 2002: 1756), suspension dots may be used for a variety of purposes – especially in informal writing. In CMC in particular, they seem to be quite popular, which is also mirrored by the number of studies investigating or at least commenting on their use. In their analysis of punctuation in text messages exchanged between university students, Baron and Ling (2011: 60) identify three additional functions:

> In more informal writing, ellipses are sometimes used to indicate speech trailing off ("I know what you mean..."), for dramatic effect ("and the winner is...Angelina Jolie."), or to separate sentences in lieu of a more standard period (e.g., "It's hard to read the gambler's motives... he's stalling for time.").

Simpson (2005), on the other hand, investigating synchronous text-based CMC, considers suspension dots above all a cohesive device. In addition to marking omissions, pauses and a trailing away of sentences, they are used in his data as a floor-holding device both at the end of a turn and the beginning of the same speaker's subsequent turn.[216] This use allows the interlocutors to reduce wait time by breaking down the message into smaller chunks, not only signalling that more is to come but also creating coherence between the individual turns. Darics (2010), who also studies synchronous text-based CMC, only comments on the use of '…' to mark hesitation, which, according to her, can be a signal of emotional involvement and – together with backchannel cues – a politeness strategy. In a similar vein, Maness (2007: 6), who investigates online library services and, in particular, students' satisfaction with chat reference conversations with librarians, comes to the conclusion that "in chat reference and CMC, the power of the ellipse [sic], of simple dots, can make all the difference". According to him, they convey the librarian's interest and engagement and thus signal to the patrons that their needs are attended to, which results in higher satisfaction ratings. Ong (2011), in contrast, claims that suspension dots can also be used to signal disagreement and confusion in chats if they are the only content of an interlocutor's turn.[217] Especially if the current speaker was selected by the prior speaker (cf. the turn-taking system established by Sacks et al. 1974), such a "typographic silence" or delay (Ong 2011: 228) becomes meaningful, signalling that the speaker is unable to contribute.

[216] This usage is related to that found by Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016) in comics and may even be a strategy adopted from there.
[217] Ong (2011: 211) speaks of "ellipsis marks-only turns".

As this brief literature review has shown, suspension dots can be used for a variety of purposes. If such functional differences are included in the discussion, the difference between the present corpora becomes even more striking. However, since the use of this punctuation mark depends on the context and the form of communication, not all of the functions mentioned above could be found, while additional functions (and sub-functions) were identified. Moreover, the functions described by Baron and Ling (2011) in particular are not as clear-cut as their examples suggest, and the discussion will show that some of the categories overlap. Despite these classificatory difficulties, Table 12 illustrates the differences between the two corpora.

Table 12 Functions of suspension dots in reader response (percentages in brackets)

	comments	**letters**
omission in quotations	14 (8.0%)	20 (66.7%)
pause/hesitation	62 (35.6%)	1 (3.3%)
gluing fragments together	27 (15.5%)	0 (0.0%)
thought trailing off	68 (39.1%)	4 (13.3%)
direct speech/quotation trailing off	0 (0.0%)	3 (10.0%)
enumeration trailing off	3 (1.7%)	2 (6.7%)
totals	174	30

In the letters, the majority of suspension dots (N=20, i.e. 66.7%) mark omissions in quotations (161). In the comments, in contrast, suspension dots take this role on only 14 occasions, i.e. in merely 8.0% of the cases.

(161) Andy Burnham boldy asserts that “the NHS … has the unequivocal support of every Labour representative”. (It’s all about the N, 18 March). At this point, is there any […] [NEWS G06-039]

The most striking and also most frequent function in the comments is that of representing a trailing off of thought.[218] While this use is also found in some

[218] Baron and Ling (2011: 60) simply speak of “speech trailing off” when discussing their corpus of written text messages. In the present study, however, a distinction was made between the contributor’s text (i.e. his/her thoughts put to paper) trailing off (the majority of cases) and direct speech/quotations enclosed by quotation marks trailing off. Even if the latter only occurs in three letters, it is sufficiently distinct to warrant a separate category. In these letters, the writers play around with the lyrics of a song, quoting fragments and letting them trail off. Even though quotation marks are used, these fragments are slightly amended, which is why they were not considered quotations in the strict sense of the term. Moreover, the function of the suspension dots is clearly not that of marking an alteration (after all, they are placed not in the middle but at the end of the quotation and the other alterations go unmarked) but rather that of conveying a certain ‘open-endedness’ and ‘incompleteness’. Yet since the text is presented as a

letters (162), it is by far more frequent in the CMC corpus (163). Instead of simply placing a full stop at the end of their sentence (and contribution), the writers end it with suspension dots, thus conveying the impression that their thoughts have not been fully expressed and inviting the reader to think further.

(162) So, to save the planet Anthony Horowitz [A NOVELIST] is going to cut down one flight in 10, Sara Cox [A BROADCASTER] is going to fit 80s draught excluders, and Daniel Merriweather [AN AUSTRALIAN MUSICIAN] thinks Melbourne is the greenest place he has ever visited, despite Australia having one of the world's worst per-capita carbon footprints. We're all doomed… [NEWS G08-034][219]

(163) Ok, so the public sector must take the dreaded pill, but what medication is planned for the banksters? By the way, I don't mean the vast majority of people who work in banks but the small financial elite who are pulling the strings from behind the scenes. They're the ones who have been creaming off the top of the milk... [CMC G10-056-59 c1]

This usage is related to the rhetorical figure of *aposiopesis*, which is produced by "breaking off a sentence and leaving it unfinished" (Farnsworth 2011: 182) and signalled either by suspension dots or a hyphen. While Forsyth (2013: 34) argues that there are "three usual reasons for aposiopesis: that you can't go on, that you don't need to go on, or that you want to leave your audience hanging", Farnsworth (cf. 2011: 182ff.) discusses several more, including the creation of suspense, interest and drama as well as the imitation of real speech and its use as a narrative device. Such a "breaking off in midstream" (2011: 182) can be found in (164) below: the letter writer starts his/her last sentence with 'on second thoughts' but fails to finish it. Since this phrase is commonly used in spoken conversation "when you want to change something that you have just said, often to say the opposite",[220] finishing the sentence is not necessary: by letting it trail off, the letter writer clearly implies that he/she considers the politicians and celebrities on the shortlist a very poor choice if they are to act as a lifeboat and 'keep the flame of human culture alight'. This example is thus a case of not needing to go on (cf. Forsyth 2013: 34), or, as Farnsworth (2011: 186)

quote instead of the writer's voice or thought, an additional category was created to distinguish them from examples such as (162). One of these letters is discussed as example (416) in 6.4.1.1 below.

[219] The letter writer is reacting to the *Guardian*'s 10:10 climate campaign to which numerous celebrities pledged their support. Each of these celebrities was given a question to answer in the newspaper, e.g. the easiest things to change about their lifestyle or the greenest place they have ever visited.

[220] According to the definition provided by the *Macmillan Dictionary Online* (see http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/on-second-thoughts; last accessed January 3, 2017.

puts it: "[t]he breaking off makes the listener a partner in the discourse and invites him to fill in the details", while at the same time allowing the letter writer to express his/her unfavourable thoughts without having to verbalise them, so that "the speaker's delicacy is kept conspicuously intact" (2011: 185).

(164) The concept of a no-return mission into space is an interesting concept (Fly me (one-way) to Mars, 15 September). Would it not be possible to introduce an element of compulsion in the selection of astronauts? Any shortlist could include Jeremy Clarkson [BROADCASTER], George Bush [FORMER US PRESIDENT], Nick Griffin [POLITICIAN], Jim Davidson [COMEDIAN], Noel Edmonds [TV PRESENTER], Gordon Ramsay [CELEBRITY CHEF], Peter Andre [SINGER] and Jordan [A PSEUDONYM OF KATIE PRICE, TV PERSONALITY]. Davies [AUTHOR] also assures us that a self-sustaining Mars colony could act as a "lifeboat" in the event of a global catastrophe on Earth, and would "keep the flame of human culture alight". On second thoughts … [NEWS G10-060]

The fact that the negative evaluation remains implicit makes the criticism all the more effective and offers the letter writer the chance to present him/herself as a witty commentator.[221] The criticism in (162) above is equally implicit, yet both (162) and (163) differ from (164) in that the last sentence is not syntactically incomplete even though suspension dots are used. Thus, while the suspension dots of (162) and (163) could be replaced with a full stop or even an exclamation mark, this is not possible in the case of aposiopesis (164). The effect achieved, however, is similar: the suspension dots signal that something is left unsaid or that more could be said; this, however, is left to the readers' imagination, thus involving and engaging them. At the same time, they create the impression that the readers are witnessing the writer's thoughts as they appear. As (Quinn 1982: 36) puts it: "[a]n aposiopesis does not always have to be used for the expressing of deep emotion. Sometimes it can be used to convey casualness, spontaneity". This is also the case in (165), which is a particularly intriguing example since the commenter not only uses suspension dots but also line breaks, an interjection ('oh') and expressions commonly used only in spoken language ('wait', 'hang on') to produce a staged orality with an illusion of spontaneity. The comment is opened with a direct quote from the article in which a public figure (i.e. Chris Keates, leader of the teachers' trade union) is quoted. The commenter then adds a direct agreement, only to stop in mid-sentence as if only remembering and realising at this point that the quoted statement contradicts prior statements by the same person.

[221] For a detailed analysis of criticism and aspects of identity construction see 7.3 and 7.4 below.

(165) [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE] “She [CHRIS KEATES] added: “This code [OF CONDUCT] intrudes into teachers’ private lives; it is an affront to teachers’ basic human rights. There is no evidence to demonstrate it is needed.” [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE]
I quite agree, and...
Oh. Wait.
Hang on, is this the same Chris Keates who was campaigning *in the very pages of this newspaper* a while ago for people who belong to the BNP (a legal political party) to be banned from teaching? Even where there was no evidence that they did anything in the classroom to deserve that? […] [CMC G08-094 c15]

The reader is thus given the impression of witnessing the commenter’s train of thought, which gives the post a very authentic and immediate feel. Yet of course, this sense of casualness and spontaneity is produced artificially and used as a very effective persuasive strategy. Instead of simply accusing the public figure of practicing double standards, the writer uses staged orality and spontaneity, together with rhetorical questions, to make the readers arrive at this conclusion on their own, illustrating at the same time the importance of considering the wider context when making one’s judgement.

The examples above have shown that trailing dots – whether used to break off a sentence or added to a syntactically complete one – have various overlapping functions. In particular, the air of open-endedness and spontaneity that they create seems to be what makes their use so popular in the comments: the writer’s thoughts may be trailing off, but the (unsaid) meaning still lingers on:

(166) […] Indeed, during the sixties and seventies the ultimate ‘truth’ was that we all descended from apes, as time has gone on we see that this is not the accepted ‘truth’ so how can we claim this now? Are we really that niave?
Afterall apparently we share 50% of our DNA with bananas... [CMC T07-005 c4]

(167) I can only hope that the voting masses don’t blindly walk into that one... but then I also hope for world peace and many other fluffy things that will probably never happen. [CMC G07-115-17 c6]

As (167) illustrates, the trailing dots need not end the contribution; the commenter can also proceed. However, they more frequently constitute the final punctuation mark, closing the speaker’s turn but at the same time creating a sense of continuation.[222]

[222] This usage may be linked to the fact that in other forms of CMC, especially quasi-synchronous ones, ending one’s turn with a full stop is perceived by some as a sign of unfriendliness or insincerity. The girls interviewed for Baron and Ling’s (2011) study, which also addressed gender-related differences in punctuation, perceived text messages ending with a full stop as unfriendly, wondering whether the writer was mad at them. Studies with similar

When suspension dots occur in the middle of a sentence, they usually represent a pause or hesitation, i.e. they suspend the delivery of the remainder of the sentence. Thus, they also constitute a means to imitate spontaneous spoken language, as in (168), which is the only such occurrence in the letters, or (169), where the commenter uses voiced hesitation ('hmmm') to strengthen the effect (see 5.2.8.1 below). Like in spoken conversation, such pauses need not be the direct result of the speakers' hesitation caused by the pressure to produce an immediate response or 'think on their feet'; they can also be used consciously to produce suspense and hence a dramatic effect (cf. e.g. Baron and Ling 2011: 60), as in (170), where the suspension dots add emphasis to the vicious circle described.[223]

(168) […] Or perhaps I missed the bit in the gospels when Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery: "Go … and burn fossil fuels no more!" […] [NEWS G10-071]

(169) […] Hmmm...where have we heard that one before? […] [CMC G10-023-25 c12]

(170) […] So luxury goods firms become rich, and spend their money on... luxury goods. […] [CMC G06-046 c19]

Yet while the examples above are fairly straightforward, hesitation can also be signalled by other means (e.g. the dash, as discussed above, which is commonly preferred in the letters). In addition, other punctuation marks (e.g. the colon) also cause speakers to pause when reading aloud. In consequence, some of the uses of suspension dots overlap with those of dashes, as in (171), where the suspension dots add an afterthought, or colons, as in (172), where the suspension dots could be replaced with *that is* (see 5.2.4.4.1 above). In some cases, they are even used in the place of commas,

findings also made their way into several newspapers in 2015 (including the *Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian*), where they were usually met with ridicule, as illustrated by the *Guardian*'s headline: "Science has spoken: ending a text with a full stop makes you a monster" (Golby 2015). Easy as it may be to dismiss such findings as trivial, there seems to be a certain reluctance in some forms of CMC to end one's message with a full stop. Even if this applies above all to interactive, (quasi-)synchronous forms of communication, traces of this tendency can also be noted in the comments: at least 51 lack a final punctuation mark, compared to only four letters.

[223] This dramatic effect can also be used to delay the punchline of a joke, as in (680) below, which is discussed on p. 454, or to postpone the delivery of a face-threatening act, as in (53) above (see p. 146), which is further discussed as (570) on p. 420 below. Unlike in spoken language, where pauses can also be unintentional, those produced in the comments and letters are of course always intentional. For a discussion of the role of pauses, tempo and rhythm as enhancers of humorous effect see Sayenko (2001).

as in (173) or (174). All in all, this kind of usage is not found in the letters, where the punctuation is much more systematic.[224]

(171) […] Fact: The rights organisations are running around like chickens with their heads cut off and can't put a unified argument forward to save their lives ... or my income! […] [CMC T10-039 c5]

(172) [...] This will benifit one group of people.....the rich. [...] [CMC G07-115-17 c11]

(173) […] However...I do find water rather much more appealing as a way to keep healthy. [CMC G09-008 c14]

(174) […] Yes... I am concerned about truth as well Mr Dawkins and as far as I can see the scientific evidence does not support your theory. [CMC T07-005 c6]

The most extreme use of suspension dots is that of gluing sentences (cf. Baron and Ling 2011: 60) or sentence fragments together. This kind of usage is influenced by the sometimes rather lax sentence structure found in the comments, which, again, is often associated with spoken language. Shortis (2007: 5), for instance, claims that trailing dots are used in CMC "for the kind of vague completion of utterance associated with the spoken mode". The examples below illustrate how the commenters may use a series of suspension dots to connect the individual bits and pieces of their contribution. While (175), in particular, shows clear signs of having been written speedily and posted without revision (e.g. the omission of the verb 'thinking' or 'talking' in the second-last sentence), all of these examples include features commonly associated with (staged) orality (e.g. incomplete syntactic structures, capitalisation for emphasis, interjections, imitation of casual pronunciation, exclamations, informality).

(175) Again, what an incredibly poor, sad, depressing, stupid and plain WRONG idea.... for so many reasons, it doesn't even need to be explained why.. The worst thing is, it's probably going to happen, too..Time to start about a revolution... or emigration. I'm not even joking.. [CMC G07-115-17 c19]

(176) Ah! Sugar-puff Myners [LORD MYNERS, AT THE TIME CITY MINISTER] is on the case... himself a bit of a serial banker I believe ...he'll sort 'em out. [CMC G06-M13 c12]

(177) […] No wonder satire is dead....anyone can join in the fun...you don't even have to make it up ! [CMC G11-001 c7]

[224] For a more detailed account of pauses see the discussion of paralinguistic features in 5.2.8.1 below.

Of course, it is almost impossible to draw a clear and indisputable line between this use and that of signalling hesitation and pauses – the one blends into the other. In a similar vein, one could argue that the examples above, in particular (175), simply consist of a series of thoughts trailing off. On the other hand, examples such as (176) differ markedly from the usage shown in (171) to (174), especially if the contributions are considered in their entirety. The three functions largely absent from the written corpus (i.e. pause/hesitation, gluing fragments together, thought trailing off) are thus best understood not as entirely discrete categories but rather as variants of the same tendencies, i.e. to avoid full stops because they are perceived as too strong a boundary marker and to use suspension dots to transfer characteristics of spoken language to the screen (or page). Baron and Ling (2011) consider such usage to be in line with a general trend to move from grammatical punctuation, which gives "the reader clues as to the internal structure of sentences" (2011: 47), back to rhetorical punctuation, which tells the reader where to stop and take a breath:

> At the beginning of this article, we noted a general contemporary trend for written language to record informal speech, along with a concomitant tendency for punctuation to be used rhetorically rather than grammatically. These tendencies are reflected in the data we examined on text messaging, wherein EMC [i.e. electronically-mediated communication] punctuation (at least among adolescents and young adults) can lend an oral tone to the messages (2011: 62).

In the comments analysed, the use of suspension dots at least appears to speak in favour of this interpretation. When it comes to the function of trailing dots, the type of CMC studied in the present analysis indeed combines aspects of spoken and written language.

Before moving on, the last type of suspension dots listed in Table 12 above needs to be mentioned briefly. In both corpora, suspension dots are occasionally used to let enumerations trail off, i.e. to replace *etc.* at the end of lists.

(178) [...] A lot of artists and writers are very unpleasant. Frank Sinatra, Jim Morrison ...... the list is endless. [...] [CMC G06-060 c4]

(179) Taxes on socially useless banks (Editorial, 28 August), cancellation of Big Brother, the state rebuilding the railways, football violence ... are we at last entering the first stage of a post-Thatcherite renaissance? [NEWS G08-011]

This usage constitutes the clearest link between the function of signalling omission and that of representing pauses. In (179) above, the dots can even be considered to glue the fragments together, thus illustrating once more the overlapping functions of this punctuation mark. Less frequent but no less interesting is the next punctuation mark to be discussed here, i.e. the slash.

5.2.4.4.4 Slashes

If slashes used in hyperlinks or to indicate line breaks in quotes from poems or songs are excluded, only 21 can be found in the letters, compared to 90 in the comments (see Table 9 above).

Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1764) describe two uses of the slash, which are (a) to indicate "an 'or' relationship", as in 'flat/apartment', and (b) "as an alternate of the long hyphen", as in 'staff/student relations'. They stress that the 'or' relationship is an inclusive one, i.e. the relationship between the entities combined with a slash is not one of 'either/or' but one of 'and/or'.

In the letters, slashes are usually of the first type, i.e. they indicate alternatives or rather combinations (as in (180) and (181), where they can only be replaced by 'and'). In addition, the slash may stand for 'per' (182) or appear in the fixed expression '9/11', used to refer to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. All in all, the use of the slash is fairly rare and shows little variation: the 21 occurrences are spread across 14 letters only, and the combination 'HIV/Aids' is responsible for four occurrences, all within the same letter.

(180) […] As part of my doctorate research on A/AS re-sits, I interviewed some Year 13 students from three schools/colleges earlier this year. […] [NEWS T07-032.2]

(181) While a student at Hackney Downs school in the late 1970s/early 1980s, we were always […] [NEWS G07-101]

(182) […] The idea of making air travel more expensive is logical, as on a cost/mile basis it is cheap when compared to road or rail travel and much of it is unneccessary. […] [NEWS T09-056.3]

With 90 occurrences in 67 comments, the slash is decidedly more frequent in the CMC corpus. However, this corpus is fairly similar to that of letters in the types of usage found, the major difference being that in addition to the usage described above, the slash also appears in figures (183), for reasons of gender neutrality (184) and with other word forms besides nouns, such as verbs (185), adjectives (186) or pronouns (187).

(183) […] It costs 1/5 of the price of a bottle of mineral water. […] [CMC T07-022 c20]

(184) […] S/he offered to have the waste buried in his/her garden. […] [CMC G09-051 c13]

(185) Having spent many years instructing/supervising outdoor pursuits I have always been required to ensure the personal safety of those in my care. […] [CMC T10-055 c8]

(186) I fail to understand why anyone should be angry/sad/bitter/ suprised/sad or evince any other reaction to the release of Megrahi. […] [CMC G07-083 c7]

(187) […] Wake up. Look outside the UK to see how/what others are doing. […] [CMC G07-005 c7]

The data also show that commenters are slightly more creative than letter writers. While some words occur several times (e.g. '9/11' and 'rich/poor divide', the latter illustrating the use of the slash instead of a long hyphen), the majority of occurrences are ad-hoc creations. Some uses seem superfluous, as in (188) and (189) below, where the two terms combined with the help of the slash are nearly synonymous, yet other cases clearly reveal the expressive potential of such combinations. Even if the adjectives in (186) above and (190) below are closely related semantically, their co-presence adds vigour to the respective commenter's argument. A similar effect is achieved by the poster quoted in (191) below, who first criticises the author's argument explicitly ('rubbish') and then accuses him indirectly of not having devoted enough time, energy and thought to his article by suggesting not only one but several scenarios of how the text was produced. These alternatives, together with the use of a pseudo quote (i.e. putting statements into the author's mouth that he would never make), lend great force to the criticism.[225]

(188) […] But what's the deal with the promotion/advertising of all of the off-shore savings accounts (e.g., in Jersey)? […] [CMC G07-067 c7]

(189) [...] Fantastic work coming up with a heading/title that is 100% off the mark. [CMC G07-067 c19]

(190) […] penalties for Carless/reckless/dangerous driving should be much higher. […] [CMC T10-055 c10]

(191) […] For an alleged philosopher [REFERENCE TO AUTHOR] this [REFERENCE TO DIRECT QUOTE FROM ARTICLE] is just rubbish. The rest of it [REFERENCE TO ARTICLE] is just as vague. 'Im on the train/A40/toilet, but I'll give you four sentences anyway.' [...] [CMC G07-035_2 c8]

Such combinations of more than two items (see (186) and (191) above), which are usually not mentioned in grammar books, are more frequent in –

[225] The use of quotes will be discussed in detail in 6.3.2, and criticism is the topic of 7.3.

but not exclusive to – comments, as (192), taken from a letter to the editor, illustrates.

(192) […] The Cameron/Osborne/Grayling [CONSERVATIVE PARTY POLITICIANS] line, should they win the next election, will then link the initiatives and spending of Labour with the "fact" that parts of British society cannot be improved or civilised. […] [NEWS G08-079]

All in all, the comments are thus characterised by a more frequent and versatile use of the slash than the letters.

5.2.4.4.5 Question marks

In contrast to the punctuation marks investigated so far, which all had various functions, that of the question mark is fairly straightforward: "[a]s the name implies, this indicates that the constituent it terminates has the status of a question" (2002: 1732). While the use of the word *constituent* already hints at the existence of embedded questions or interrogative parentheticals (cf. 2002: 1733), Quirk et al. (1985: 1633) prefer to stress in their definition that the clause type need not be interrogative: "[t]his indicates that the sentence it terminates is a question, whether it is interrogative or (less frequently) declarative in form". The only additional function both grammars list is that of marking uncertainty or doubt. In this case, the question mark is placed directly before or after (in the latter case usually enclosed in brackets) the item in doubt (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1734 and Quirk et al. 1985: 1634).

The predominant function of question marks is thus to indicate questions. These are, according to Biber and Conrad (cf. 2009: 7), among the linguistic features that figure more frequently in conversations than other types of language use. It is therefore not surprising that in Sanchez-Stockhammer's (2016) comparison of comics and academic texts, question marks are largely absent from the latter but fairly frequent in the former. This finding is similar to that of Meyer's (1987: 21) comparison of texts from the categories of journalistic, learned and fictional prose taken from the Brown Corpus: question marks are most frequent in fictional and largely absent from learned style, with some occurrences in journalistic prose.[226] Yet questions are not only a feature of dialogues; they also figure prominently in certain types of monologues, e.g. political speeches, which may contain a considerable number of (rhetorical) questions (cf. e.g. Ilie 1994). This usage, however, does not necessarily contradict Biber's (1988: 227) claim

[226] Meyer (1987) simply speaks of *journalistic prose;* his appendix shows, however, that his investigation is based on an equal number of texts from the press categories *reportage*, *editorial* and *reviews* of the Brown Corpus.

that questions "indicate a concern with interpersonal functions and involvement with the addressee". Even rhetorical questions in monologic texts, i.e. cases where no answer is expected, have the function to elicit some kind of mental response in the reader. This is reflected in Ilie's (1994: 128), definition of the concept:

> A rhetorical question is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser's commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressee's mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity.

She comes to the conclusion that in argumentative discourse – to which both letters to the editor and online comments clearly belong – the main discursive functions of rhetorical questions are to "induce, reinforce, or alter assumptions, beliefs, or ideas, in the addressee's mind" (1994: 128). Thus, even though neither form of reader response is as interactive as a spoken dialogue, question marks can be expected to occur there with a far greater frequency than in academic texts.

As Table 9 above illustrates, utterances ending with a question mark are fairly common overall, the comments slightly exceeding the letters (N=484 vs. N=425). Yet while the letter writers ask almost as many questions as the readers commenting online, they produce a substantially greater number of words overall. If this difference in length of contribution is considered, the contrast between the two corpora becomes far more marked (55.6 vs. 33.7 occurrences per 10,000 words).[227] Interestingly though, the number of contributions containing question marks is almost identical: 297 comments vs. 294 letters. While this means that the ratio of utterances ending in question marks per contribution is slightly higher in the comments, multiple occurrences also exist in the letters, which may contain up to six such sentences.[228] In the comments, the highest number of direct questions within a single contribution is nine.[229]

Far more interesting than overall occurrences, however, is a brief look at contextual features. First of all, the present corpora differ from most forms of spoken conversation in that the overwhelming majority of questions do

[227] Two ways of accounting for this difference in ratio come to mind: either the proportion of utterances ending in question marks is decidedly lower in the letters or the sentences in the letters corpus are simply longer than those in the comments. As it was not possible to count the sentences and measure their length automatically, both explanations are possible, as is a combination of the two.

[228] Two letters contain six questions: NEWS G07-085 and NEWS T08-014. With 161 and 146 words respectively, these letters are longer than average (126 words) but not exceedingly long.

[229] Two comments contain nine questions: CMC G06-M13 c11 and CMC G07-035.2 c11. With 538 and 693 words respectively, these are among the longest ones in the corpus.

not have a clear addressee. In multi-party discourse, however, identifying the addressee is a necessary step if the question is to be answered. Thus, if reader response is not simply understood as the audience talking back to the newspaper, one could expect more questions to have a clearly identifiable addressee. That this is not the case is of course linked to the fact that the majority of questions do not constitute a request for information – or an *inquiry*, as Huddleston and Pullum (cf. 2002: 866) prefer to call this pragmatic concept – but rather an argumentative device. In the corpus of letters, only six questions are directed at the journalist or newspaper (193), and a mere five questions are directed at another letter writer (194).

(193) "Leonard Cohen, songwriter and poet, 75; Liam Gallagher, singer-songwriter and poet, 37" (Birthdays, 21 September). Are you suggesting Leonard Cohen can't sing? [NEWS G11-032]

(194) Sir, Toby Mullins [LETTER WRITER] (letter, Sept 1) suggests that a parent might wish to know which school is best for a child of average ability. Does he actually know any parents who think that their child falls into that category? [NEWS T08-025]

However, as these examples illustrate, even these questions do not constitute genuine requests for information but rather a tongue-in-cheek reproach for having painted an incomplete or at least inconsistent picture (193) and a strategy to dismantle the argument made in a previous letter (194).[230] True requests for information or clarification are rare, but the one in (195) below, which is directed at the general readership, is met with no less than four responses, the first being quoted in (196). Interestingly, even questions that are clearly meant as statements rather than requests for information may receive an answer from another reader, as (197) illustrates.[231]

(195) I want to do my bit, but I can't be the only one who has trouble visualising a tonne of carbon dioxide. Can anyone help? How many would fit on Wales? [NEWS G11-011]

(196) Rod Warrington [LETTER WRITER] (Letters, 21 September) wants to know what one tonne of carbon dioxide looks like. CO2 is a gas that is invisible and

[230] The letter writer addressed in (194) adopts the position of a professional and speaks in his role as headmaster of a college. The strategy of claiming expert status will be discussed in 7.4.2 and matters of interaction and addressivity (note how the reader in (194) is referred to in the third person) will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 6 below.

[231] The letter writer replied to in (197) asks a whole battery of rhetorical questions, expressing how utterly scandalous he considers the situation barristers find themselves in. (This letter is quoted in excerpts as (215) on p. 199 below). He clearly does not want people from other professions to step forward and claim that they are treated equally badly, as this would be counterproductive to his aim of drawing attention to the singular plight of barristers.

odourless, so visualising it is hard. How about this? An ordinary-size balloon would hold 10g by weight of pure CO2. […] [NEWS G11-047]

(197) Sir, In his letter regarding barristers' pay (Sept 8) Sir Ivan Lawrence [LETTER WRITER] asks "Is there any other profession in the land where the income is so disgracefully low?" The answer is yes: the acting profession. […] [NEWS T09-064]

The picture emerging from the analysis of the comments is similar: the journalist or newspaper is asked a question on only 16 occasions and another user on 19.[232] Yet again, these questions usually do not constitute requests for information but rather support the commenter's line of argumentation, as (198) illustrates, where the user even proceeds to answer one of his/her own questions immediately.

(198) […] Oh, and 'Nettleton' [USER] if these bankers are so "high powered" how come they led the global economy into disaster? How many of them saw the recession coming? I'll tell you how many. None. […] [CMC G06-M13 c11]

As was the case in the corpus of letters, true requests for information or clarification are rare in the comment sections, which may seem surprising given the comparative ease with which such platforms can be used to interact with other users.[233] If they are used, they may also be addressed to the wider audience (199) instead of individual users.

(199) […] The DCFS [DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES] website does not mention which private contractor built this database. Does anyone know? […] [CMC G10-086 c9]

So far, it has been shown that despite the great number of questions in both corpora, they are usually not directed at any particular member of the larger group of participants in the communicative situation, and even if they are, they usually do not constitute a request for information. Instead, they may be used to raise questions that have not been answered (or raised) in the newspaper article (see (200) and (201) below) or to criticise others, e.g. the newspaper, as illustrated by (202) below.

(200) […] Perhaps we need to celebrate the achievements of pupils from independent schools, rather than appear to condemn them for widening the gap between state and private school education, and ask the question: why aren't state schools achieving similar results? [NEWS G07-005]

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232 In this count, only direct questions marked by a question mark were considered. The number of direct questions addressed to the journalist/newspaper and other readers is slightly higher in both corpora because question marks are sometimes omitted, as will be discussed in 5.2.4.4.6 below.

233 For a comparison of the two types of reader response in terms of their interactional patterns see chapter 6 below.

(201) The government love databases of our private lives run by their corporate friends. Anyone hacking this gets a list of every vulnerable child in the country.
Does central government need this information? Would it be better held by individual schools and social services departments? Would the £224 million have been better spent on actual childrens services? […] [CMC G10-086 c9]

(202) He's run half a second faster than the legendary Jesse Owens. He's taken an unbelievable 0.11 of a second off his own 100m world record. So what does Usain Bolt have to do to get his picture on the front page (17 August) instead of the latest plucky British medal winner? Grow wings and fly ? [NEWS G06-007]

While all of these questions are relevant and worth pondering, the contributors asking them do not expect an answer. Instead, they intend to signal that their question is where the focus of interest should lie (200) and that the questions they raise should be debated openly (201). The question in (202), in contrast, constitutes an unmistakable reproach, which is further intensified by a second, syntactically reduced question in which the letter writer offers an answer to the first one by painting an impossible scenario ('Grow wings and fly?'), thus suggesting that Bolt's picture will never make the front page.

In reader response, questions are thus above all used as an argumentative strategy: when voicing their opinion and, in particular, when arguing against somebody else's position or point of view, readers often ask (rhetorical) questions or even sequences of (rhetorical) questions to communicate their stance and – more importantly – convince other readers by seeking their agreement. This usage is best described by looking at such questions in their wider context: (203) and (204) below represent longer excerpts from a letter and comment respectively, and in both contributions, the readers use a series of questions to convey their standpoints. While these are not directed at a particular individual, they still involve the addressees, i.e. the general readership, by encouraging them to think about and answer the respective question for themselves – the intended answer of course being already implied.

(203) Sir, I was somewhat disappointed to read "Going cheap — Decent MPs cost decent money" (leader, Sept 9). The logic quite escapes me, as it would appear that the MPs' expenses scandal has been quickly forgotten. If huge and uncontrolled expenses failed to provide quality MPs, why should increasing their salary?
Would we have better doctors or train drivers if we paid them more? No, in a system where there is even a small oversupply, we will receive the same service at a higher price. […] Will an increase in MPs' salaries persuade less efficient MPs to stand aside for the most able candidates, thus raising the quality of the House? No.

> The article seems to imply that all potential MPs are driven by a desire for vast rewards and that, magically, raising the potential rewards will increase the quality. I rather feel that the only "quality" such a rise will engender is avarice. […] [NEWS T09-057.1]

The letter quoted in (203) is opened with a negative evaluation of the newspaper article reacted to. However, rather than openly criticising its author, the writer prefers to speak of being 'somewhat disappointed' and hedges the criticism even further by only referring to him/herself and not the author ('the logic quite escapes me' instead of 'your argument fails to make sense').[234] This evaluation and the reference to the expenses scandal already communicate the writer's stance and set the scene for the first question. Interestingly, this question is preceded by a conditional clause which presupposes a lack of quality MPs. It is thus evident that the reader's question is simply a way of challenging the journalist's proposal to increase their salaries, rather than a request to list reasons for such an increase. The next two questions are straightforward yes/no questions with the same function. While it should already be obvious to all readers at that stage what the answer to each of them should be, the letter writer even provides not only an answer to both of them ('No') but also explains the reasoning behind it.

The persuasive strategy of the commenter quoted in (204) is similar: the opening lines of the comment make his/her position quite clear.

(204) There is something of a conflict between getting a good education and having a workforce with the skills needed to meet the demands of employers. There are many people who have no university experience who have an excellent education and of course, sadly, those with university degrees who seem to show no signs of ever having acquired a single piece of knowledge. What is the reason behind having 50% of people in higher education? If it is to broaden and deepen the overall education of the community then we should be aiming for 100%, not 50%. If it is to provide a trained workforce, then different types of education, some not academically based, but technically based, are needed.
The present A level system seems to provide a ceiling effect. It clearly isn't differentiating the very very able from the capable, but then is this really what we want? Take medicine. […] Wouldn't a less academically able, but more socially skilled individual be a better doctor? I want someone who cares, as well as being knowledgeable. […] [CMC G07-005 c11]

The first question ('What is the reason …?') is followed by two alternative answers in the form of conditional constructions. Neither reply is presented as more plausible than the other, which strongly invites the conclusion that

[234] For a more detailed analysis of criticism directed at the journalist see 7.3.4.1, which also includes a brief discussion of this example.

the target, i.e. 50% in higher education, is not one that should be pursued, whatever the reasons for it may be. The commenter then goes on to state a problem, which is again followed by a question ('… but then is this really what we want?') intended to prod the readers into examining the problem and answering the question for themselves. In this process, however, they are guided rather firmly by the commenter. First of all, he/she uses *inclusive we* to evoke a sense of community and agreement, presupposing that what he/she wants is the same as what other readers want. He/she then suggests an example ('Take medicine') and asks a further question – this time a negative yes/no question ('Wouldn't a less …?'), which is always conducive (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 808) or biased towards a certain answer (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 883f.). In this case, the bias is clearly towards a positive one ('Yes, a less academically able …'), i.e. the question could be rephrased as an assertion with *surely*, both structures containing an element of disbelief (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 809) and constituting an attempt to get the addressee to agree.[235]

In terms of structural characteristics, it is worth noting that questions are often placed at the beginning of reader contributions and thus in a fairly prominent position: in 56 letters and 69 comments they constitute the opening move. Declarative questions are surprisingly frequent – not just in the comments (N=94) but also in the letters (N=44). These questions have the syntax of a declarative sentence or simply constitute a clause fragment but are nevertheless marked as a question by a final question mark or, in the case of speech, rising intonation (cf. 1985: 814).[236] They are thus indirect speech acts (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 868ff.) and commonly considered "rather casual in tone" (Quirk et al. 1985: 814). In (205), (206)

[235] Interestingly, in their discussion of rhetorical questions, Quirk et al. (cf. 1985: 825f.) paraphrase all their examples of rhetorical yes/no questions with *surely*. This modal adjunct is particularly popular among letter writers: it occurs in 45 letters. In the comments, its use is not quite as wide spread (N= 28), yet its overall frequency, just like that of questions, is clearly related to the argumentative function of reader response: "*Surely* is used only epistemically, and characteristically with persuasive intent, inviting agreement" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 207). Even more interesting, however, is that *surely* can also be used in declarative sentences ending with a question mark (N=8 in the letters and N=7 in the comments, see (214) below). As will be argued below, in these cases, the persuasive intent is even more striking.

[236] However, the link between rising intonation and yes/no questions appears to be far weaker than commonly assumed. As Levinson (2010: 2742) puts it: "For those raised on the standard assumption of rising intonation as a universal marker of questions, it may be sobering to find that, actually, corpora of spoken English show that at least 50% of yes/no questions are in declarative form, and the great majority of these display falling intonation". It would be interesting to compare the frequency of declarative yes/no questions across different discourse domains. In written conversation they can be expected to be less frequent than in casual speech. In any case, the number of declarative questions in the present corpora is certainly worth mentioning.

and (207) below, where they constitute the opening move, such questions followed by an answer also have the function of establishing coherence between the text reacted to and the reader's contribution.[237] Such question-answer adjacency pairs not only allow the contributors to make explicit what they are referring to but also create an impression of interactivity and dialogicity, which is often coupled with a rather relaxed style; the opening questions in all three examples below are syntactically reduced, (206) uses features commonly associated with spoken interaction ('Hang on – didn't he ...?'), and (207) contains a structure comparable to that of Huddleston and Pullum's (2002: 812) "unintegrated final *not*" discussed above (see 5.2.3.3.4.1). In (208), in contrast, the declarative question is neither used to open the comment nor does it state the topic; rather, it presents a reproach directed at another user, expressing the commenter's incredulity.

(205) Most irritating Latin spellings (Letters, 24 August)? The use of "media" as a singular noun. [NEWS G07-046]

(206) Text speak the fault of the Jackie comic (Letters, 22 September)? The rot begins in Great Expectations, when Pip writes to Joe: MI DEER JO i OPE U R KR WITE WELL i OPE i SHAL SON B HABELL 4 2 TEEDGE U JO AN THEN WE SHORL B SO GLODD AN WEN i M PRENGTD 2 U JO WOT LARX AN BLEVE ME INFXN PIP. I'm re-reading Dickens for any sign of mobile phones. Hang on – didn't he meet Doctor Who? [NEWS G11-064]

(207) Leadership by Example? Not! […] [CMC T07-055 c14]

(208) [...] so you're a vegan, presumably for ethical reasons, but you think burying nuclear waste in the sea won't harm sea creatures? [...] [CMC G09-051 c11]

Some declarative questions are even echo questions, i.e. they constitute the exact repetition of a stimulus but with rising intonation, as in the (209), where the letter writer simply adds a question mark to a quote from the article. According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 886), interlocutors use echo questions in cases where the stimulus might be obscured due to perceptual difficulties to check whether they have understood correctly "or because its content is surprising or remarkable in such a way that I want to verify whether you did in fact say, or mean to say, what I apparently heard". As the possibility of auditory perceptual difficulties can be ruled out in the case of written discourse, the echo question in (209) expresses very effectively the reader's incredulity and surprise.

[237] How coherence is established between the follow-up (i.e. the reader contribution) and its trigger will be examined in detail in 6.3 and 6.4 below.

(209) "Prince Charles speaks for most people's ideas about buildings" (Response, 19 August)? Is this not a slightly more anaemic version of Louis XIV's "l'état c'est moi"? […] [NEWS G06-054]

Interestingly, such echo questions sometimes do not truly *echo* the stimulus, as in (210), which can only be understood as an indirect reply to a post in which a user claims that asylum seekers need to apply for asylum in the first country they enter. The commenter in (210) uses a question mark to signal rising intonation, asking in abbreviated form: 'You ask/wonder why they do not go to …?' even though this question was never asked explicitly.[238] This strategy allows him/her to create the impression of a dialogue, positioning him/herself as the one who can provide an answer.

(210) […] Why they do not go to Switzerland and convince them that they need the asylum?
Because Swiss officials and laws are much smarter, and do not fall for the false stories. […] [CMC G08-074-75 c12]

Before moving on to discuss cases where punctuation marks are clearly missing, an interesting phenomenon warrants mentioning, i.e. the use of the question mark to signal rising intonation in cases where it is not required, as in (211) to (216) below. Even though it is impossible to say what precisely caused these readers to use question marks instead of full stops, these examples – if read out loud – sound like examples of the use of *high-rising tone* (HRT) or *uptalk*, i.e. the phenomenon of "rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences, or (to put it more simply) the tendency for people to make statements that sound like questions" (Warren 2016: i; emphasis deleted). Although this intonation pattern was already commented on decades ago (e.g. Lakoff 1973: 55f. and 1975: 78; for an overview see Warren 2016), it has only recently gained in popularity and, at the same time, received a rather bad press.[239] As if indicative of this trend, the term *uptalk* was added to the *OED Online* in September 2016, where it is defined as a "manner of speaking in which declarative sentences are uttered with rising intonation at the end, a type of intonation more typically associated with questions".[240]

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[238] Compare Warren (cf. 2016: 22), who also discusses an example of an echo question that does not repeat a prior statement but the inference drawn from it. If such cases are included, (205) to (207) can also be considered echo questions used to mimic the dialogic structure of a conversation and to express the reader's surprise or dismay at the same time.

[239] Warren (cf. 2016: 129ff.) provides an interesting review of the way uptalk is presented in the media, including its vilification in opinion pieces and letters to the editor.

[240] "uptalk, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 21 February 2017. Many of the definitions of uptalk also apply to declarative questions, and, indeed, it is difficult to draw a clear line between these two concepts. Any discussion of questions and intonation is further complicated by the fact that terms such as *question* can be used to refer to

(211) i am really struggling to understand how seeking attention for this cause is wrong? […] [CMC G08-017 c18]

(212) Just wondering who Wogan [TERRY WOGAN, RADIO PRESENTER] is ousting at the weekend? [...] [CMC G09-067 c6]

(213) [...] If a person is very sick they can be manipulated into doing what is not always right for them, I think this is a mine field and we could see people killing themselves not because it is what they want but it's what the third party want? [CMC T11-032 c15]

(214) […] If the BNP's policies are welcome then we will elect them; if they are not then we will reject them. Surely this is how our democratic political system is meant to operate? [NEWS T09-058]

(215) [...] Is there any other profession in the land where the income is so disgracefully low? Trainee nurses, teachers and policemen earn much more, while half the criminal Bar, the largest section of barristers, does not even earn a living? And this pittance is to be cut further by the Government by a quarter? Is anyone else asking how long our proud system of criminal justice, in which those charged with crime are represented by independent-minded lawyers not in thrall to government or even an employer, can resist this onslaught? [...] [NEWS T09-020]

(216) Sir, While I agree, as a farmer for more than 50 years, that judicious use of selenium fertilser for wheat could do no harm to the environment, I question whether this is the most efficacious way of using it? [...] [NEWS T10-002.2]

While Lakoff (1973: 56) associates such a rising intonation pattern with women's language and describes it as the "unwillingness to assert an opinion carried to an extreme", this view has been widely challenged, even if negative attitudes remain common (cf. Cameron 2007: 112ff.). Warren (2016: 47) also addresses the discrepancy between the public's perception of the phenomenon and the views adopted by experts, who list among its functions "uncertainty, continuation, deference, verification, facilitation, checking, grounding, negotiation, implication and lack of confidence". His own account is both detailed and insightful: not only does he discuss the use of uptalk in the major English varieties, drawing attention to social as well as stylistic variation, but he also includes a historical perspective and even takes a look at other languages.

Limitations of space unfortunately preclude a detailed discussion of the use and function of uptalk, yet a few comments on the examples above

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the function of an utterance as well as its syntactic form (cf. e.g. Borge 2013: 411f. and Warren 2016: 22f.). While declarative questions are functional questions with the syntactic form of a declarative, i.e. they are used to elicit information, the term *uptalk* is used for utterances that have the syntactic form of a declarative coupled with rising intonation but are used to impart information rather than seek it, i.e. they function as statements (cf. 2016: 22).

show how intriguing this phenomenon is and how difficult its analysis can be, especially in the case of written discourse.[241] First of all, one could argue that in (211), (212) and (216), the choice of punctuation was also influenced by semantic aspects: the declarative sentences contain embedded questions in the form of a subordinate clause. In such cases, the embedded question does not take a question mark (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1733), yet the utterance could still be rephrased as a direct question, i.e. ‘How is seeking ...?’, ‘Who is Wogan ousting ...?’ and ‘Is this the most ...?’. In a similar vein, the letter writer in (214) uses *surely* to invite agreement. As touched upon above, this is a function closely associated with that of negative yes/no questions, and, indeed, the utterance could be rephrased as a conducive question using ‘Isn’t this ...?’.[242] In (215), which was already commented on briefly above, the two declarative sentences ending with question marks (‘Trainee nurses ...?’, ‘And this pittance ...?’) are surrounded by rhetorical questions signalling the letter writer’s incredulity and could easily be replaced with constructions such as ‘How can it be that ...?’ or ‘Why on earth do/is ...?’. Yet this fairly close link to questions is not present in (213), where the commenter clearly makes a statement (‘I think ...’) but nevertheless chooses to end it with a question mark. What the examples above share is that the rising intonation appears to be used to seek or invite a response, i.e. acknowledgement or agreement, on the part of the readers (cf. Warren 2016: 60ff.).

Even if the examples briefly discussed here may not be the most prototypical representatives of uptalk and even if the choice of punctuation may also have been influenced by the fact that some of these statements are closely related to questions in terms of structure or function, there appears to be a clear link to the multi-faceted phenomenon of uptalk – a subject that certainly calls for further investigation, especially regarding its transfer to written language.

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[241] Warren (2016: 2), despite his focus on spoken language, admits that “question marks can of course be used to mark uptalk in written texts”, adding, however, that “they are of little use as a guide in dealing with what is largely a spoken phenomenon” (2016: 2). True as this may be, the examples above can be claimed to mimic this intonational phenomenon in written discourse, and, indeed, even Warren (2016: 110) argues that “we can also observe a spread into written English”. However, this claim is only backed up with a brief comment on how Donna Tartt uses question marks to represent these patterns as produced by the protagonist of her novel *The Goldfinch*, which, as the rendition of speech in fictional texts, is a rather special representative of written English. Emails are only mentioned in passing, thus making an investigation of uptalk in CMC all the more promising.

[242] As briefly touched on above, several further examples of declarative sentences with *surely* coupled with a question mark can be found in both corpora (N=8 in the letters and N=7 in the comments).

To return to the overarching topic of punctuation, the above has shown that even though both question marks and questions are fairly frequent in both corpora, the majority of questions are not asked to elicit information. In Searle's (1969: 66) view such questions are infelicitous, since the preparatory condition that the speaker "S does not know 'the answer'" is not met.[243] Rather than constituting an attempt to elicit information, most questions in the present corpora constitute an attempt to elicit agreement – a function that is in line with the argumentative nature and persuasive function of reader response.[244] It is important to stress at this point that the discussion above has focused solely on those questions marked by a question mark, i.e. formal ones, the focus of the present chapter being on punctuation. Of course, far more utterances fall under the move (i.e. the functional category) of *asking a question* or *eliciting information*, e.g. those with embedded questions or requests for information in imperative form. Moreover, any analysis based solely on punctuation also misses those cases where question marks – or any other punctuation mark – are lacking despite being required, which is the next topic to be discussed.

5.2.4.4.6 Missing or wrong punctuation

So far, the analysis has focused on those punctuation marks found; yet as outlined above, CMC is often claimed to be characterised by an absence of punctuation in places where it is required. This kind of analysis is more cumbersome as it cannot rely on lexical searches; nevertheless, a few comments about the absence or faulty use of punctuation in the present corpora are in order.

The omission of punctuation is certainly most striking in the case of direct questions. All in all, 10 such cases were identified in the letters, compared to 39 in the comments, the latter being distributed across 30 contributions. Omitting the question mark is thus more frequent when commenting online, but it may also occur in letters to the editor.

(217) Wait a minute: aren't the financial service industries supposed to service something (Reforming finance: Daring Adair, 28 August). […] [NEWS G08-027)

(218) Why, in Know your headaches (G2, 18 August), did you omit headaches caused by blocked sinuses/sinusitis – certainly a more common cause of headache than brain tumours or haemorrhage. […] [NEWS G06-100]

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[243] Searle (cf. 1969: 69) allows for an exception, i.e. so-called exam questions, where the speaker already knows the information elicited. In these cases, the question is not a request for information but a request to display one's knowledge.

[244] Also see Borge's (2013) discussion of agreement seeking questions.

(219) [...] Are they any better for it. Nope. [...] [CMC G08-104 c18]

(220) Horn [USER], what are you on about. Playing to the peanut gallery sounds very amusing but what does it mean. […] [CMC G06-046 c17]

(221) […] What is wrong with that picture? Do we ban all photos of anyone under the age of 16? Do we prosecute people for looking at pictures.
Where has common sense gone to in this country? [CMC G10-023-25 c9]

While (219) and especially (220) might give the impression that question marks are not considered necessary in CMC, (221) illustrates that punctuation marks are often used inconsistently, which in turn suggests that lacking question marks may also be the result of fast writing and less careful (or no) proofreading. In (217) and (218), the question marks may have been omitted by the respective letter writer or lost in the process of editing; in any case, they illustrate that even letters to the editor are not free from mistakes. When viewed in this light, the number of missing question marks in the comments appears to be comparatively small – after all, this form of reader response is produced under different circumstances and not edited.

Full stops may also be missing or be replaced by suspension dots (see 5.2.4.4.3 above), dashes or commas, especially if the sentence structure is fairly loose. As commented on briefly above, their absence is both comparatively frequent and noticeable at the end of comments (N=51), where a final full stop could be perceived as too harsh a boundary, especially in fairly short contributions (222). In contrast, only four letters lack a final punctuation mark, as in (223), where its absence is unlikely to have been a conscious choice.

(222) This seems to indicate the advisability of single sex schooling [CMC T08-032 c16]

(223) […] However, closing off such a popular area of moorland on the Saturday of August bank holiday weekend is simply unacceptable [NEWS G08-058]

Commas, even though not discussed above, usually help readers to break down sentences into smaller units. Their absence may lead to sentences that are difficult to process (224), as does the absence of paired dashes or round brackets to mark parentheses (225). In such cases, repeated reading is necessary to decipher the underlying structure. Readers of (225), for instance, probably need some time to grasp that ‘real’, ‘decent’ and ‘principled’ all premodify the noun phrase ‘independent government’, which means that ‘with a view to what MacAskill did last week’ is a parenthesised element modifying ‘principled’.

(224) As far as anyone is prepared to quote numbers the government's annual deficit is 175bn. […] [CMC G10-056-59 c8]

(225) [...] Devolution may be a fudge to you. To me it's a stepping stone to real and decent and possibly with a view to what MacAskill [THE SCOTTISH JUSTICE SECRETARY] did last week principled independent government. [...] [CMC G07-083 c18]

If commas are placed in positions where they are not required, understanding may also be slightly hampered, yet usually such superfluous commas are fairly easy to ignore (226). All in all, such faulty use of punctuation is decidedly more frequent in the comments, even though the letters are not free from mistakes either; in (227), the comma before 'it's taken' had better be replaced with a semicolon or a full stop, whereas (228) would read better without commas.

(226) […] The fact that this wealthy elite can make a disproportionate amount of noise, should not be a shock to anybody. […] [CMC G06-046 c17]

(227) […] We were told that engineering was a sunset industry and that leisure, tourism and finance were the future, it's taken a generation but the country has finally found out where relying on the City will get you. […] [NEWS G07-057]

(228) […] Even more to be blamed, than the small shareholders, are the hedge funds which piled in to Northern Rock shares on the speculation that the market was undervaluing them. […] [NEWS G06-087]

The observations above are not intended to represent a full account of the absence or faulty use of punctuation in reader response; after all, little is to be gained from such an approach. Rather, the examples are meant to provide some insights into the inconsistencies and deviations found, illustrating that errors occur in both types, even though they are decidedly more frequent in the comments. In both corpora, it is impossible to trace these deviations back to a specific cause. Sentences like those quoted above may be the result of a lack of knowledge, but they could just as well be a sign of complacency, unintentional sloppiness or even carelessness. In the case of the letters, the mistake could even be caused by several people besides the letter writer, making it even harder to account for it. Yet while it is surely mistaken to assume that commenters in general are ignorant of punctuation, there is no denying that some have a more nonchalant attitude towards linguistic correctness than many readers of newspapers are used to. In any case, the above has shown that punctuation in the comments is not fully aberrant and that some of the particularities identified can also be found in the letters. As always, there is an exception to this rule: the use of iterated punctuation marks to be addressed in the following.

5.2.4.4.7 Iteration of punctuation marks

As outlined above, the use of multiple punctuation marks is commonly considered one of the emblematic features of CMC (cf. Squires 2010). It is associated with playfulness and informality (cf. e.g. Tseliga 2007: 121) as well as the desire to express strong emotions (cf. e.g. Luginbühl 2003, who analyses verbal arguments in IRC) or to give the written text a spoken feel (cf. e.g. Danet 2001: 17). One could thus expect this feature to be absent from letters to the editor but fairly common in below-the-line comments.

While multiple punctuation could indeed not be found in the corpus of letters, it is used in only 28 comments. Even if the total number of occurrences is slightly higher (N=37), this finding seems to undermine the prevalent picture of CMC as being characterised by excessive punctuation. In line with previous findings (cf. e.g. Herring and Zelenkauskaite 2008 and Tseliga 2007), the iteration of exclamation marks (229) is more frequent than that of question marks (230), with 25 occurrences of the former and only nine of the latter. Combinations (231) are also possible, but with only three occurrences, these are fairly rare, just as they were in the text messages analysed by Herring and Zelenkauskaite (2008). As the examples below illustrate, punctuation marks are iterated above all in critical contributions, where they emphasise the commenter's exasperation, incredulity or anger.

(229) The problem with Lib Dem is Nick Clegg [AT THE TIME LEADER OF THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS] - the man doesn't have an opinion on anything!! […] [CMC G11-001 c16]

(230) […] And finally, given the recent high profile cock-ups with **data-protection** making the headlines, and given that this database will include the *name and address*, *and a psychological profile of a child* (ie - weaknesses, points of emotional vulnerability etc), **are we not placing 11 million children in far greater danger than if we just left them alone**?? […] [G10-086 c11]

(231) […] Just look at the cost of an album on iTunes compared to a CD – it's not greatly lowered (and no shipping, raw materials processing, no production line staff to pay, either) - and why!?! […] [CMC T10-039 c13]

In their analysis of gender differences in Italian text messages, Herring and Zelenkauskaite (2008) also investigate, among other features, the use of repeated punctuation. They find women to employ every subtype[245] more

[245] In addition to the types investigated in the present analysis, Herring and Zelenkauskaite (2008) also include repeated dots, which they apparently consider a repetition of the full stop. However, in the present study, this category was analysed as a feature in its own right (see 5.2.4.4.3 above), as iterated dots are functionally different from iterated exclamation or question marks. Instead of adding emphasis to the first punctuation mark, additional dots rather

frequently than men, arguing that "women's greater use of non-standard typography may communicate feminine qualities of expressiveness, friendliness, and playfulness (childishness)" (2008: 88).[246] Although the gender of the commenters is not known, the present data clearly reveal that in the majority of cases, the iteration is neither a sign of friendliness nor playfulness. All in all, only four of the 27 comments do not contain criticism, and in only one of these four comments is repeated punctuation used in a joke. The comment in question (232) is one of the comments on an article reporting the theft of tropical birds from a museum that are immediately criticised for being 'flippant' and thus inappropriate replies to such a serious topic.[247] In a further two comments, the users simply debate a topic without voicing explicit criticism (233), and in (234), the commenter shares his personal weight loss experiences, repeatedly using multiple punctuation. While these instances could be interpreted as signs of informality and attempts to make the text appear more lively, the strong link between repeated punctuation and criticism or even anger cannot be denied, as illustrated by (229) to (231) above and (235) below, where it is combined with capitalisation (see 5.2.3.3 above).

(232) Seems like they have flown the nest !!!! […] [CMC T06-001 c3]

(233) […] Slippery slope it is!!!! [CMC T11-032 c7]

(234) […] but in general, I now sup about 5 litres of cranberry and apple juice a week instead of 5 times that in lager!! [...] [CMC G09-008 c11]

(235) Gordon Brown HONEST!!! Come off it. […] [G07-083 c11]

This usage is in line with research reporting that complaints in social networks are often "emotionally charged" and that "[c]omplainants often stress their statements by lining up multiple punctuation marks or by using capital letters for parts of their complaint" (Hogreve et al. 2013: 530). Repeated punctuation is even used when providing positive feedback and encouragement (236) if the overall purpose is to voice the commenter's anger about the general situation and to criticise a third party.

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weaken its function – i.e. to mark sentence boundaries (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1729f.). In light of this fundamental difference and the fact that ellipsis points are commonly considered to represent a unit, i.e. *one* punctuation mark (cf. 2002: 1726), it seemed more helpful to consider occurrences of iterated dots as ellipsis points/suspension dots rather than iterated uses of the full stop.

[246] As commented on briefly above, Herring (2012: 2) uses the term *typography* to refer to "the use of nonalphabetic keyboard symbols such as numbers, punctuation, and special symbols such as <, $, and @".

[247] For the reprimand see (134) discussed on p. 173 above.

(236) Excellent article, Jonathan [AUTHOR] - glad someone here's not taking this shit lying down!!! […] [CMC G08-104 c20]

Multiple punctuation marks in the present corpus are thus clearly "emotion-tinged" (Baron and Ling 2011: 61). However, in contrast to previous studies and prevalent opinion, they are found in only a small minority of comments.[248]

In sum, comparing the use of punctuation in the two related genres has proven to be a fruitful endeavour. On the one hand, the analysis has clearly demonstrated the need to move beyond automated searches and surface-level characteristics. On the other, it has revealed some intriguing stylistic and functional differences. With respect to the "complaint often voiced in popular media […] that traditional punctuation in EMC [electronically-mediated communication] is either non-existent or random" (Baron and Ling 2011: 56) the findings are clear: while the comments are characterised, overall, by a more lax attitude towards punctuation and more variation than the letters, punctuation still serves important functions, which makes it highly unlikely that it is abandoned any time soon. In fact, some of the features considered typical of CMC punctuation could also be identified in the letters, and while there are still differences between the genres in numbers and frequency, these are not as pronounced as one might have expected. Maynor's (1994: 50) description of punctuation as serving "to add conversational touches" to CMC quoted above (see 5.2.4.3) is surprisingly to the point despite the years that have passed since her observations. It is thus to a certain extent understandable that CMC is considered a blend between speaking and writing: not only is the punctuation in the comments far less systematic than in formal written discourse, it can also be used to mimic features of spoken discourse (e.g. hesitation and pauses). However, some letters to the editor show similar tendencies, and it will be interesting to observe how both genres develop in the future.

[248] As argued above, suspension dots were excluded from the analysis even though previous studies discussed them together with repeated question and exclamation marks. Critics might argue that cases of more than three or – if one allows for typos – four successive dots are deliberate uses of iterated dots and that excluding these cases distorts the findings. After all, suspension dots are not only fairly frequent in the present data but also vary in length, the longest sequence counting 18 individual dots (see 5.2.4.4.3 above). However, only 17 comments contain trailing dots with more than four individual dots and another 17 comments contain sequences of exactly four dots. Even if these cases were included here, the overall percentage of comments containing multiple punctuation would still not exceed six per cent.

5.2.5 Spelling

In addition to discussing the use of capitalisation and punctuation, many researchers describe CMC as having a characteristic spelling. These deviations from standard orthography can be grouped quite nicely according to the formal strategies employed. However, the individual categories are not mutually exclusive: since the *respelling* of a word can often be attributed to different strategies simultaneously, overlaps exist.[249] Many respellings representing casual or even regional pronunciation for instance (see 5.2.5.1 below) are at the same time ways of abbreviating the word in question (see 5.2.5.3 below).

5.2.5.1 Phonetic respellings: standard, casual and regional pronunciation

Changes in spelling that are motivated by the pronunciation of the word or words in question rank among the most common deviations from standard orthography in CMC (cf. e.g. Lyddy et al. 2014). Depending on whether the substitution or omission of certain letters is intended to represent standard, casual or regional pronunciation, three different types of what in the following will be called *phonetic respelling* can be distinguished.[250]

The first group, i.e. deviations that represent standard pronunciation, has up to date received rather little attention in CMC research. Referring to Balhorn's paper on dialect renderings in writing (cf. 1998: 60), Androutsopoulos (cf. 2000: 521) uses 'wuz' for 'was' to illustrate this peculiarity, and Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan (2005: 417), who describe this feature as "spelling a word just as it is pronounced", give 'lata' for 'later' and 'wots' for 'what's' as examples from their data. From the examples that Herring (cf. 2012: 2) and Shortis (cf. 2007: 8) provide to illustrate what they call *eye dialect* (i.e. 'sez' instead of 'says' and 'tuff' for 'tough' respectively), it can be deduced that they are referring to the same phenomenon. It is thus assumed that they use the term *eye dialect* in the narrow sense as introduced by Krapp (1925: 228) to describe the literary device of spellings in which "the convention violated is one of the eye, not of the ear" and not in the wider sense of spellings that represent particular

[249] The term *respelling* covers those deviations from standard orthography that are intentional and thus excludes typing errors as well as spelling mistakes (cf. Shortis 2007: 3). Since the latter two are not uncommon in CMC, they will be addressed briefly below (see 5.2.5.6).

[250] Androutsopoulos (2000) distinguishes between *phonetic spellings*, i.e. deviations from standard orthography used to represent standard pronunciation, *colloquial spellings*, i.e. those that represent colloquial pronunciation, and *regiolectal spellings*, i.e. those that represent the pronunciation of regional varieties. Since colloquial and regiolectal spellings are also phonetic spellings, this term will be used as the cover term for these three types in the present study.

regional pronunciations (as in group 3 to be discussed below).[251] With the help of the examples 'sez', 'minit', 'pictsher' and 'wimin' and focusing on such usage in literature only, Krapp (1925: 228) argues that a dialect writer often uses such eye dialect spellings

> not because he intends to indicate here a genuine difference of pronunciation, but the spelling is merely a friendly nudge to the reader, a knowing look which establishes a sympathetic sense of superiority between the author and reader as contrasted with the humble speaker of dialect.

In literary works, eye dialect is most often used in combination with other forms of dialect renderings to portray and characterise the speaker and to establish a close relationship between the author and the reader (cf. Bowdre 1964).[252] However, the use of eye dialect outside the realm of fiction or the representation of direct speech has received very little attention so far. In the context of CMC studies, it is usually only mentioned as one feature among many belonging to the "adaptation of writing to oral interaction" in highly interactive forms of CMC (Deppermann 2011: 443).[253] Since this type of respelling does not visually represent changes in pronunciation but merely draws attention to the way a certain word is pronounced as opposed to the way it is spelt, the additional benefit derived from the change may be difficult to discern, especially if it is not used in combination with other forms of phonetic respellings, such as the visual rendering of dialects or accents. The driving force behind such respellings seems to be the desire to play around with spelling conventions, i.e. creative language use as also

[251] For a short overview of the origin and use of the term *eye dialect* in the broader and narrow sense see Brett (2009).

[252] Dickens, who is, together with Thomas Hardy, Emily Brontë and Terry Pratchett, one of the authors renowned for his use of eye dialect, employs this feature to strengthen the effect of pronunciation spellings and the use of non-standard grammar in the direct speech of his lower class characters. Jo's way of speaking in *Bleak House* is a good example: "Different times, there wos other genlmen come down Tom-all-Alone's a prayin, but they all mostly sed as the t'other wuns prayed wrong […]. We never knowd nothink. I never knowd what it wos all about" (Dickens 1977: 571). In addition to the great number of non-standard features used for dialect rendering, the spelling of 'wos', 'sed' and 'wuns' are clear cases in which "the impression of rendering non-standard speech by non-standard spelling is pure illusion" (Leech and Short 2007: 135). The stylistic effect of this means of characterisation is even more powerful when the use of eye dialect stands in direct contrast to the orthographic norm used to represent the same word in a different character's speech. When Jo echoes Lady Dedlock's question "Is it blessed?" by replying "Blest?" (Dickens 1977: 202), graphology indicates a difference in pronunciation that, according to Leech and Short (2007: 136), does most likely not exist, "and it is to this that the reader reacts in registering the contrast between the dialects between the two speakers".

[253] Again, as was already the case with capitalisation and punctuation, the matter of phonetic respellings is associated with the topic of speech vs. writing and the somehow intermediary position of CMC.

documented on other levels of language use in CMC (see 5.2.5.4 below). Even if the phonetic respelling is shorter than the standard one in many cases, which indicates a certain amount of overlap with simplification and abbreviation strategies (see 5.2.5.3 below), the examples given above seem to support the claim that this is rather a side-effect produced by the complexity of the phoneme to grapheme correspondences in English orthography. This means that as far as this first group of phonetic respellings, i.e. eye dialect, is concerned, the deviation from standard orthography is produced first and foremost for the sake of deviation. According to Jeffries (1996: 187), an eye dialect spelling like ‘wot’ instead of ‘what’ “is a symbol, rather than an accurate representation, of nonstandardness”, which hints at the fact that such spellings might be used as some sort of rebellion against or resistance to standard norms in general. In his study on the construction of youth identity through deviant spelling, Sebba (2003: 168) also highlights the potential for rebellion by arguing that

> the existence of different sound-to-spelling correspondences can be exploited in order to produce a symbolic value. By choosing a non-legitimated spelling option, writers can maintain intelligibility but create symbolic distance; by focussing away from the legitimated norm, they can convey a social meaning through form as well as content.

However, when used in isolation, such a non-standard spelling runs the risk of being mistaken for a spelling mistake instead of a deliberate rejection of the norm. This might explain why this feature seems to be comparatively rare; at least it is not discussed in detail in the literature.

In contrast to eye dialect, the second and third types of respellings, i.e. casual and regiolectal respellings, are, in fact, visual representations of phonetic deviations from standard pronunciation, and their use in CMC has been reported in numerous studies (cf. e.g. Werry 1996, Thaler 2003, Shortis 2007, Dürscheid et al. 2010 and Herring 2012). The most common examples of casual respellings found in the literature are ‘wanna’ and ‘gonna’ for ‘want to’ and ‘going to’, ‘cos’ or similar respellings for ‘because’ and verbs like ‘thinkin’, illustrating the process of *g-clipping*, which is especially frequent in the present continuous. As these examples illustrate, colloquial pronunciation often results in reduction phenomena on the word and/or phrase level, leading to an overlap in this category with features of abbreviation on the one hand and syntactic features, such as reduced forms, on the other. Since casual respellings are employed to mimic casual conversation in writing, their primary function is to make the text appear more informal in style and to establish a relaxed communicative atmosphere.

The last type, i.e. regiolectal or dialectal respellings, is closely related to the group of casual respellings, but in this case the spelling deviation can be attributed to the visual representation of a certain regional variety and not just more wide-spread colloquial language use (cf. Androutsopoulos 2000: 521). Although Thurlow (2003) calls this form of respelling *accent stylisation* and Shortis (2007) *accent simulation*, they group this type together with casual respellings and do not discuss it in greater detail individually. Since respellings can – as already stated above – often be assigned to several functional and formal categories simultaneously, this is, to a certain extent, understandable. However, it does not explain why Thurlow (2003) lists *g*-clippings as an individual type of spelling deviation but groups spellings such as 'girlz' for 'girls', 'wanna' for 'want to' and 'da' for 'the' together under the heading of *accent stylisation*. Whereas 'girlz' is not used to represent changes in pronunciation and therefore belongs to the first group presented above, i.e. eye dialect, 'wanna' mimics the reduction phenomena of casual conversation and therefore belongs to the second type, i.e. casual respellings. The determiner 'da' is more than just a feature of casual pronunciation and should therefore be considered a regiolectal or rather sociolectal variation. *G-clippings* are the written representation of what is generally referred to as *g-dropping* in sociolinguistics and thus a marker of both, social status and formality (cf. e.g. Labov 1966: 394ff. and Trudgill 1974: 84ff.), which makes them possible candidates for the second and third types of respelling at the same time.[254]

The discussion so far has shown that there seem to be two fundamental problems in matching examples to the three categories introduced by Androutsopoulos (2000). First of all, the third group of respellings in his typology is limited to regional varieties only. Spellings such as 'da' for 'the', however, are often not used to represent a regional variety but to position the writer as belonging to or having an affiliation with certain social, ethnic or cultural groups. For this reason, the third category needs to be broadened in order to encompass variation according to region as well as to social group; this category will therefore be renamed *socio-regiolectal respellings*. The second group, i.e. that of colloquial respellings, is thus limited to those respellings that represent reduction phenomena typical of casual spoken interaction.

[254] That inconsistencies in attributing examples to categories are hard to avoid is also illustrated by the fact that Thurlow (2003: 21) terms 'lata' for 'later' a *non-conventional spelling* (a category which corresponds roughly to that of eye dialect as used in the present study) but groups 'afta' for 'after' as *accent stylisation* even though the underlying process and the function fulfilled are identical.

The second point that needs to be addressed is the fact that the boundaries between casual and socio-regiolectal respellings are rather fuzzy, as the example of *g*-dropping as a marker of both social status and formality illustrates. Even in context, drawing the line between what is simply a matter of colloquial speech and what is intended to represent a regional, social, ethnic or cultural variety may be a difficult task. After all, casual pronunciation often has a slight regional tinge and may, for instance, differ between the north and south of a country or speech community, or it may be closely linked to certain social or ethnic features.[255] It is therefore best to conceive of casual and socio-regiolectal respellings as the two poles of a continuum. This makes it possible to position *g*-clippings somewhere along this cline – depending on what other linguistic features can be found in the surrounding text. The two poles, however, clearly differ with respect to the underlying function. Casual respellings, on the one hand, mimic very wide-spread phenomena and therefore "only give 'stylistic' information about the persona being adopted. That is, they say that this person has adopted the low, covert-prestige version of the variable and is hence tough, cool, warm, etc." (Shaw 2008: 43). Regiolectal and social respellings, on the other hand, are used to position the writer sociolinguistically and thus go beyond setting the style and reveal much more about the person communicating (cf. 2008).

In any case, phonetically motivated respellings are always deliberate choices. Even if certain speakers tend to 'drop their *g*s' in spoken interaction, they may not choose to represent this characteristic in writing or may limit such representations to particular contexts. As Sebba (2003) illustrates in the case of youth identities, deviations from standard spelling allow interlocutors to project the identity they claim for themselves (cf. e.g. 2003).[256] In the context of CMC, where all visual and auditory paralinguistic cues are missing, they constitute an important means for interlocutors to influence and shape the communicative atmosphere and to write themselves into being by transmitting identity information.[257]

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[255] This is a common problem in discussions of sociolinguistic variation, which is also mirrored in the *OED*, where the tags *colloquial* and *regional* are frequently found in combination (see also Table 13 below).

[256] For a discussion of the concept of identity underlying the present thesis see 7.2 below.

[257] Deviations in spelling, especially if they are motivated by the pronunciation of the word in question, can, of course, also indicate a lack of education. This was true in the 15th century, when spelling was still in the process of standardisation, and is still true today. Just as some non-standard spellings in the Paston letters may be the result of lacking literacy skills (cf. Nevalainen 2009: 153), some spelling deviations in CMC may not be the result of a conscious choice either. For the discussion of misspellings and typing errors in CMC see 5.2.5.6 below.

Unfortunately, detailed studies of the different types of phonetic spelling deviations in CMC are still rare, and this highly intriguing topic is often only mentioned in passing. Herring (2012: 2), for instance, simply speaks of “spellings that imitate casual or dialectal pronunciations” and gives ‘wassup?’ for ‘what’s up?’ as an example. Sebba (2003) devotes part of his study to computer-mediated communication, yet the message board analysed is very special and thus hardly representative of CMC in general.[258] In Lyddy et al.’s (cf. 2014: 551) study of text messages, *accent stylisation* accounts for 19% of the non-standard spellings identified and thus ranks second (after missed capitalisation).[259]

Despite the great expressive potential of phonetic respellings, they are hardly used in the reader response investigated in the present analysis. Eye dialect is only found in ten comments and nine of these respellings represent the same word (i.e. the New Labour Party). Before these cases will be discussed, (237) serves to illustrate the function of this kind of respelling. In this comment, eye dialect is combined with several strategies to imitate a spoken delivery, e.g. the interjection ‘oh’, the use of ‘really’ to signal the commenter’s surprise about what has just been said and the use of short, syntactically reduced sentences.

(237) [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE OMITTED]
Oh really? Sez who?
Sez Simon Jenkins [AUTHOR]. After all comment is free. But why […] [CMC G07-083 c19]

This reaction to the article represents a clear challenge to its author; it is particularly effective because ‘sez who?’ is not an ad-hoc creation but a formulaic challenge indicating disagreement that is often represented in this respelled form in writing. Calhoun (2004: 32) calls it “a universal taunt by which a skeptic may challenge the standing/competency of the speaker to make authoritative moral assessment”, which is precisely what the commenter is doing. Casting doubt over and even rejecting the journalist’s authority in this way of course constitutes a severe threat to his face, and the commenter clearly assumes a confrontational position. As Lemert (1992: 244) argues, ‘sez who?’ is a “powerful locution” because it “turns the rage

[258] Since Sebba (2003) investigates deviant spelling as a form of youth culture and rebellion, he chooses a message board surrounding the British comedian ‘Ali G.’. The act of this comedian “involves presenting himself as a tough streetwise youth/gang leader, of ambiguous ethnicity, who uses a form of English influenced by street slang and Creole” (2003: 165). While the comments posted to this board are highly interesting because they imitate Ali G.’s language, the data reveal very little about CMC as such.

[259] Note, however, that Lyddy et al.’s (2014) categorisation is based on Thurlow (2003) and thus exhibits the same problems (see the discussion above).

that arises from feeling degraded into a disarming condescension that goes straight for the heart of those presumed to have done the degrading", and indeed, the condescending tone in (237) can hardly be missed.[260] This act of rebellion ties in nicely with the function of eye dialect spellings described by Sebba (2003), the repetition of the respelling in the example above strengthening the overall effect.

A rebellious undertone is also present in the nine remaining comments in which eye dialect spellings are used, i.e. comments in which 'New Labour' is referred to as 'NuLab' (N=4), 'Nu-Labour' (N=3), 'nu laba' and 'Zanulabour'. Again, these are not ad-hoc creations: *New Labour* is often referred to as *nu labour* in online public discourse in general, and various other spelling variants exist.[261] What they have in common is that they are used by commenters who want to distance themselves from the movement or those associated with it.

The number of respellings belonging to the second and third categories is slightly larger yet still extremely small (21 tokens, 15 types). Moreover, none of these respellings are novel creations or particularly unusual. As illustrated in Table 13 below, the majority of respelt words even have an entry in the *OED*, which demonstrates that they are highly conventionalised.[262] At the top of the list, with four occurrences, is *yeah*, which is so conventionalised that it could even be considered a colloquial variant of *yes* and hence a lexical feature instead of an orthographic one. However, the *OED* describes it as "repr. a casual pronunc. of YES", which is why it was considered to belong to the latter group of characteristics.[263]

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[260] Aspects of face and criticism will be discussed in detail in 7.3 below.

[261] All these variants are of course used by critics and restricted to certain contexts, as the entry for 'nu labour' in the *Urban Dictionary* suggests: "[A]sinine slang term for the British "New Labour" movement of the 1990s to late 2000s under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Generally employed by would-be political commentators on internet forums who aren't as witty as they think they are" (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=nu%20labour; last accessed February 13, 2017). *Nu laba* is rarer, as are *ze nu labour* and *zanulabour*. While all these spelling variants are mainly used on the Internet, the latter also occurs (and may have originated) in an article from the satirical magazine *Private Eye* published in April 2005, where Tony Blair (called 'Mugablair') is likened to Robert Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe and leader of the ZANU-PF party (see http://eureferendum.blogspot.de/2005/04/mugabe-speaks-out.html; last accessed February 10, 2017). The spelling 'NuLab' mentioned above occurs once in a lexical clipping, i.e. in the construction 'the NuLab gov' (see 5.3.3 below); in the other cases, it is simply used as a proper noun. Even if it is not possible to say how precisely these terms originated, the occurrences in the present data are clearly not ad-hoc creations.

[262] The description in Table 13 is based on the register label used in the *OED Online* in all cases in which such an entry is available. Note, however, that the *OED* uses *colloquial* instead of *casual*.

[263] "yeah, adv." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 10 February 2017.

Table 13 Casual and socio-regiolectal respellings in the comments (N=21)

respelling	standard spelling	occurrences	description	*OED* entry?
yeah	yes	4	casual	yes
‛em/em	them	2/2	casual/regional	yes
bloomin‛/ havin/ takin	blooming/ having/ taking	1/1/1	*g*-clipping: casual/regional	--
cos	because	2	casual/regional	yes
dunno	I don’t know	1	casual	yes
d‛you	do you	1	casual	--
gotcha	got you	1	casual	yes
ole	old	1	casual/regional	yes
yer	your	1	casual/regional	yes
c’mon	come on	1	casual	yes
thunk	thought	1	regional	yes
tak’n	taken	1	unclear[264]	--
		21	**total**	

Them is shortened twice with an apostrophe signalling the omission (238) and twice without, and in the case of *g*-clippings, the *g* is also replaced with an apostrophe on one occasion (239). These cases illustrate nicely that the strategy is not used to save time or effort, as the number of keystrokes required is only reduced by one (238) or remains the same (239).[265]

(238) […] And I am sick of threats to strike if these cossetted individuals can’t carry on living the Life of Riley at our expense. So LET ’EM strike if they want to. We can manage without them for quite some time […] [CMC T07-055 c10]

(239) […] They do a bloomin’ marvelous job. [CMC G06-M13 c9]

The respelt version of *because* is usually among the examples provided in the literature, though with a range of spelling variants (e.g. *cuz* in Lyddy et al. 2014, who use the term *accent stylisation*); its infrequent use (N=2) in

[264] Whether ‘tak’n’ is considered regional or simply casual depends on whether the vowel is assumed to be pronounced [a] or [æ].

[265] The number of keystrokes depends on the keyboard, of course. On the onscreen keyboards of smartphones, the apostrophe usually requires use of the shift key (or a longer tap), as it does on standard German keyboards. With these keyboards, producing (239) would even require one keystroke more than in the unclipped version.

the present data is therefore quite surprising.[266] While the remaining tokens can only be found once, they are also highly conventionalised. As the examples illustrate, the comments using respelt words may be emotionally tinged and fairly casual in style overall, yet the respellings are either words (or combinations of words) that are very common or even part of fixed expressions.[267]

(240) […] C'mon people, I assume that we're all old enough to remember John Redwood [CONSERVATIVE PARTY POLITICIAN]; we don't want to subject ourselves to that again, do we? […] [CMC G10-069 c7]

(241) The good ole days are back!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
This FSA [FINANCIAL SERVICES AUTHORITY] piece is so watered down that banks can reward whichever way they like. […] [CMC G06-M13 c4]

(242) Bloody Hell Polly [POLLY TOYNBEE, AUTHOR, USUALLY SUPPORTING THE LABOUR PARTY] is about to "jump ship" to the Lib Dems! Who'd have thunk it? […] [CMC G11-001 c7]

While 'c'mon' is listed as an interjection in the *OED*[268], the expression 'the good ole days', appears in the titles of numerous songs, movies and books, and 'Who'd have thunk it?' (or 'Who'd a thunk it') is a very popular way of expressing incredulity, often with an ironic twist.[269] The examples above also illustrate that on the rare occasions that respellings are used, they occur in isolation, are not combined with other socio-regiolectal features and only provide stylistic information. This suggests that the commenters employ them mainly to set the tone rather than to construct identities; even those respellings that could be considered regional in origin (e.g. 'thunk') are not used to position the commenters regionally. If, as argued above, casual and socio-regiolectal respellings are considered the two poles of a continuum,

[266] Strictly speaking, *cos* can only be considered casual or regional because the first syllable is dropped; the other substitution and deletion processes at work would have to be classified as eye dialect as they do not represent deviations from standard pronunciation but only deviations from standard spelling (with the additional benefit of reducing word length).

[267] The commenter in (238) for instance uses capitalisation (see 5.2.3.3.2 above) and the one in (241) a set of 30 exclamation marks (see 5.2.4.4.7 above) to add expressive force.

[268] "c'mon, int." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 13 February 2017.

[269] The *Macmillan Dictionary blog* also discusses the popularity of the expression 'Who'd a thunk it?', arguing that "*thunk* is used as a pseudo-archaic past participle of *think* (by analogy with *drink/drunk*)" (http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/whod-a-thunk-it; last accessed February 13, 2017). The *OED*, in contrast, describes the verb 'thunk' as "dial. and joc. pa. tense and pa. pple. of THINK" ("thunk, v.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 13 February 2017), which is why 'thunk' is considered a regiolectal respelling (used with humorous intent) and not a lexical feature in the present analysis.

all the comments would have to be positioned towards the casual end of the cline.

Given that respellings are already rare in the comments, it is hardly surprising that they cannot be found in the letters; however, letter writers also play around with dialects, as the letters discussed as (413) and (551) illustrate (see p. 328 and 410 respectively). Yet in these letters, the word play does not simply set the tone but constitutes the main purpose of the letter, which is clearly not the case in the comments discussed above.

5.2.5.2 Reduplication of letters: prosodic spelling

Closely linked to phonetic respellings is the group of spellings in which certain graphemes are reduplicated – a feature considered to be very common in CMC (cf. e.g. Thurlow 2001, Thaler 2003, Shortis 2007, Shaw 2008, Dürscheid et al. 2010 and Herring 2012). In this type of respelling, pronunciation also seems to influence the orthographic representation but in this case on the level of prosody rather than on that of individual phonemes. Davies (1987) groups this type together with other techniques used to emphasise the pronunciation of a word (or, in his case, trade names) on the visual level, such as *alliteration, assonance* and *rhyme*. These features are of course far more frequent in the language of advertising than in CMC, yet spellings such as 'hellોoooo' (example from Herring 2012: 2) have the same onomatopoeic quality as 'ssschweppesss' (example from Davies 1987: 54). While the former represents a voice calling out 'hello' to somebody, the latter is "reminiscent of the sound of this effervescent drink being poured out" (1987: 54). In both cases, the effect is achieved by reduplicating certain graphemes and thus suggesting a lengthened pronunciation of the corresponding phonemes, mimicking vocal emphasis (cf. Shortis 2007). Together with the use of capitalisation for stress and emphasis described above (see 5.2.3.2 and 5.2.3.3.2), this characteristic belongs to what Shortis (2007: 5) calls "graphical indicators of auditory paralinguistic features of pitch and volume". In fact, such reduplications are sometimes even combined with capitalisation in order to enhance the effect of emulated prosody and added emphasis. Since lengthened pronunciation, especially in combination with stress, is one of the properties that makes spoken communication lively and since it is often used to express emotions or attitudes, Shaw (2008: 43) calls this feature *expressive respelling*. Most interestingly, such respellings may be effective even without representing the way a certain word is pronounced, which leads Shaw to distinguish between *orally* and *visually iconic expressive respellings*. In the first group, the reduplicated graphemes correspond to a possible lengthening of the respective phonemes, as in 'looong' (example from Shaw 2008: 43). In the second one, in contrast, this is not the case, as the examples 'luvvvvv' (from Shaw 2008: 42) and 'its trueeee' (from Tagliamonte and Denis 2008: 3) illustrate.[270] Visually iconic expressive respellings are closely linked to the above-discussed use of iterated question and/or exclamation marks as expressive strategy (see 5.2.4.4.7), since they also add emphasis without having a direct equivalent in spoken interaction. The effect achieved is always the same: the word, fragment or utterance is emphasised, and an emotional stance is communicated.

In the present data, only four commenters make use of prosodic spelling. All four occurrences are cases of orally iconic respellings, i.e. the reduplicated letters represent vowels, mimicking a drawn-out pronunciation – an effect that is further emphasised with the help of capitalisation on two occasions (245).

(243) Groooooaaann. Yet another divisive victim article about education in the UK. […] [CMC T08-032 c14]

(244) […] Conclusion: swimming and being a no-alcohol pioneer rocks and is soooooo much easier than you think. […] [CMC G09-008 c11]

(245) […] You are SOO dim. […] [CMC T06-018.1 c18]

Two of the comments are critical in nature, the criticism being directed once at the journalist or newspaper (243) and once at another reader (245). The other two comments, in contrast, are fairly positive: in (244), for instance, the commenter sides with the journalist and recounts a personal experience similar to the one described in the article. As limited as the conclusions that can be drawn from such findings are, the present data strongly suggest that prosodic spellings may not be as frequent as commonly believed. In the present data, they are only found in informal, emotionally charged comments, yet these emotions need not be negative in nature (244). Moreover, commenters can also express their emotions without using prosodic spelling. As was the case with the other forms of respelling discussed so far, prosodic spellings are not used in letters to the editor.

5.2.5.3 Simplified spellings: abbreviations and shortenings/reductions

While some forms of phonetic respellings have the certainly not unpopular side effect that the respelt version is shorter than its standard orthographical form, CMC research has documented several other types of simplified

[270] Note how in 'luvvvvv', the second example provided by Shaw (2008: 42), the strategy of reduplicating the letter <v> is used in combination with a phonetic respelling representing standard pronunciation, i.e. eye dialect.

spellings which are not motivated by the pronunciation of the word in question, be it standard, colloquial, regiolectal or sociolectal. Instead, in these cases, the spelling is adapted with the clear aim of shortening the item in question. Since CMC is usually considered a much faster form of written text production than traditional writing, and since, in many cases, it is used to replace spoken interaction, the motivation behind the different abbreviation strategies is widely believed to be that of saving time and effort. A more thorough contemplation of the individual strategies and their usage patterns will reveal, however, that this is not the only driving force behind this phenomenon.

5.2.5.3.1 Acronyms and initialisms

The first abbreviation strategy usually mentioned in this context is the heavy use of acronyms and initialisms in CMC (cf. e.g. Maynor 1994, Werry 1996, Thurlow 2001, Lewin and Donner 2002, Baron 2004, Shortis 2007 and Herring 2012). However, a closer look at the examples given often reveals that many of the acronyms and initialisms found belong to those that are frequently used in other types of discourse as well, e.g. 'CIA', which is hardly ever spelt out as 'Central Intelligence Agency' in any context or text type. Far more interesting and at the same time more emblematic of CMC are those acronyms and initialisms that do not replace compound nouns or proper names but stand for whole phrases and clauses and are thus not to be found in an ordinary dictionary (e.g. 'brb' for 'be right back' or the often-cited 'lol', which stands for 'laughing out loud').[271] In their study of CMC features in Internet message boards, Lewin and Donner (2002) therefore limit this category to such special acronyms, e.g. 'AFAIK' ('as far as I know') or 'BTW' ('by the way'), which function as discourse markers.[272] Baron (2004: 411; emphasis in the original) also explicitly excludes "acronyms that, although appearing in CMC messages,

[271] In fact, 'lol' is by now in such wide-spread use even outside the realms of CMC that it has made its way into the *OED*, where it is defined as "[o]riginally and chiefly in the language of electronic communications: 'ha ha!'; used to draw attention to a joke or humorous statement, or to express amusement" ("LOL, int. and n.2." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 13 February 2017). Interestingly, the *OED* treats 'lol' as an interjection and only hints at its origin as an acronym in the first quotation provided, dating from 1989, in which the non-abbreviated form 'laughing out loud' is referred to. 'Lol' can also stand for 'lots of love', even if this usage is far less wide-spread; despite not being documented in the *OED*, it is probably older than the use as an interjection. As Crystal (2008a: 81) points out, "[i]f a message of transmitted love gets the reply 'LOL', it is up to you to decide whether it means 'laughing out loud' or 'lots of love'. It could make a big difference to an emerging relationship".

[272] Strictly speaking, these items are not acronyms but initialisms – a distinction that is rarely made, as the subsequent examples from Baron (2004) illustrate.

are also part of common offline written usage (e.g., *US = United States* or *TA = teaching assistant*)" from the analysis of her IM corpus and Lyddy et al. (2014) make the same choice. Since it is crucial to take such considerations into account, the present study also excludes those acronyms and initialisms that stand for compound nouns and are in general use offline. In line with this reasoning, the use of acronyms and initialisms is considered a type of simplified spelling and thus included in the analysis of orthography and not morphology, even though it is hard to draw a clear line between the two.[273]

What is also striking about the discussion of this characteristic is that the examples provided are always the same (e.g. 'lol', 'brb', 'btw', 'imho'), the majority being discourse markers.[274] Even if it is not surprising that authors choose the most prototypical examples instead of more infrequent ones to illustrate their points, this strongly suggests that the number of acronyms and initialisms actually used must be rather limited.[275] While frequency may be high as far as tokens are concerned, the number of types seems to be fairly small. This hypothesis is supported by Lewin and Donner (2002), Baron (2004) and Lyddy et al. (2014), who only found a rather limited set of acronyms/initialisms in their corpora. Interestingly, the number of tokens in these studies is comparatively small as well. In light of the fact that acronyms – together with abbreviations in general – are at the top of the list of the features enregistered as Internet language (cf. Squires 2010: 475), these findings are rather surprising. One reason for this mismatch between public perception and actual use could be that such abbreviations are very salient and thus particularly noticeable and memorable. In consequence, they might be perceived as being typical of CMC despite not occurring in great numbers or variety. Moreover, the use of such abbreviations is often seen not only as stemming from the need for brevity and speed but also as

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[273] Since most CMC acronyms and initialisms operate above the word or noun phrase level, they could also be considered syntactic features. However, since the shortened spelling is central here, grouping them together with other types of reduced spellings seems to be the best solution.

[274] 'Brb', 'btw' and 'imho' stand for 'be right back', 'by the way' and 'in my humble opinion' respectively.

[275] Although many websites or even books (e.g. Crystal 2004a, see below) listing such abbreviations and what they stand for can be found, I argue that the vast majority of these acronyms and initialisms are hardly ever used or at least confined to certain user groups. The "NetLingo List of Chat Acronyms & Text Shorthand" (; last accessed February 8, 2017) claims to be the "largest list of chat acronyms and text shorthand" and includes numerous fairly exotic examples, such as 'AWGTHTGTTA' ('Are We Going To Have To Go Through This Again'). It was also published in book form in 2014, counting more than one hundred pages (Jansen 2014). Crystal (2008a: 81) himself admits that of the abbreviations collected for and published in his 2004 book, "only a small number […] actually turn out to be in regular use. The vast majority are there just to be 'clever', illustrating the possibilities of language play".

an in-group marker, i.e. a means of signalling one's familiarity with CMC and to present oneself as a competent and experienced user.[276] In public discourse, the supposedly cryptic nature of CMC is usually highlighted (cf. e.g. Thurlow and Bell 2009), and "media portrayals of text messages as an indecipherable code" (Lyddy et al. 2014: 547) abound. This might have affected how such special acronyms and initialisms are perceived.

As in the studies mentioned above, the number of acronyms and initialisms found in the present data is extremely small (see Table 14 below). Moreover, only four of the ten occurrences are CMC-specific: 'LOL' (used twice), 'btw' and 'imho', all ranking among the prototypical examples found in the literature.

Table 14 Acronyms and initialisms in the comments (N=10)

acronym/initialism	**meaning**	**occurrences**	***OED* entry?**	**CMC-specific?**
BAB	bonuses are back	2	--	--
LOL	laughing out loud	2	yes	yes
A.S.A.P.	as soon as possible	1	yes	--
aka	also known as	1	yes	--
wmd	weapon(s) of mass destruction	1	yes	--
Btw	by the way	1	yes	yes
imho	in my humble opinion	1	yes	yes
A. C. A. B.	all cop(per)s are bastards	1	--	--
	total	**10**		

The remaining acronyms and initialisms are either fairly well-established (at least in some discourse domains) or were quite frequent at the time of data collection. 'A.S.A.P.' and 'aka' belong to the former, while 'BAB' and 'wmd' are best grouped among the latter.[277] A.C.A.B. is an "old English

[276] See the discussion of Crystal's (2004a) glossary below (5.2.5.4).

[277] The initialism 'wmd' gained prominence in 2003, when the Bush administration used weapons of mass destruction as the main justification for invading Iraq. This development is also mirrored in the *OED Online*, where 'wmd' is published as draft addition in 2004. 'BAB', on the other hand, was used above all during the 2009 bonus scandal and only by a limited group of people, as the *Guardian* headline "The new City buzzword: BAB (that's Bonuses are Back)" suggests (Finch 2009). It has not made its way into the *OED Online*, and the two

gang and prison tattoo that was first reported on in the 1970s" (Aitken-Smith and Tyson 2016: 13) and later gained prominence through graffiti and other imagery (e.g. T-shirts bearing the acronym).[278] In popular media, it also appears as the title of a movie and several punk songs; however, its meaning is probably not known to the general public. According to Partridge (1977: 1), as an acronym, "the phrase hardly precedes 1970, but, spoken in full, it existed at least as early as the 1920s". Despite this fairly long history, it is still not listed in the *OED*. In any case, it predates the era of the Internet and is thus clearly not a CMC-specific acronym.

While the use of acronyms and initialism is certainly influenced by a wide range of situational factors and may therefore vary from one form of CMC and user to another, the comments analysed in the present study support the findings of previous research suggesting that this allegedly typical feature of CMC is far from being as wide-spread as commonly assumed. Again, the general perception appears to have been affected by the popular stereotypes as perpetuated by the media and public discourse.

5.2.5.3.2 Clippings

Another form of abbreviation commonly mentioned in research on CMC is the use of clippings (cf. e.g. Maynor 1994, Werry 1996, Thurlow 2003, Shortis 2007, Shaw 2008, Cho 2010, Herring 2012 and Lyddy et al. 2014). Despite being related to the strategy of *g*-clipping as a form of phonetic respelling (see 5.2.5.1 above), this use of clipping is not motivated by pronunciation but by the need for brevity and speed, i.e. the word is shortened by omitting the beginning or – more frequently – the ending in order to save keystrokes and not to represent features of pronunciation in the written medium. Unfortunately, this difference has received little attention, and what is meant by the term *clipping* is often insufficiently explained in the individual studies, which makes it difficult to compare the results and to estimate the importance of this feature. The example provided by Shortis (2007: 8), i.e. 'congrats' for 'congratulations', for instance, is on a totally different level than those provided by Shaw (2008: 43), i.e. 'hav' for 'have' and 'fri' for 'Friday'.[279] Whereas 'congrats' is an interjection

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occurrences in the present data appear in comments by the same user, who, when first using the acronym, even feels the need to spell it out.

[278] In the present data, the initialism is spelt with additional spaces between the individual letters. This might be a strategy to avoid being detected by profanity filters, which are sometimes used on websites allowing user-generated content. See 5.3.3 below for a discussion of the use of profanity.

[279] Despite discussing 'hav' as a form of clipping, Shaw (2008: 43) admits that it can also be considered to belong to the group of *regularisation of irregular spelling* (see 5.2.5.3.4 below). Depending on how consistently 'hav' is used in a text, it could even be argued that it is simply

commonly used in informal spoken conversation and on greeting cards, the latter two examples have no equivalent in spoken language. The difference between these two types of examples thus lies in the fact that the one used by Shortis (2007) consists of a term that – despite having its origins in the word-formation process of truncation – has passed into common usage, whereas this is not the case in the examples provided by Shaw (2008).[280] Strictly speaking, clippings of the 'congrats'-type, i.e. clippings that are in common use and have their own entries in dictionaries, are not a feature of orthography at all but rather of morphology, which is why they will be addressed when discussing lexical and morphological characteristics (see 5.3 below). One could even go a step further and claim that, despite both being features of orthography, the examples used in Shaw (2008) comprise two distinct phenomena: whereas 'fri' is an abbreviation adopted from other written text types (e.g. calendars or announcements), 'hav' is not commonly used and can therefore be considered unique to special discourse types or an individual writer's preferences. There are thus three different stages of acceptance: 'congrats' is no longer perceived as an abbreviation but as an individual lexeme; 'fri' is a clearly recognisable and widely accepted abbreviated spelling of 'Friday', and 'hav' is more or less an ad-hoc abbreviation used when the need to save time and space is considerable. As indicated above, only the latter two types of clippings will be dealt with under the heading of orthography, and a careful consideration of factors such as acceptance and intelligibility needs to be included in the analysis.

Thurlow (2003) seems to avoid this blurring of categories by differentiating between *shortenings* and *clippings*. A closer look at his data reveals, however, that this distinction is based on formal characteristics only: *clipping* is used for words in which only the final letter is clipped, whereas *shortening* is used if several end letters are missing.[281] As a result, Thurlow's group of shortenings includes, on the one hand, abbreviated forms that are used in other contexts as well and thus belong to the group of lexical features, such as 'uni' ('university), 'bro' ('brother') and 'goss' ('gossip').[282] On the other hand, it contains items that are less likely to occur

a typographical error, especially if it occurs in isolation and is not surrounded by other types of spelling deviations. However, Jaffe (2012: 215) points out that even in the case of intentional respellings, "authors respell very inconsistently".

280 A look at the *OED* reveals that unlike 'fri' and 'hav', 'congrats' has its own entry, a fact which clearly hints at the different status of these items ("congrats, int." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 14 February 2017).

281 Lyddy et al. (2014) use the same categories.

282 All three words have an entry in the *Macmillan Dictionary Online*. 'Uni' and 'bro' are labelled *spoken* while 'goss' is described as *informal*. The former also have entries in the *OED*, where they are considered *colloquial*.

outside the realms of speedy writing and are not listed in dictionaries, such as ‘aft’ (‘after), ‘proj’ (‘project’), or ‘tog’ (‘together’). That there is a fundamental difference between these forms of clipping becomes clear when turning to the possible motivations behind their usage. Whereas ‘uni’, ‘bro’ and ‘goss’ are indicators of an informal, colloquial style and can even be considered in-group markers, the main motivation behind truncating the word ‘together’ to its reduced form ‘tog’ seems to be the fact that it saves five keystrokes and thus a little bit of time and space.

In the present data, orthographical clippings are clearly outweighed by lexical clippings (see 5.3 below): all in all, only six occurrences of the former could be found (see Table 15 below).

Table 15 Clippings in the comments (N=6)

clipping	**standard spelling**	**occurrences**	***OED* entry?**	**description**
no	number	2	yes	abbreviation
Thatch	Thatcher	1	--	ad-hoc clipping
prob	probably	1	yes	abbreviation (but also colloquial)
A Fib	atrial fibrillation	1	--	medical term
Dec’	December	1	yes	abbreviation
	total	**6**		

Three of these types of clippings (i.e. four tokens) have a high level of acceptance, as they are even registered in the *OED*: ‘no’, ‘prob’ and ‘Dec’.[283] The two remaining occurrences are a medical term (‘A Fib’) and what is probably an ad-hoc creation (‘Thatch’). The comments thus illustrate that clippings are not used if (a) time (and space) constraints are low and (b) the message is intended for the general public. In this form of CMC and communicative context, the benefit of saving keystrokes clearly appears to be outweighed by the desire to be understood by all.

5.2.5.3.3 Vowel omission and consonant reduction

Aside from back clipping, i.e. retaining only the beginning of a word, words can also be abbreviated by omitting letters from the middle, which constitutes the third type of shortening strategy documented in CMC

[283] ‘Prob’ lies on the border between lexical and orthographical clipping: according to the *OED*, it can be both a *graphic abbreviation* and a *colloquial* use (“prob., adv.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 15 February 2017).

research (cf. e.g. Werry 1996, Thurlow 2003 and Lyddy et al. 2014, who call this feature *contraction*, Shaw 2008, who uses the general term *abbreviation*, and Herring 2012, who only provides examples). Depending on what kind of letters are omitted, one can distinguish between *vowel omission* and *consonant reduction*, the latter being used predominantly in the case of medial double consonants (cf. Shortis 2007). The examples 'pls' for 'please' and 'gd' for 'good' (adopted from Werry 1996: 55, Shortis 2007: 8 and Shaw 2008: 43) illustrate that vowel omission rarely reduces intelligibility significantly, especially when enough context is provided. The same holds true for consonant reduction, which is often used in combination with vowel omission, as in the example 'imedtly' for 'immediately' provided by Shortis (2007: 8). According to Werry (1996: 55), in synchronous forms of CMC, these forms of abbreviation are a clear indication of the "incessant drive to reduce the number of keystrokes to the absolute minimum".

If the only or overriding benefit of such abbreviations is that of saving time and space, it can be assumed that their frequency in online user comments will turn out to be rather low, owing to the means of message production and the fact that leaving comments on a newspaper website is not a synchronous form of communication, even though it can be, and indeed sometimes is, used quasi-synchronously. In the second decade of the 21st century, the feature of vowel omission and consonant reduction seems to a certain extent reminiscent of the language used in text messages before the advent of flat rates and smartphones: when the limit of 160 characters was still more of a problem than it is today, when the space on the screen was extremely limited and when messages had to be produced on tiny, alphanumeric keypads. The general impression is that today, these types of abbreviation are used above all in communicative situations that are either highly interactive, synchronous and performed under considerable time constraints (e.g. when chatting) or strongly influenced by space limitations, as is the case with tweets or used to be the case with text messages. However, such abbreviations can, in addition to saving time and space, also be used as formality or group membership markers; therefore, their use is not necessarily restricted to the forms of communication mentioned above.

As expected, instances of vowel omission and consonant reduction are rare in the present data, and the latter can only be found in combination with the former (see Table 16 below). The 24 tokens only represent seven types,[284] and all of the occurrences of 'bn' appear in the same comment,

[284] If 'yr' and 'yrs' are considered representatives of the same type, the number of types shrinks to only six.

posted by a user providing an overview of government expenditure in the form of a list.

Table 16 Vowel omission and consonant reduction in the comments (N=24)

reduced form	standard spelling	occurrences	*OED* entry?	vowel or consonant?
govt	government	10	yes	both
bn	billion	7	--	both
yrs	years	3	--	vowels
yr	year	1	yes	vowels
f'kn	fucking	1	--	both
hrs	hours	1	--	vowels
pct	percent	1	--	both
	total	**24**		

The shortening of 'government' to 'govt' is the most frequent use; as 'yr' for 'year', it is highly conventionalised, i.e. both have an entry in the *OED*. Even those abbreviations that are not listed in the *OED* are easily understandable, the only non-conventional shortening – at least in standard language – being that of 'f'kn' used in the sarcastic expression of enthusiasm 'whoopie fucking doo' (246).[285]

> (246) So Lord Myners [A POLITICIAN PROMISING A CRACK DOWN ON BANKS] is going to 'crack down'. Well whoopie f'kn doo. [...][CMC G06-M13 c16]

As in the case of the additional spaces between the letters of 'A.C.A.B.' discussed above, the strategy of not spelling out 'fucking' could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid censorship.[286] The abbreviation 'fkn' is not uncommon in CMC, yet it is usually spelt without apostrophe. All in all, vowel omission and consonant reduction constitute another feature that is largely absent from the comments under investigation. This finding is line

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[285] According to *The new Partridge dictionary of slang and unconventional English*, *whoopeedoo* is "used as an, often ironic, expression of celebration" in the UK (Dalzell and Victor 2006: 2100). The insertion of 'fucking' does not seem uncommon; at least numerous examples can be found in representations of direct speech in novels if spelling variants are considered (e.g. 'whoopee' and 'whoopie', 'doo' and 'do', with and without hyphen as well as any possible combination thereof; search performed via *Google Books*).

[286] The term 'fuck', including its morphological variants, is very rare in the comments. All in all, it is spelt out on only seven occasions (in three comments). In an additional four occurrences, it is either abbreviated, as in the example above, or some letters are replaced by asterisks or dots, as in 'Honestly, it's f****ing lunatic.' [CMC G10-023-25 c13]. The use of profanity in reader response will be discussed in 5.3.3 below.

with that of Lyddy et al.'s (2014) analysis of text messages, where what they call *contractions* only account for 5% of the non-standard spellings.

5.2.5.3.4 Regularisation

In some cases, the simplified spelling of a certain word is produced in analogy to the spelling pattern of another word, which has led some researchers to create an individual category for such strategies of spelling regularisation (cf. e.g. Shortis 2007 and Shaw 2008). As the examples 'thru' for 'through' and 'nite' for 'night' (adopted from Shortis 2007: 8 and Shaw 2008: 43 respectively) illustrate, this form of regularisation is based on grapheme to phoneme correspondences and therefore directly linked to the strategy of phonetic respellings discussed above (see 5.2.5.1). Inconsistencies in the taxonomies established by Shortis (2007) and Shaw (2008) unfortunately preclude a more thorough discussion of this category.[287] In any case, such regularised spellings cannot be found in the present data apart from the obligatory exception to the rule:

(247) […] Nu-Labour may have shot itself in the head but the Lib-Dem's shot themselves in both feet electing Clegg [NICK CLEGG, AT THE TIME LEADER OF THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS] and going Tory lite. [CMC G11-001 c13]

However, 'lite' is highly conventionalised, especially in commercial use; the same holds for 'Tory lite', which evokes this commercial frame by sounding like a brand name or product.[288]

[287] Shaw (2008) distinguishes between (a) the strategy of *representation of spoken forms*, which roughly corresponds to the second and third type of phonetic respellings discussed above, i.e. casual and socio-regiolectal respellings (see 5.2.5.1) and (b) a strategy he calls *regularisation of irregular spelling*, which seems to be motivated by sociolinguistically unmarked standard pronunciation and therefore corresponds to the first type of phonetic respelling, i.e. eye dialect, as his examples 'nyt' for 'night' and 'coz' for 'because' illustrate. As a matter of fact, one cannot really speak of a regularisation strategy being employed in his examples, since the deviant spelling is not built in analogy to the spelling patterns of similar words but on the basis of an alternative sound to spelling correspondence that simultaneously helps to save several keystrokes. Shortis (2007) lists the abbreviation strategy of *respellings by analogy with other words with more straightforward sound-spelling correspondences* on the one hand, and *eye dialect* as a strategy for simulating features of spoken language on the other. He uses 'fone' and 'thru' as examples of the first type and 'tuff' as an example of the second. This necessarily begs the question as to what the difference between the two is – a question that unfortunately remains unanswered. The only tentative suggestion that comes to mind is that his first type comprises those respellings that are in widespread use and to a certain extent accepted (just think of 'drive-thru' signs), whereas this is not the case as far as what he terms *eye dialect spellings* are concerned.

[288] The *OED* describes *lite* as being used in advertising, the description of products and "in humorous imitation of brand names" ("lite, adj.2 and n.6." *OED Online*. Oxford University

5.2.5.4 Letter and number homophone spellings

The remaining two groups of purposefully employed spelling particularities consist of strategies that, because of their apparently creative nature, have received considerable attention in the literature. The formal orthographic strategies outlined so far can all be attributed to factors of time, space, formality and style; they are not necessarily unique to CMC. To a certain extent this is different in the following types of spelling deviations, where the driving force seems to be a certain playfulness, even if the strategies employed may serve several functions at the same time and consist of a combination of creative language use with any of the functions outlined so far. Although there may be antecedents in other types of discourse, the use of these strategies today is predominantly associated with CMC, which has made them emblematic of CMC as such. How frequent these features really are, or rather in what instances they are most commonly found and why, still remains to be seen.

The first creative strategy to be addressed in more detail is that of *letter or number homophone spellings*, a feature sometimes also called *letter or number rebus* (cf. e.g. Thurlow 2001 and 2003, Crystal 2006, Shortis 2007, Shaw 2008 and Lyddy et al. 2014). Crystal (2008b) also uses the term *logogram*, arguing that in this strategy, graphic signs (i.e. letters, numerals and the @ sign) are used to represent morphemes and words, as is the case in languages with a logographic writing system, e.g. Chinese. However, this terminology is problematic in two ways. First of all, the graphic signs are not always used to represent a morpheme but can stand for any part of a word, as examples such as ‘l8er’ (see below) illustrate. This has to do with the fact (and the second problem) that this kind of substitution is purely motivated by homophony, an important – not to say the defining – characteristic of this strategy, which is obscured if the term *logogram* is used. Therefore, the more cumbersome but nevertheless more precise and accurate term *letter and number homophone spelling* will be used instead.

The examples found in the literature range from very obvious and widespread ones, such as ‘B4’ for ‘before’, ‘C U l8r’ for ‘see you later’ or ‘r’ for ‘are’ to more enigmatic forms, such as ‘Z’ for ‘said’ or ‘N E WAY’ for ‘anyway’ (examples from Crystal 2006: 229, Shortis 2007: 8 and 2007: 22). Shortis (2007: 8) even finds instances of combinations of such homophone spellings with others types of abbreviation, as in ‘G2G’ (‘got to go’), where the numeral replaces the middle letter of an initialism. As the name *rebus* suggests, such spellings have a cryptic and therefore also

Press, December 2016. Web. 15 February 2017). It can be used both positively and dismissively.

playful, creative quality while at the same time reducing the number of characters needed. According to Crystal (cf. 2006: 229), they have their origins in the interactive, synchronous computer-mediated communicative settings of chat groups and virtual words but were developed even further and came into more wide-spread use with the great success of text messaging and the desire or need to bypass the character limit. Owing to their distinctive and enigmatic character, it is not surprising that such homophone respellings are among the features enregistered as Internet language (cf. Squires 2010). They are frequently commented on in public discourse although their distribution may be limited to very special contexts and user groups. The fact that Crystal (2004a), who is renowned for writing language books for the general public, authored *A Glossary of Netspeak and Textspeak* highlights the public awareness of such CMC features and the apparent need for what he calls a *lexipedia* (2004a: vii), i.e. a reference book which combines lexical information and encyclopaedic knowledge. The section "An A-to-Z of Textspeak" (cf. 2004a: 139ff.) consists of a list of letter and number homophone spellings as well as CMC acronyms (see 5.2.5.3 above) and their translation into plain English.[289] Crystal (2004a: 141) claims that this list is representative, though not exhaustive, but at the same time has to admit that "many of the coinages used in Textspeak are never found in routine messaging, being artful creations devised just for fun to see how far this kind of approach can be developed".

Several conclusions can be drawn at this point: first of all, even though Crystal (2004a) fails to define the term *Textspeak*, the name itself and the quotation above imply that such coinages, i.e. letter and number homophone spellings and CMC acronyms, are above all associated with the language of text messaging and may be quite rare in other CMC contexts. Second, the need for a glossary suggests that such usage is limited to a certain user group and domain of speech. In his introduction, Crystal (2004a: vii) describes this user group as "young (or young-minded) Internet users" and uses the term *slang*. Third, as Crystal has to admit, even within this group, the features listed vary considerably in frequency and the number of coinages used on a regular basis and by more than a comparatively small group of people may be fairly limited. Finally, the fact that the publishers felt that there was a market for a book addressed to the general public, together with the way the cover and the blurb are designed and worded,

[289] Some of Crystal's (2004a: 142) homophone spellings also include several of the other strategies of spelling deviation outlined above, such as '4EvrYrs' ('forever yours'), which is a combination of a number homophone spelling and vowel omission, '2nite' ('tonight'), which combines a number homophone with a regularised simplified spelling, or '2moro' ('tomorrow'), which combines a number homophone with the use of consonant reduction and eye dialect.

clearly illustrates that in this case, *Netspeak* and *Textspeak* are framed as "the cool communication of the electronic age" (2004a: blurb), thus stressing the innovative and creative nature of the features described.

The above discussion indicates that number and letter homophones are more than a simple abbreviation strategy; they are most likely to be found in (a) communicative situations that allow for playing around with language, i.e. ones with a high level of personal involvement as opposed to ones with a clear focus on content and (b) those where time and space are limited, as in text messaging, IM, IRC or tweets. In the online reader comments examined in the present study, their number is estimated to be rather low, given that time and space limitations are not an issue and that the comments are addressed to the general public, i.e. written to be read and understood by an unknown audience.[290] This hypothesis is supported by the findings of Lewin and Donner (2002), who studied Internet message boards in order to ascertain how frequently features commonly ascribed to CMC are used. In their data, letter and number homophone spellings[291] only appear in 14% of the messages, and they do so most infrequently, i.e. in only 5% of the messages, on the message board designed for users to discuss their problems with Microsoft Windows, i.e. a board with a clear focus on content and the task at hand (e.g. asking for help and providing assistance with technical problems) instead of phatic communication (cf. 2002). In the text messages analysed by Lyddy et al. (cf. 2014: 551), on the other hand, letter and number homophones make up 13% of the non-standard spellings, ranking third (behind missed capitalisation and accent stylisation). As hypothesised above, such homophone spellings appear to be above all a feature of text messages or tweets, i.e. texts with a strict character limit. In the corpus of around 11,000 text messages (190,516 words) analysed by Tagg (cf. 2012: 24), the pronoun *you* is spelt <you> 4,560 times and <u> an impressive 3,043 times (cf. 2012: 70). However, the data were collected between 2004 and 2007 under technological conditions that differ largely from those of today, and the extraordinary frequency of respelt forms in the case of <u> is not mirrored in other words.[292] As Tagg (cf. 2012: 209ff.)

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[290] It will be interesting to see in what way the topic and the particular communicative function of individual comments influence the occurrence of these features. One could expect witty or humorous remarks on less sensitive topics to display more of such features than heated discussions about serious matters.

[291] Lewin and Donner (2002: 31) do not use this term but speak of *special spellings* instead. Their examples ('u' for 'you' and 'l8ter' for 'later') reveal, however, that this is the feature studied.

[292] At the time of data collection, many mobile phones did not yet have a QWERTY keyboard, message length was still more severely restricted than it is today and predictive texting was neither as sophisticated nor as wide-spread.

acknowledges, such changes may well leave their traces in the linguistic make-up of text messages, even if it is "not the technology but people's values and perceptions, and how they choose to exploit the technology […] that really shape the discourse" (2012: 212).

Whether it is due to the technological affordance of typing on a keyboard and not being restrained by time constraints on the one hand or the commenters' 'values and perceptions' on the other, homophone spellings are – as expected – absent from the present data except for a single occurrence.

(248) […] be thankfull u even have a job […] [CMC T08-063 c3]

Even in jocular and playful comments on less serious topics, letter and number homophone respellings are not used. Funnily enough, however, they were found in a number of letters to the editor debating the origin of text speak, which nicely illustrates the gap between public perception and actual use.[293] Apart from these jocular discussions, the letters are free from all the forms of simplified spellings discussed above.

5.2.5.5 Use of non-alphabetic symbols

The occurrence of number homophone spellings is only partly responsible for the impression that the use of non-alphabetic symbols is characteristic of CMC.[294] While the use of letters and numbers in the cases just discussed is motivated by their phonetic similarity with the unit they are used to replace, non-alphabetic symbols can also be employed because of their visual quality, as is the case in the two following strategies.

The first strategy, a phenomenon called *leet* or *leetspeak*, is certainly the least common form of respelling and the one that is furthest removed from standard spelling. This may be the reason why this feature has received surprisingly little attention in research, despite its playful and creative nature (cf. Androutsopoulos 2011). In leet, the letters of the Roman alphabet are replaced by ASCII characters or combinations of ASCII characters chosen on the basis of graphic resemblance, so that the term 'leet' can be spelt '1337' (cf. Coleman 2012: 270) and 'ass' can be spelt '@$$' (example

[293] For a discussion of these letters see 5.2.6 below.
[294] As numbers are not part of the Roman alphabet, number homophone spellings could also have been discussed under the heading of *use of non-alphabetic symbols*. However, since the underlying strategy is precisely the same as in letter homophone spellings, it was considered best to treat them as belonging to the same strategy.

from Herring 2012: 2).[295] As Squires (2010: 486) points out, this substitution is not performed "for the purpose of phonetic approximation (as in <gr8> 'great'), but for the purpose of data encryption (as in <h4x0r> 'hacker')", which not only clearly distinguishes this strategy from the use of letter and number homophone spellings but also from all the types of phonetic respelling discussed above (see 5.2.5.1). As the purpose of data encryption suggests, the origin of this practice is commonly ascribed to its use among computer hackers or players of MUDs (multi-user dungeons) in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Squires 2010: 486 and Coleman 2012: 270).[296] This function as a secret code that can only be deciphered by a few people is also said to be responsible for the name *leet*, which is derived from *elite* (cf. 2012: 270) and suggests that it is – or at least was in the beginning – used as an in-group marker. Coleman (2012: 271) describes the historical development quite nicely:

> Leetspeak provided users with a way to evade text filters and discuss outlawed topics, but it was probably more useful as a method for signalling their position in the hierarchy. Only experienced gamers would be fluent, which enabled them to exclude, tease, or confuse new users […] However, by the late 1990s, these conventions had become so widely used that they no longer functioned as a signal of elite knowledge, and serious computer enthusiasts began to avoid them.

Since, in the beginning, leet was predominantly used among peers of a very particular and tightly-knit subcultural group with the aim of highlighting their group identity and making their messages unintelligible to outsiders, it is not surprising that the deviations from standard language not only affect graphological but also syntactic and morphological features. Coleman (2012: 271), who treats leet as slang, gives the example 'Me g0 gr4b s0Me k0ph33' (I'm going to grab some coffee') to illustrate such grammatical deviations. Owing to the lack of research into this phenomenon, it is difficult to tell how widespread it is nowadays and in what way it has developed since the 1980s. In most forms of CMC, however, it seems to play only a very minor role, with the occasional occurrence in usernames. In the present corpus, leet is not used at all.

Whereas in leet all kinds of ASCII characters are used to replace letters of the Roman alphabet based solely on their graphic resemblance, non-alphabetic keyboard symbols are sometimes used in a more straightforward manner as well, i.e. to symbolise what they traditionally stand for. Even if

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[295] The acronym *ASCII* stands for *American Standard Code for Information Interchange*, which is used to encode and represent characters in computers. It consists of 33 non-printing and 95 printable characters (i.e. small and capital letters, numbers, punctuation marks and symbols).

[296] Multi-user dungeons are virtual worlds where several players interact with each other, much of the interaction being text-based.

the use of symbols in CMC is only mentioned in passing in most studies (cf. e.g. Ferrara et al. 1991, Werry 1996, Thurlow 2001 and Herring 2012), two different types of usage need to be distinguished. On the one hand, symbols can be used to replace a lexical unit and thus serve the function of saving keystrokes and abbreviating the message. This is the case when somebody writes '£2' instead of 'two pounds' or '&' instead of 'and'. On the other hand, symbols are sometimes also used in addition to the lexical information they represent and therefore not as a strategy for abbreviation but rather for visual emphasis. This is the case when somebody types '€uros' instead of 'Euros' (example from Franco 2005: 304), calls a company "€CONOMY CONCEPT" (example from Dürscheid 2012: 66) or adds several dollar signs to a comment on how expensive something is. In these cases, the symbols are used to evoke associations; such usage is thus an expressive strategy rather than an economising one. The phenomenon as such is not new but has its origins in different forms of private communication (cf. Elspaß 2002) or advertising. However, this latter use of non-alphabetic symbols as additional expressive means lies on the borderline between spelling features and other graphic means of expression that are not directly related to orthography, which will be discussed in more detail below (see 5.2.8).[297]

Table 17 Use of non-alphabetic symbols replacing lexical units in the comments (N=33)

symbol	lexical unit replaced	occurrences
&	and	23
=	is/equals	4
+	plus	4
>	larger than	1
@	around	1
	total	**33**

In the present corpora, only the first type of usage can be found, i.e. symbols are only used to replace the word they stand for (see Table 17

[297] Dürscheid (2012: 64ff.) differentiates between pictograms and logograms, the former being icons and the latter abstract symbols. In CMC, both forms exist, with emoticons being an example of the first category and the @ or € sign discussed above examples of the second. Since the latter can be created with the help of the keyboard and are often part of the spelling of a certain word, they are discussed under the heading of *spelling*, whereas emoticons and other icons are discussed as *graphic means of expression* (see 5.2.8 below).

above).[298] With 23 occurrences, the use of the ampersand for *and* is most frequent, followed by '=' and '+' with four occurrences each. As the examples below illustrate, comments containing such symbols are still easy to understand and fairly ordinary in style. There is thus nothing particularly noteworthy or puzzling about the use of these non-alphabetic symbols.

(249) […] It is intrusive & disproportionate. […] [CMC G10-023-25 c19]

(250) […] they are utterly despicable & deserve nothing but our disgust. […] [CMC G07-083 c1]

(251) […] Other kids (male and female) all over the world succeed in systems that are similar to the UK system. Complaining = making excuses. [CMC T08-032 c14]

(252) [...] And lets just be clear what is required: no air travel, no private cars, 80%+ of your food to be grown/ produced within your own County, or neighbouring counties in the case of major towns - which means no more shopping in supermarkets. [...] [CMC G09-051 c4]

(253) [...] Exactly, my childhood in a 3 bed semi + garden in a pleasant, safe leafy suburb of London, with a car and occasional holiday was supported entirely on one very averagely paid, though professional, income. [...] [CMC G10-001-04 c20]

If the comments above were printed as letters to the editor, the symbols would most likely be replaced with the lexical item they stand for. However, one letter (254) could be found in which the same structure as that in (252) is used, i.e. a number followed by '+' to signal that the actual number (or percentage) may be even larger.

(254) […] The most effective way for us as employers to bridge the gap that exists between classrooms and the world of work, and ensure a work-ready pipeline of skilled recruits in future, is through the work experience that the UK's large and small employers offer more than 500,000+ young people each year. […] [NEWS T10-017]

Although symbols are only rarely used in comments to replace lexical units, one kind of usage needs to be briefly mentioned here for the sake of completeness, i.e. the use of asterisks to replace some or all of the letters of

[298] Note that the present analysis focuses exclusively on symbols that are used to replace a lexical unit that is commonly spelt out in standard written discourse. The use of the % symbol was for instance excluded from the analysis, as it is used more frequently than the words 'per cent' and 'percent' in both the letters and the comments. In the former, 100 occurrences of '%' could be found, compared to 56 of 'per cent' and 'percent' combined; in the latter, there are 80 occurrences of '%', compared to only seven of 'per cent' and 'percent' combined. The use of the @ sign in combination with user names to signal addressivity in comments written in reaction to a previous comment will be discussed in 6.4.2.2.1 below.

expletives (255). In CMC, this usage is often interpreted as a strategy to avoid censorship rather than a sign of showing consideration for other readers' sensitivities. In newspapers, on the other hand, such usage is usually interpreted as the latter and restricted to the reporting of direct speech (256).[299]

(255) […] Can I suggest these pontificating poltroons all take their large pay packeges and **** off. [CMC T09-042 c3]

(256) […] She [AUTHOR] talked up Alan Duncan's [POLITICIAN] recent unguarded comments that MPs are being "treated like s***" and live "on rations", and hypothetically argued that […] [NEWS T06-030.2]

In the comments of the present analysis, expletives in general are rare, and they are masked on only seven occasions. All in all, there is thus very little use of non-alphabetic symbols and the comments hardly differ from the letters in this respect.[300]

5.2.5.6 Orthographic mistakes and typing errors

The non-standard spellings discussed so far all belong to the group of intentional deviations and clearly exhibit regularities that lend themselves to description and analysis. This does not appear to be the case when it comes to *typos and incorrect spellings*, which, according to Squires (2010: 475), also rank among the linguistic features enregistered as Internet language, having sparked, or at least further ignited, the public discussion about the detrimental influence of new media on our linguistic abilities. To a certain extent this is comprehensible, since it is often difficult or even impossible to discern whether a misspelt word is merely the result of a slip of the keyboard or an indicator of a lack of orthographic skills. Readers may therefore assume that mistyped words or even any of the respellings presented above are errors of ignorance.

Typing requires not only a considerable cognitive effort but also good fine motor coordination, which, especially in synchronous forms of communication, represents quite a challenge not only to less skilled touch typists. Yet even if there is awareness that many mistakes are not the result

[299] The example above is taken from the *Times*. While the *Guardian*'s style guide urges authors to use expletives only when absolutely necessary, its advice on using asterisks and similar strategies is pretty clear: "[N]ever use asterisks, or such silliness as b------, which are just a cop-out" (Marsh and Hodsdon 2015: n.p.).

[300] However, two additional types of usage can only be found in the comments: on the one hand, the use of non-alphabetic characters in emotes (see 5.4.2 below), and, on the other, the use of the @ sign to address other users (see 6.4.2.2.1 below). As the discussion below will show, both are far from frequent.

of bad spelling skills, the occurrence of typing errors can still be interpreted as sloppiness and thus taken as a proof of declining standards and a lack of linguistic diligence.

Thus, despite being produced unintentionally, orthographic mistakes and typing errors are still meaningful and worthy of analysis. In fact, the comparative frequency of typing errors has been of interest in linguistic research into CMC since its inception (cf. e.g. Murray 1990 and Ferrara et al. 1991), the focus being on the question of whether or not these errors are corrected and on trying to give plausible reasons for doing or not doing so. While Ferrara et al. (1991: 25) find that "users showed a preference for retyping the misspelling they noticed rather than deleting the error and erasing any trace of their mistake", Murray (1990: 44) sees typing errors as the direct result of strategies used for economy and brevity, stating that "[u]nless communication will be impaired or the recipient is of high status, most CmC conversationalists do not bother to correct typos or infelicities of syntax". These two opposing findings illustrate nicely that what is interesting about the occurrence of typing errors in a certain communicative situation is first and foremost what they reveal about the message production process (for instance whether the message is reread and edited) and the metalinguistic awareness of the individual interlocutors. Given the concern about language decay and the fact that CMC, as an emerging form of communication, still lacks clear norms of appropriateness, the latter aspect is of particular interest.

Baron's (2004) study of IM, a quasi-synchronous form of communication, reveals that barely 1.5% of the words in her corpus of nearly 12,000 words are spelt wrongly and that on several occasions, these are corrected by the writer in the following turn. The results of Lyddy et al.'s (2014) analysis of text messages are comparable: misspellings only account for less than 4% of the non-standard spellings. These findings seem to run counter to the widely held view of CMC as being characterised by "devil-may-care spelling", as Baron (2004: 411) puts it so adequately and call for more quantitative studies of this kind.

With this in mind, the present data were searched for misspelt words, and an attempt was made to categorise the misspellings (e.g. additional key hit, wrong key hit, wrong order of keys hit and mistakes likely to have been caused by homophony). In addition, all comments free from spelling deviation (both intentional and unintentional) were assigned a special code to set them apart from comments characterised by non-standard spelling on the one hand and comments with only minor inconsistencies or deviations from the norm on the other, including the different types of respellings presented above. Such a categorisation is more complex than it might seem at first glance. If a comment of 140 words, for instance, contains what is most certainly a typing error (e.g. 'rhe' instead of 'the'), should it be characterised as exhibiting standard spelling or minor inconsistencies?[301] What if a fairly short comment of only 17 words contains what is more likely to be an orthographic mistake than a typo, i.e. 'there' instead of 'their' (257)? Is the latter comment not on a different level than the former, even though the number of mistakes is identical?

(257) The idea of a 'brain drain' is insulting. Like everyone else is dribbling into there bibs. [CMC G06-046 c10]

For the sake of consistency, the coding was thus performed in two rounds. In the first one, comments without a single mistake were assigned the code *standard spelling*, and comments with one or several minor mistakes were assigned a special, preliminary code. These preliminary codings were then coded again in a second round, following a clear scheme devised after having reread all the texts belonging to this category: comments containing more than one typing error per 50 words and comments containing what is highly unlikely to have been a mere slip of the keyboard (e.g. mistakes likely to have been caused by homophony) were assigned the code *not quite standard spelling*; all other comments were classified as *standard*. This yielded the following results: of the 1,000 comments analysed, 488 were coded as exhibiting standard spelling and 125 as being not quite standard. In consequence, 387 comments show clear deviations, including the respellings discussed above. Of the 488 comments classified as standard overall, 368 do not contain a single deviation (including emoticons).

These findings suggests that online comments are indeed characterised by what Thurlow et al. (2007: 124) describe as "generally less regard for accurate spelling and/or typing errors". However, even in the letters to the editor, a considerable number of non-standard spellings could be found: 62 letters (28 in the *Guardian* and 34 in the *Times*) contain some form of non-standard spelling; in 57 of these letters, the deviation is clearly not intentional (e.g. 'descendents', 'presumbly', 'incidently', 'more then 80 years', 'perfoming'). While this does not justify the deviations found in the comments, it illustrates that even texts revised and edited by several people may not be free from mistakes. In this light, the 368 comments without a single spelling deviation and the 488 comments classified as standard overall are certainly noteworthy. Moreover, even the intentional respellings discussed

[301] See comment CMC G10-001-04 c14.

above (e.g. capitalisation for emphasis) were considered non-standard, i.e. not every non-standard comment is a sign of lacking linguistic diligence.[302]

Table 18 below lists some of the most frequent types of misspelling. It is intended to illustrate that the majority (i.e. 82%) appear to be inadvertent typing errors, the two most frequent types in this category being the result of failing to hit a key or hitting an additional key. Misspellings that are likely to have been caused by homophony were classified as orthographic errors (18%); in this group, using a wrong key – or rather letter – is the most frequent type of misspelling.

Table 18 Most common types of misspellings in the comments and their likely cause (N=432)

type of misspelling	**inadvertent typing error**		**orthographic error**	
	examples	**N**	**examples**	**N**
key not hit	departmen eucation criticsm	112	asymetric goverment canabis	15
additional key hit	stuipid professsional an good story	84	delussion biggots loosing	19
wrong key hit	furthernore signigicant minumum wage	72	blatent lies benifit solomn	38
word missing/ used twice	needs to challenged/ seem to to be	52		0
wrong order of keys hit	stopped in thier tracks May I alos point out Britian	34	acheivements alliegances food yeilds	6
	totals	**354**		**78**

Apostrophes were not included in the table above, as their analysis is less straightforward. In most studies on CMC, they are treated as a feature of punctuation rather than spelling (cf. e.g. Lyddy et al. 2014). However, mistakes like that of using ‘it’s’ where the genitive pronoun ‘its’ is required

[302] Two points need to be addressed at this stage. First of all, in order to avoid having to type up the letters to the editor analysed, they were collected using the database *LexisNexis Academic*, which provided the letters in digital form. It might be that the misspellings only occur in these texts and not in the printed newspapers. In the case of the *Guardian*, however, the letters to the editor were also published on the newspaper website, and these texts featured the same misspellings as the present corpus. Second, the identification and categorisation of the misspellings was performed manually, assisted by the features Microsoft Word offers for checking spelling and grammar. While great care was taken, there is no guarantee that the list of misspellings is complete. However, Table 18 and the other figures listed above were never meant to represent a minute examination of misspellings; rather, they are intended to offer a rough sketch and uncover general tendencies.

are clearly not a matter of faulty punctuation but of faulty spelling, even though a punctuation mark is involved.

What complicates the analysis is that apostrophes are often omitted in CMC and that this may not be done consistently. If a comment contains only one apostrophe and this apostrophe is missing – should this then be classified as a typing error, an orthographic mistake or simply as a sign that apostrophes are not used in general?

All in all, 102 comments were identified in which one or more apostrophes are missing. Even if it is impossible to say why apostrophes are not used in these comments, this still means that in only 10% of the comments, apostrophes are missing despite being required. In addition to cases where apostrophes are simply lacking, some misspellings appear to be caused by insecurities concerning the use of apostrophes; in these cases, the mistake involves more than a simple lack of apostrophe (e.g. the use of <’s> instead of plural <s>, <whose> instead of <who’s> or <there> instead of <they’re>). These kinds of mistake are fairly common in English and could be found in 39 comments.

This brief discussion of orthographic mistakes and typing errors has shown that although the former are not uncommon, the latter appear to be decidedly more frequent. The present data clearly suggest that the majority of mistakes are not caused by a lack of knowledge but by a more relaxed attitude towards linguistic accuracy and consistency than some people might be used to or consider appropriate.

5.2.6 Concluding remarks on orthography

The preceding sections have shown that deviations from standard orthography in CMC run the gamut from special uses of capitalisation and punctuation via a vast array of respelling strategies on the word or phrase level to unintentional typing errors and orthographic mistakes. This might explain why, as Herring (2012: 2) points out, “[n]onstandard orthography is widely considered to be a defining characteristic of computer-mediated language”. However, the discussion has also revealed that many such deviations are far from arbitrary and that certain patterns and regularities can be identified. Whenever deviations from a norm are not arbitrary but systematic, it can be assumed that they are employed on purpose and serve a particular function. Indeed, Herring (2012: 3) comes to the conclusion that “the proportion of nonstandard spellings that are unintentional is very low among native speakers”, which seems to challenge the claim made by the popular media that “devil-may-care spelling” epitomises language use in computer-mediated settings (Baron 2004: 411).

Moreover, the orthographic features described above are far from being as novel as the popular media want the public to believe. Many of them have been adopted from other discourse types, thus casting doubt over the detrimental influence of CMC on the language of today's youth. If non-standard spellings such as 'cos', 'wot' or 'dunno' have such a long tradition that they have their own entries in the *OED* (the first occurrences listed there dating back to 1828, 1829 and 1842, respectively)[303] and if often bemoaned abbreviations like 'aftn', 'gd', 'agn', 'fwd' and 'btwn' can be found in an abbreviation dictionary from the 1940s and thus date back to long before people began to communicate via computer networks (cf. Crystal 2008b: 47ff.), claims of the English language being ruined by CMC are difficult to uphold.

Interestingly, this is also the conclusion drawn in some of the letters to the editor of the present corpus. Reacting to a copy of the *Guardian* that included a free reprint of a Jackie comic from the 1970s one reader argues:

> (258) Did anyone else notice the advert in the free Jackie comic (12 September) for a speed-writing course: "If u k rd th msg u k bkm a sec + gt a gd jb"? It looks like the youth of today are not responsible for text-speak after all. [NEWS G11-031]

This letter is then picked up by another reader, who goes even further back in time than the 1970s and the need for speed-writing secretaries:

> (259) Text speak the fault of the Jackie comic (Letters, 22 September)? The rot begins in Great Expectations, when Pip writes to Joe: MI DEER JO i OPE U R KR WITE WELL i OPE i SHAL SON B HABELL 4 2 TEEDGE U JO AN THEN WE SHORL B SO GLODD AN WEN i M PRENGTD 2 U JO WOT LARX AN BLEVE ME INFXN PIP. I'm re-reading Dickens for any sign of mobile phones. Hang on – didn't he meet Doctor Who?
> Barry Russell
> Prfsr ov Cmnty Msc, Lds Clg ov Msc [NEWS G11-064]

If the orthographic features called typical of CMC are neither new nor unique to this medium, their allegedly detrimental influence may stem from their ubiquity rather than their singularity. It is certainly true that people today communicate far more often in writing than they did in the past, and a large part of this written communication is computer-mediated. However, this does not mean that this large part also exhibits the characteristics described above. As the present analysis has demonstrated, in some forms

[303] "cos | 'cos, adv. and conj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 16 February 2017; "wot, pron." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 16 February 2017; "dunno, v." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 16 February 2017.

of communication, many of the features called typical of CMC are either absent or fairly rare.

Ironically, it is not only the media that are to blame for the mismatch between public perception and actual use. I argue that scholarly discussions about the characteristics of CMC based more on anecdotal evidence than empirical findings and studies in which the affordances and constraints of the individual communicative situations have not been considered assiduously enough have played their part as well. Unfortunately, Crystal (2008b: 56) seems to be correct in saying that "text-messaging dictionaries are partly to blame for making people think that texting is incomprehensible" – an observation that seems to hold true not only for text messages.[304]

However, it is certainly true that the comments are not produced with as much attention to linguistic correctness as the letters, where the editors make sure that linguistic standards are met. While the number of typing errors suggests that proofreading and editing are far less important in this more direct and instant way of sharing one's opinion, this does not mean that readers are not aware of mistakes or take them to be the norm. Several comments could be found in which readers correct their typos in a further comment or use it to apologise:

(260) Apologies for spelling and grammar - never type when you're ranting! [CMC G10-001-04 c16]

Such meta-comments suggest that awareness of linguistic standards is at least not completely lacking, even if readers may fail to spot their mistakes in the heat of the debate. They also point to the fact that some commenters feel the need to pre-empt possible criticism – an aspect to be discussed in more detail below (see 7.3.4.2.3).

5.2.7 Typography

As discussed above (see 5.2.1.3), in the present analysis, the term *typography* is used exclusively to refer to the characteristics of fonts, spatial organisation and page layout (cf. Crystal 2003: 192). Although many forms of CMC offer their users a range of typographical choices, such characteristics are usually not the focus of linguistic research. One of the reasons for this may be that such features – despite their visual nature – are often not considered essential to written language. However, with an increasing interest in multimodal communication not only in spoken interaction but also in writing has come a tendency to include such aspects when discussing

[304] Interestingly, Crystal (2004a) himself is the author of *A Glossary of Netspeak and Textspeak*, i.e. the very kind of dictionary he seems to condemn (see also above).

written texts. While in the beginning this trend was most noticeable in the analysis of discourse domains like advertising (cf. e.g. Goddard 1998), it has by now reached other contexts of language use as well, such as the study of narrative (cf. e.g. Page 2010), where the use of typography, layout and photographic images and their combined meaning potential is increasingly becoming a focus of interest (cf. e.g. Nørgaard 2010). Since the importance of multimodal analyses has recently also been stressed in CMC research (cf. e.g. Bolander and Locher 2014: 18ff.), it is to be expected that typographical features will be given more attention in the future; after all, they are semiotic resources that need to be studied together with all the other visual and auditory resources that are often combined in intriguing ways in today's multimodal media landscape.[305] According to Herring (2013: 15), "the use of channels other than text, and semiotic systems other than verbal language, to carry on conversational exchanges" is even one of the *emergent aspects* of web 2.0 discourse, i.e. an aspect that gives it its distinctive character. Yet even in primarily text-based forms of CMC, which are generally not regarded as prototypical representatives of multimodality, typographical choices have meaning potential. Researchers interested in gender or age-related differences can for instance find rich sources of data in discussion forums, where choices of typeface, font colour and size are most certainly used to create meaning and project a certain identity.

In contrast to the above-mentioned discussion forums and blogs, both online comments and letters to the editor offer their authors hardly any typographical choices. Neither can the users choose between different font types, sizes or colours, nor can they influence the overall layout of their texts. The layout and the position of a letter to the editor in the letters section of a printed newspaper are the result of choices made by the editors and not its author. These are largely determined by the general layout of the newspaper and the space available, i.e. editors may even change the original paragraph structure if need arises. In comparison, comment writers have slightly more control over what their texts look like on the screen; after all, they are the ones to decide where a paragraph ends and the next begins and

[305] As the term *mode* is used to refer to many different concepts (see 3.1.2.3 above), it is little surprising that researchers' understanding of the terms *multimodal* and *multimodality* differ. Akinnaso (1982: 12), for instance, argues that "[w]hile writing is uni-modal, speech is multimodal, making use of linguistic, prosodic, kinesic, and contextual cues in the signalling of meaning". However, this begs the question as to why writing, which makes use not only of linguistic but also of typographic cues, should not be considered multimodal as well. Indeed, Kress (2000: 187) claims that "all texts are multimodal" because the wording cannot exist in isolation but is combined with graphic resources (e.g. typography) in writing and auditory resources (e.g. intonation, rhythm or accent) in speech (cf. also Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). For a more detailed discussion of the status of modes and the resources used in writing as opposed to speaking see Kress (2010: 79ff.).

how many blank lines are displayed in between.[306] In addition, the comment writers on the *Guardian* website can use italics and bold print to highlight words or sentences and set off parts of their texts as quotes by using the respective icon displayed above the text entry field. These options, however, are not available on the *Times* website (see 4.3.5.2 above). Despite this minor advantage compared to letter writers, readers commenting online are still fairly restricted in comparison to users of other forms of CMC. The typographical options available rather resemble those of text messages or tweets, which are transmitted as plain text only. This has interesting implications on language use: since typography cannot be fully exploited as a meaning-carrying device, nearly everything has to be expressed with the help of the keys available on the keyboard of the computer or the mobile device used to type the message. Those features that are offered (at least on the *Guardian* website), i.e. bold print and italics, are used above all as markers of emphasis, which is why they were included in the discussion of capitalisation as a means of emphasis above (see 5.2.3.3.2.2). While the analysis revealed that bold print and italics may serve important functions (e.g. marking explicit contrast), the majority of commenters prefer to ignore the typographical choices offered. All in all, only 8.0% of the comments posted to the *Guardian* website (i.e. 48 out of 600) contain such features.

5.2.8 Further graphic means

So far, the focus has been on how verbal messages are represented in computer-mediated form both in terms of orthography (i.e. capitalisation, punctuation and spelling) as well as typography (i.e. choices of layout). In addition, interlocutors can draw on graphic means of expression to represent both vocal (i.e. paralinguistic) and non-vocal (i.e. kinesic) features of spoken communication in writing.

5.2.8.1 Paralinguistics: vocal, non-verbal features

When indicating emphasis via non-standard capitalisation (see 5.2.3.2 and 5.2.3.3.2 above) and prosody via reduplication of letters or punctuation marks (see 5.2.5.2 and 5.2.4.2 above), interlocutors transfer paralinguistic features of spoken language to the written medium. Among the most important of these non-verbal yet still vocal features of speech are volume, stress, rhythm of speech and non-verbal noises such as laughing and clearing one’s throat (see 4.3.5.2 above). As discussed above, volume and stress can be indicated in writing via capitalisation, iteration of signs and typo-

[306] Line breaks can be inserted manually; the maximum line length, however, is pre-specified and breaks are automatically inserted if the limit is reached.

graphic means (e.g. bold print or italics). The rhythm of speech can be – at least to a certain extent – represented via the signalling of pauses or hesitation (cf. Crystal 1966: 96) with the help of trailing dots (see 5.2.4.2 above) or by spelling out fillers such as 'uh', 'uhm' or 'er'.[307] In addition, laughter and other non-verbal yet meaningful noises can be represented; 'he he he' or 'ha ha ha' for instance indicate different types of laughter, and 'mhm' or 'hmmm' represent thoughtfulness or hesitation (cf. e.g. Lewin and Donner 2002).[308] These are features that Crystal (1966: 96) subsumes under the heading of *vocalisations* as opposed to *hesitation*, arguing, however, that "[t]here is an unclear boundary between vocalisations and voiced hesitation ('hmmm' – 'ə:m', etc.)". Spelling out such features of spoken interaction in the written medium is not unique to CMC, since many such instances can be found in texts predating the Internet era. In novels, for instance, the direct speech of characters is often made more realistic with the help of vocalisations or hesitation markers, but such features can also be found in written texts that are not intended as a verbatim representation of direct speech or dialogue, e.g. tabloids or private letters (cf. Maynor 1994: 50).

Two further categories of paralinguistic communication could also be analysed under the heading of graphology, i.e. exclamations and interjections. The former lie on the borderline between graphological and syntactic features, as exclamations can be marked in writing either by punctuation or by syntax. In the present thesis, their analysis was included in the discussion of exclamation marks (see 5.2.4.4.2 above). Interjections, in contrast, lie on the borderline between graphological features and lexical/morphological ones; they are generally considered a rather elusive category. Carter and McCarthy (2006: 224) for instance define them as "exclamative utterances consisting of single words that do not easily fit into the major word classes", e.g. "bother, crikey, damn, god, goodness (me), gosh, (good) heavens, hooray, jeez, ooh, oh no, oops, ouch, ow, ugh, tut-tut, whoops, wow, yippee, yuk, phew, hooray, aargh, urgh, poo, yuk, ooo" (2006: 224). Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1361), in contrast, describe interjections as "a category of words that do not combine with other words in integrated syntactic constructions, and have expressive rather than propositional meaning". Interestingly, most lists of interjections include items from Crystal's catego-

307 Interestingly, 'uh' and 'er' but not 'uhm' have entries in the *OED* as markers of hesitation ("uh, int." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 17 February 2017; "er, int." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 17 February 2017).

308 'He he' and 'ha ha' as well as 'ho ho' as representations of laughter are listed in the *OED* under the entry of 'he' ("he, int.2." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 17 February 2017.).

ries of *vocalisation* and *voiced hesitation* (cf. 1966: 96), which is why these features will be discussed together under the heading of graphology.[309]

Together with discourse markers (e.g. 'anyway', 'okay', right' or 'you know', 'I mean' and 'you see'), stance markers (e.g. 'actually', 'I think' and 'to be honest') and hedges ('apparently', 'like' and 'sort of'), interjections are what Carter and McCarthy (cf. 2006: 208) refer to as *pragmatic markers*, which, in turn, are a typical feature of spoken language (cf. 2006: 165ff.).[310] In a similar vein, Koch and Oesterreicher (cf. 1990: 50ff.) consider hesitation phenomena, interjections and other discourse markers to be features of conceptual orality, which makes their analysis all the more relevant for the present study.

The representation of such paralinguistic features via graphic means is a well-documented characteristic of CMC and commonly attributed to the fact that since auditory cues are missing, interlocutors need to find novel ways to signal their involvement in the conversation (cf. e.g. Tagliamonte and Denis 2008: 11ff. and Herring 2012: 3). All of the features described above are generally considered part of the oral characteristics of CMC (cf. e.g. Werry 1996, Lewin and Donner 2002, Thaler 2003 and Cho 2010). Their function of seeking "to redress the apparent loss of socio-emotional or prosodic features" in CMC (Thurlow and Poff 2013: 176) has led Thurlow (2003) to coin the term *paralinguistic restitution* to describe their use (see 4.3.5.2 above). The strategy of representing paralinguistics in writing is commonly viewed as having originated in – or at least as having gained currency via – comic books (cf. e.g. Meise-Kuhn 1998 and Dürscheid et al. 2010), where such indicators of conceptional orality lend the texts a 'spoken flavour'.[311] How frequent these allegedly typical features of CMC are, however, is a question that has rarely been addressed. Quantitative studies are scarce and those that have been undertaken (e.g. Lewin and Donner 2002 as well as Tagliamonte and Denis 2008) suggest that such features are comparatively infrequent and that usage centres around a small number of

[309] For an overview of the literature on interjections see Norrick (2011).
[310] Examples taken from Carter and McCarthy (2006: 208ff.).
[311] See Koch (cf. 1999a: 143) for the link between comics and conceptional orality and Haase et al. (cf. 1997: 78) and Androutsopoulos (cf. 2007b: 86) for the relationship between comics, CMC and conceptional orality. For a very interesting analysis of interjections, onomatopoetica, spelling variants and their function in comics see Forster et al. (2012). In addition to these graphic means of expression, comics also make use of several of the other characteristics described above, e.g. respellings, punctuation and typography. Another distinctive feature of comics is the written representation of sounds in general (i.e. not just vocal sounds), such as 'crash!' 'bang!' 'boom!'. While the occurrence of spellings representing non-human noises is sometimes also mentioned in CMC literature (cf. e.g. Herring 2012), it seems to be a far less frequent feature in this context.

types, e.g. ‘haha’ and its variants in the case of vocalisations (cf. 2008: 11f.).

In the present data, all of the features described above can be found, yet their numbers differ. The most frequent strategy of representing paralinguistic features in written form is that of indicating stress and emphasis via capitalisation discussed above (see 5.2.3.3.2). Almost as frequent as this use is that of signalling hesitation and pauses. In 62 comments, this is achieved via suspension dots, as was discussed in detail above (see 5.2.4.4.3) and is illustrated by (261) below. In the letters, in contrast, suspension dots are used only once to fulfil this function. However, as argued above, dashes are often used in this corpus to represent a prosodic pause, thus adding emphasis to the part of the sentence following the dash (262). In the comments, on the other hand, dashes with this function are very rare.

(261) […] Well... No, changed my mind. [CMC G11-018 c11]

(262) […] Furthermore, we also need the government to take the moral lead by setting reasonable pay structures within our public bodies, for public procurement contracts and last but not least – within our publicly owned banks. […] [NEWS G06-12M]

Readers commenting online sometimes also signal hesitation by spelling out fillers or what Crystal (cf. 1966: 96) calls voiced hesitation (263). As (264) illustrates, voiced hesitation may even be combined with suspension dots signalling a pause. However, when hesitation is vocalised and not just represented via suspension dots, a layer of meaning is added, which speaks in favour of grouping voiced hesitation and vocalisation together with interjections (cf. Norrick 2011). The use of ‘hmmm’ in (263) and (264) signals not just hesitation but also thoughtfulness, while ‘err’ in (265) expresses the commenter’s perplexity and disagreement in reaction to another user’s claim that cycling helmets should not be worn because they are useless at speeds over 12mph.[312]

(263) […] Hmmm, so Mr. Cameron would like to reduce the size of the state, (whatever that means in this day and age). […] [CMC G09-061-62 c8]

(264) [...] Hmmm...where have we heard that one before? [...] [CMC G10-023-25 c12]

(265) […] Err no Gus [USER], ask Rachel Atherton, last years Downhill World Champion who had a collision with a pickup truck at well over 12mph or Jens

[312] In spoken interaction, the intonation contour plays an important role in the interpretation of the pragmatic meaning of interjections, especially when very frequent and versatile ones like ‘uh’ (spelt ‘err’ in the example above) are concerned (cf. e.g. Norrick 2011: 257f.).

> Voigt who crashed in this years Tour De France at well over 12mph. […] [CMC T10-055 c10]

In any case, this strategy is far less frequent than simply using suspension dots. As Table 19 below reveals, only 15 occurrences of voiced hesitation could be found, the use of 'hum' probably being a mistyped form of 'uhm'.[313] Interestingly, *uhm*, *um* and *uh*, which all rank among the top ten most frequent interjections in the *American English Conversation* portion of the *Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus* (LSWEC) (cf. Norrick 2011: 255), are almost completely absent from the present corpus.[314]

Table 19 Voiced hesitation in the comments (N=15)

voiced hesitation	**occurrences**
hm/hhmm/hmm/hmmm/mmmm	1/1/1/5/1
er/err	1/2
um	1
hum (misspelt uhm?)	1
ahh	1
total	**15**

The use of vocalisation is even more infrequent than the use of voiced hesitation: all in all, there are only two occurrences of laughter (both ironic, see (266) below), one use of 'grr' to represent the commenter's anger and one use of 'blah blah', which the *OED* considers a *derisive interjection*.[315]

> (266) […] Result ? A very happy 38 year old man with almost a 6 pack and lots more cash haha, down 4 belt holes in 10 months to 80.7kgs, with no real dietary changes, although […] [CMC G09-008 c11]

Both voiced hesitation and vocalisation are absent from the letters. However, this corpus contains the only representation of a non-linguistic

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[313] In the present data, the use of fillers is thus even more infrequent than in the message boards analysed by Lewin and Donner (2002), where they appeared in 17% of the messages. However, Lewin and Donner (cf. 2002: 33) consider 'oh' a filler, which makes it difficult to compare the findings.

[314] There are two exceptions: one occurrence of 'um' and one possible use of 'uhm' (if the 'hum' mentioned above is interpreted as a misspelling of 'uhm'). If 'er' is considered the British spelling variant of American 'uh', three further occurrences can be found.

[315] "blah, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 17 February 2017.

sound: a letter about the fictional character of a car-driving toad ends in the hooting sound ‘parp parp’ [NEWS G11-009].[316]

The picture emerging from the analysis of the remaining interjections is similar: all in all, they are significantly more frequent in the comments than the letters (N=118 vs. N=13) yet far from as frequent as one might have expected.[317]

Table 20 Interjections in the comments, including vocalisation and voiced hesitation (N=118)

interjection	occurrences
well	27
oh	18
jesus	3
oh dear	3
ah	2
alas	2
blimey	2
bollocks	2
eh?	2
goodness	2
haha/ha ha ha ha ha ha ha	1/1
hear hear	2
my god	2
wow	2

[316] The toad in question is Mr. Toad, the main character of Kenneth Grahame’s *The wind in the willows*, which was later adapted by A. A. Milne.

[317] Since interjections are such an elusive category, some of those found in the present corpora may not be considered interjections in other studies, while others may be missing. The present analysis is based on Norrick (2011), even if he does not mention all of the interjections listed in the tables below. I also follow Norrick (cf. 2011: 250ff.) in considering *well* not simply a discourse marker (as does Schiffrin 1987) but as belonging to what he – following Ameka (1992) – calls *secondary interjections*, i.e. a category that also includes lexical items (e.g. *damn*, *shit*, *blimey*) in contrast to *primary interjections* (e.g. *uh* and *oh*). The origin of this distinction is often attributed to Bloomfield (cf. 1994: 176), whose seminal book *Language* was first published in 1933, even if Ameka (cf. 1992: 104ff.) points out repeatedly that his use differs slightly from that of Bloomfield. Stange (cf. 2016: 9), in contrast, attributes the distinction between primary and secondary interjections to Wundt (1911). Whatever its origin, this distinction is widely accepted today. For a more detailed discussion also see Norrick (2009: 867ff.).

aha, aye, balls, blah blah, bless, bloody hell, dammit, damn right, frig me, good god, good luck, grr, hard luck, hey, hurrah, my, my goodness, my word, oh no, oh really, ooh, oops, pshaw, thank goodness, thank the gods, thanks, tough, tsk, why, yah-boo, yay, yuk	32
instances of voiced hesitation (see above)	15
total	**118**

Most of the interjections appear just once or twice, with the exception of *well* and *oh*. *Well* has 27 occurrences as interjection in the comments (see Table 20 above) and four in the letters (see Table 21 below), while *oh* occurs 18 times in the comments and three times in the letters.[318]

In the comments, most of the interjections involve negative emotions and express the commenter's anger or exasperation (see (267) and (268) below). Some can also be considered turn initiators, as the 'oh' in (269) or some of the instances of voiced hesitation discussed above (see (263), which follows a direct quote from the article).[319] This latter function can be understood as a way of mimicking interactive face-to-face communication – after all, such turn initiators and hesitation markers at the beginning of utterances are not necessary to hold the floor in written communication.

(267) […] jesus, what hope is there for democracy! […] [CMC G06-086 c14]

(268) […] Many things about the British legal system baffle me, but this is by far the most troubling. My goodness! [CMC T06-004-1 c8]

(269) Oh, and finally: the Conservative plans are ridiculous. [...] [CMC G06-011-12 c7]

While interjections are not as frequent in the letters as they are in the comments (see Table 21 below), they fulfil the same functions.

318 Following Norrick (2011), combinations such as *oh yes*, *oh no* and *oh really* were grouped separately. The list of interjections identified in the present corpus also includes some *formulaic phrasal interjections* (cf. 2011: 282), e.g. *my goodness*, but excludes some words that have been treated as interjections in the literature. Norrick (2011: 251), for instance, argues that "*yes* and *no*, in their characteristic function of responding to polar questions, seem too distinct from interjections proper to be sensibly classified with them" but adds that "they can also serve as true interjections", e.g. when somebody says 'no!' upon receiving bad news. Since comments are not dialogic in nature, the instances of *yes* and *no* in the present data usually do not follow a question, which makes it difficult to differentiate between the two functions. For this reason, they were excluded from the present analysis together with *yeah.* The combinations with *oh* mentioned above, however, clearly function as interjections.

319 For a discussion of the different types of turn initiators see Norrick (2011).

Table 21 Interjections in the letters (N=13)

interjection	occurrences
well	4
oh	3
oh yes	1
alas	1
thanks	1
gosh	1
hurrah	1
for goodness sake	1
total	**13**

In (270), the interjection ‘for goodness sake’ communicates very effectively the letter writer’s anger and frustration. The letter quoted in full as (271), on the other hand, illustrates how interjections can be used to create the illusion of spontaneity and dialogicity: by asking and answering questions, the letter writer lets the reader witness his interior dialogue with himself. The use of ‘oh’, which in spoken conversation frequently functions as turn initiator, helps to emphasise these question-answer adjacency pairs and, as a discourse marker commonly “signaling a change in cognitive state” (Norrick 2011: 257), also creates the impression that the writer has to search for the answers first. This staged pondering is of course meant to communicate that not much brain-wracking is necessary to see that the journalist’s advice is useless to most people. Coupled with the clearly ironic ‘most useful’ directly addressed to the journalist, this constitutes a highly effective indirect form of criticism.

(270) […] For goodness sake, stop attacking the NHS, stop the privatisation, and let us get on with using our skills to care for patients. […] [NEWS G09-001]

(271) Being an overweight diabetic with a heart complaint, high cholesterol and high blood pressure, I was most interested in Phil Daoust’s advice (I’ve taken control back over my life, 3 September) on how to sort myself out. However, there is something holding me back, now what is it? Oh yes, I have to go to work every day and find swimming for three or four hours not very convenient. I think there is something else but can’t seem to think of it... Oh, I know. I don’t live in France next to a lake. Thanks Phil anyway, most useful. [NEWS G09-008]

When compared to the interjections discussed as the most frequent ones in Norrick (cf. 2011: 257), the present corpora are clearly marked by an absence of secondary interjections like *shit*, *damn* and *fuck*.[320] The only interjections that are used in a considerable number of contributions (i.e. *well* and *oh*), on the other hand, are among the three most common interjections in the *American English Conversation* portion of the *Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus* (LSWEC) (cf. Norrick 2011: 255). Since *well* is a fairly frequent turn initiator that can be used to signal or introduce disagreement (272), it is little surprising that it occurs in the present data as well. *Oh* can be used to create an air of spontaneity (as in (271) discussed above or (273) below) or to signal one's surprise or anger (274) and thus comes in handy when debating.

(272) Julian Glover [AUTHOR] says "The fells are open today". Well, not every day. […] [NEWS G08-058]

(273) […] Oh and by the way getting them out of here saves health care dollars. […] [CMC T11-032 c7]

(274) […] Oh well done , Must have taken a bloody AGE to work that one out ! […] [CMC G10-001-04 c3]

In sum, the interjections used in reader response signal emotional involvement, express the reader's stance, also function as discourse markers and add a conversational touch to the written contributions. If they are considered markers of conceptional orality, the present findings suggest that readers commenting online rely more heavily on these means to position themselves and influence the communicative atmosphere than do writers of letters to the editor. However, interjections, including voiced hesitation and vocalisation, are far from being a common feature of below-the-line comments, and especially secondary interjections from the lexical class of expletives are rare. In light of the fact that online comments are often considered a hotbed for hostility and aggression, the absence of a very effective means of signalling not only one's emotional involvement in general but one's "negative emotions like annoyance, anger or irritation" (Stange 2016: 14) in particular is certainly noteworthy.

5.2.8.2 Kinesics: non-vocal, visual features

In addition to representing non-verbal yet vocal features of communication in written form, interlocutors in CMC can choose to represent visual ones, i.e. features of kinesics. The most important representative of this group is

[320] As briefly mentioned above, expletives are rare in the comments, and the few occurrences of 'fuck', 'damn' and 'shit' that could be found are not interjections (see 5.3.3 below), i.e. they are integrated into grammatical constructions (e.g. 'These people do a damn fine job' [CMC G06-M13 c5]). For a discussion of this distinction see Norrick (2011: 250f.).

certainly the emoticon.[321] In her brief history of the emoticon, Baron (cf. 2009: 108f.) draws attention to the fact that in the early days of CMC, the means of using typography as meaning-carrying device described above were not yet available and that the writers had to rely on punctuation, spelling and capitalisation to express emotion.

> Beginning in 1982, a new form of expression markers, known as emoticons, began to emerge. These markers were explicitly created with the goal of clarifying the emotion that an online writer was intending to convey in his or her message. Implicit in the creation of the early emoticons was the assumption that online communication was essentially a written version of casual speech, rather than more traditional written language (akin to a brief essay or a letter). However, since the language was physically written, the paralinguistic cues of face-to-face speech were missing, and it was presumed that the risk of misinterpretation was therefore high (2009: 108).[322]

Over the past thirty years, the emoticon has become the very icon of CMC, and numerous attempts to catalogue the great number of different types with their corresponding emotions have been made (cf. Dresner and Herring 2010). In addition to the emoticons typed using ASCII characters, many forms of CMC (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp and many discussion forums) offer their users the possibility to add automated graphical emoticons, i.e. the users can select the corresponding icon from a menu (see Figure 17 below for some of the emoticons available in WhatsApp, an instant messaging application for smartphones).

Since emoticons are generally held to be emblematic of CMC, they have also attracted attention in CMC research, for instance with respect to gender differences (cf. e.g. Wolf 2000 and Baron and Ling 2011) or communicative function (cf. e.g. Dresner and Herring 2010 and Skovholt et al. 2014). As with several other features among those discussed above, a number of studies have revealed that their occurrence is far from as frequent as suggested by the media (cf. e.g. Thurlow 2003: 15 and Frehner 2008: 143). However, frequency of use is likely to depend on the type of CMC, the purpose of the communicative event and also the means available. In the

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[321] The term *emoticon* is a blend of *emotion* and *icon* and refers to a combination of ASCII characters used to render facial expressions graphically, for instance by representing a smiley or a ‘frowny’ face as in :-) or :-((cf. Dresner and Herring 2010: 249). A more recent development are automated graphical emoticons, i.e. images of smileys that are not flipped sideways because they no longer consist of ASCII characters but of pictograms, e.g. ☺ (cf. Skovholt et al. 2014: 780). These can be simple black and white icons or coloured images, which may even be animated. For a more thorough discussion and the differences between Western and Japanese style (i.e. *kaomoji,* e.g. ^_^) see Dresner and Herring (2010).

[322] Baron (2009) thus establishes a direct causal link between the supposedly intermediate position of CMC with respect to the written and spoken media and the emergence of the emoticon.

case of emoticons created with ASCII characters, there may be a large difference between the range documented in netspeak glossaries (cf. e.g. Crystal 2004a) or in lists available on the Internet and those that are in widespread use.[323] However, the possibility to add automated graphical emoticons to one's message in many forms of CMC seems to have led to an increase in the number of types used. Even if this assumption is largely based on personal experience and remains to be tested by large-scale and, ideally, diachronic studies, the fact that graphical emoticons as the ones in Figure 17 below are not only far easier to create but also to interpret than ASCII emoticons lends support to this hypothesis.[324]

Figure 17 Selection of graphical emoticons available in WhatsApp

In addition to these icons mimicking facial expressions, CMC users can draw on a wide range of icons representing objects.[325] As with emoticons, these can either be constructed alphanumerically or added as ready-made icons, i.e. pictograms, if such a feature is offered by the respective form of CMC.[326] Over the past years, more and more objects (e.g. a glass of

[323] Numerous such lists can be found; see for example the one provided by Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_emoticons (last accessed March 13, 2017).

[324] This is not to say that graphical emoticons are never ambiguous; the surrounding linguistic co-text is usually needed to decode the meaning in all its nuances. However, encapsulating the emotion conveyed via a graphical emoticon with the help of ASCII characters alone would be a rather difficult task in many cases. A good example is the third emoticon in the fourth row of Figure 17 above, where the open, distressed mouth, the curled eyebrows and the cold sweat on the smiley's forehead communicate very successfully a mixture of worry and fear.

[325] Even if emoticons mimic facial expressions, this does not mean that the writer typing a frowning face is physically frowning at the moment of typing, as Marcoccia et al. (2008) revealed by investigating videotaped IM conversations. Instead of mirroring the actual facial expression of the writer, emoticons constitute conventionalised means of invoking the facial expressions commonly associated with a certain stance or emotion.

[326] When mobile phones started to have larger screens and could display several lines of text at the same time, it became popular to exchange short messages consisting of images of bears and

champagne, a heart or a plane) have become available, with the range and design depending on the individual type of CMC. Despite the visual nature of such icons, it can be argued that there is a fundamental difference between emoticons representing a facial expression or a gesture (e.g. the thumbs-up emoticon) and icons representing an object. While the former mimic or invoke facial expressions or body language, i.e. the parts of the interlocutors' physical appearance that have a communicative function in face-to-face interaction, the latter merely represent contextual features and by this means help the interlocutors to establish the physical context (cf. Werry 1996: 59ff.). The communicative function fulfilled is therefore not the same: while emoticons are usually employed to clarify the writer's feelings, mood, temper or intention, the other icons do not enact body language, gestures, facial expression and eye contact in the written medium but are used as embellishment (e.g. the icons of a flower or the moon added to a good-night message), as a visualisation strategy (e.g. the icons of a plane and a palm tree added to the message that the writer goes on summer holiday) or to replace verbal interaction altogether (e.g. the icon of a telephone to communicate that the user is busy talking on the phone). Thus, while this type of icon certainly carries meaning and – as in the example of the heart – can also express emotions, it is not used in the same way as emoticons are. However, considering emoticons as mere carriers of emotion is too simplistic a view. According to Dresner and Herring (2010), emoticons do not only – and not even primarily – function as emotion markers but fulfil an important pragmatic function by being indicators of illocutionary force: a winking smiley, for instance, helps the reader to interpret the linguistic message as tongue-in-cheek and is used to avoid that the joke is misunderstood and taken at face value. A similar claim is advanced by Skovholt et al. (2014), who argue that as *contextualisation cues*, emoticons can function in workplace emails as (a) *markers of a positive attitude*, as (b) *joke/irony markers* or as (c) *hedges*, depending on

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the like created with the help of letters, numbers and punctuation marks, as illustrated by the example of a sleeping rabbit below.

(\(\
(-.-)
o_(“)(“)
(author's example)

Such cases of ASCII art have become rare, however, and are hardly mentioned in research into CMC. One exception is Shortis (2007: 8), who calls this feature *alphabetical rebuses* and at least provides an example; however, the example given ((@}-‘-,-‘--- for a rose) is taken form Werry (1996: 61). Interestingly, Werry's example is also used by Herring (2012: 2), who considers such “drawings composed of keyboard characters” to lie “outside the scope of grammar” and therefore only mentions them in passing.

their position in the text.[327] Thus, even if emoticons do not always mirror actual facial expressions or simply express emotion, they serve clear communicative functions that are distinct from those of icons representing objects, which – especially if used first and foremost as means of visualisation or embellishment – are best considered graphostylistic devices (see 5.2.1.4 above).[328]

In the form of CMC analysed in the present analysis, only ASCII emoticons can be added, as neither the website interface of the *Guardian* nor that of the *Times* offers its users automated graphical emoticons or icons. Since below-the-line comments are fairly short texts and have a tendency towards emotional involvement, one could expect their authors to make use of strategies that allow them to communicate their stance non-verbally, especially in ironic or sarcastic remarks, which are comparatively frequent.[329] Emoticons being an interactional feature, one could also expect them to be more frequent in comments addressed to other comment writers than in those without such direct references.

Quite surprisingly, only six of the 1,000 comments analysed contain an emoticon (and only two comments contain two, i.e. N=8); these are written by only five users and distributed across only three comment threads.[330]

Table 22 Emoticons in the comments (N=8)

emoticons	occurrences
:)	4
;)	2
;o)	2
total	**8**

[327] The function of emoticons used as what Skovholt et al. (cf. 2014: 788ff.) call *hedges* depends on the speech act preceding the emoticon. In the case of expressive speech acts (e.g. thanking), their function is to strengthen the act and its illocutionary force whereas in combination with directives, their function is to soften the involved face threat.

[328] In the example of the plane and the palm tree mentioned above, the pictograms evoke features of the physical context; however, these features are not part of the immediate context of the verbal interaction but part of the physical context related to the mental frame or script of going on holiday. Thus, the author transmits mere associations as opposed to aspects of the communicative situation that would be present in a face-to-face interaction but are absent in writing. This illustrates that, in contrast to emoticons and the other characteristics of CMC discussed above, these pictograms are not features of paralinguistic restitution.

[329] For an investigation of the use of emoticons and the expression of sarcasm see Derks et al. (2007).

[330] While Lewin and Donner (2002: 35) already seem to be surprised that "[e]moticons, one of the 'signatures' of CMC, appeared only 16 times (8%)" in their corpus of message boards, the frequency of this feature in the present data is even below 1%.

As Table 22 above illustrates, there is also hardly any variation, the winking face with the accentuated nose being the idiosyncrasy of just one commenter, who uses it on two occasions.

Even if the scarcity of the phenomenon precludes a detailed discussion, some observations can be made. As expected, all but one of the comments containing an emoticon directly respond to another user or the author of the article, signalling that what is said is not meant to offend. To illustrate this use, a longer extract from a comment reacting to the same article as the letter quoted as (271) above is reproduced as (275) below. The argument made is largely the same, i.e. that the journalist's advice on how to lose weight cannot be put into practice by anyone living an 'ordinary' life. However, the way this criticism is expressed could hardly be more different. Both readers address the journalist directly using his first name; yet in contrast to using indirect criticism in the form of irony and staged spontaneity as the letter writer above, the commenter below directly confronts the journalist with his/her straightforward arguments ('saying […] is a bit ridiculous', 'sounds like a full-time job', 'is nigh impossible'). These points of criticism are flanked by positive feedback ('Congrats Phil', 'inspirational', 'thank you', 'an important point that you highlight'), which softens the criticism in between and makes it appear constructive rather than hostile or condescending.[331] The reproachful question 'Do you do any work?' asked by a previous commenter is repeated, yet it is followed by a smiley face, which – just like the flanking positive feedback – softens the impact and signals the commenter's sympathetic stance.[332]

(275) Congrats Phil... and what you write, particularly your enthusiasm and the fact that your regime worked, certainly is inspirational. In any case, thank you for this article! Though saying that it "really wasn't that hard" is a bit ridiculous, don't you think? What you describe sounds like a full-time job! For me, I already eat more or less the diet you describe, so that's easy, but finding several hours a day for exercise while having two jobs and a family with two young kids is nigh impossible... Esja [PREVIOUS COMMENTER] already asked whether you do any work... :)
An important point that you highlight is […] [CMC G09-008 c7]

If emoticons are used above all in such interactive exchanges, their absence may be linked to the interactional patterns of the comment sections, which will be discussed in detail in chapter 6 below. The only use of an emoticon

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[331] In educational contexts, this form of feedback, which is often referred to as the *sandwich technique*, is usually recommended as it reduces the negative impact of the criticism. As Harlan and Rowland (2002: 180) put it: "Like a traditional sandwich with two pieces of bread and a filling, the sandwich technique involves enfolding a criticism or a negative comment (the filling), between two sincere laudatory or praising comments (the two pieces of bread)".
[332] Aspects of positive and negative feedback will be discussed in more detail in 7.3 below.

without addressing another commenter or the journalist is (276), which constitutes a reaction to the news that tropical birds were stolen from a museum. In this case, the iterated smiley emoticon is used to signal the humorous nature of the comment. The sole purpose of this comment, which contains no less than three puns, seems to be to display the author's wit and to entertain the readers.[333] The emoticons are thus like a disclaimer that the comment is tongue-in-cheek.

(276) What a fowl thing to do. I wonder if the culprit planned the crime carefully or just decided to wing it..........
If he's caught, I have no doubt he'll find himself up before the beak! :) :) [CMC T06-001 c5]

Although Skovholt et al. (2014) distinguish between three functions of the emoticon, several functions could be claimed to be at work in the examples above. In (275), the smiley face clearly signals the commenter's *positive attitude*; yet at the same time, it also functions as a *hedge*, softening the impact of the criticism. In (276), the emoticons are *joke markers*, i.e. they draw attention to the puns; however, they can also be understood as signalling the commenter's friendly *attitude*; he/she only wants to entertain and not to offend. Yet despite the potential of fulfilling several functions at once, emoticons are extremely rare in the present corpus of below-the-line comments, where the users do not seem to feel the need to signal irony or jokes in this way. In the letters to the editor, emoticons do not occur at all.

5.2.9 Concluding remarks on graphology

The above discussion has shown that in terms of graphology alone, users of CMC have at their disposal a vast range of features that they can exploit – be it to save time and minimise the typing effort, for reasons of formality and style or to compensate for missing paralinguistic and kinesic cues by finding ways to represent features of speech in writing. Which features are used depends on various interrelated factors, among which rank the communicative setting and function, a user's personal preferences and conscious choices as well as the form of CMC.

According to Daft and Lengel (1983), communication media differ in terms of how rich the conveyed information is – a theory that is now generally known as *information* or *media richness theory*.[334] A face-to-face conversation, for instance, offers the possibility of immediate feedback and

[333] As (134), discussed on p. 173 above, has illustrated, this attitude is not appreciated by all.
[334] Daft and Lengel (1983) use the term *medium* to refer to what is called *forms of communication* in the present analysis, e.g. face-to-face conversations, phone calls or written letters.

several communication channels, i.e. the interlocutors can use visual as well as auditory cues. It is therefore considered a richer medium than a telephone conversation, which again is richer than a written letter, since in the latter only visual cues can be used and immediate feedback is not available (cf. 1983: 1ff.). While early forms of CMC were very lean, i.e. restricted to plain text, newer forms are becoming richer as users are not only offered more and more choices with regard to typography but may also embed graphics, images or even sound (cf. Baym 2006: 524). Online comments, however, are comparatively lean, and since "[l]eanness […] positions language as the sole means of creating social context among interactants" (2006: 524), one could expect the features discussed above to play an important role not only in the creation of social context but also in the meaning-making process at large. However, the analysis has revealed that from the diverse array of options available, only few are chosen by more than a couple of isolated users, the most frequent ones being the use of capitalisation for emphasis and the strategy of signalling pauses and hesitation. These findings clearly demonstrate that considering the richness of a medium or form of communication to be decisive is too simplistic a view and fails to take into account that the people communicating are active agents.[335]

As Androutsopoulos (2007c) has shown, the use of the above-discussed features in CMC differs according to genre.[336] He argues that even within well-defined subcultural groups (i.e. German hip-hop culture in his case), genre awareness exists: the interlocutors in his study adapted their language according to the particular genre (i.e. they differentiated for example between artist websites, board discussions and record reviews) although the medium-related aspects of the communicative events were fairly similar.[337] This does not mean, however, that language use within a genre is always homogeneous:

> Depending on genre, users will follow established conventions, creatively transform them, or draw on different generic models to solve the communicative task at hand. […] [T]he choice of a generic model is part and parcel of online identity design, as it contextualizes individual ambitions and alignments. Discarding a 'default' genre style and adopting a different generic model has stylistic significance and is clearly acknowledged as such by participants (2007c: 310).

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[335] See the concept of technological determinism introduced above (1.2.4), which takes the affordances and constraints of the medium as the single most important factor in shaping language use.

[336] Androutsopoulos (2007c) uses the terms *genre* and *text type* synonymously but does not provide a definition.

[337] In terms of media richness, websites and discussion boards are almost identical, the only difference lying in the possibility of feedback, as, by definition, discussion boards are more dialogic than most websites.

In the present study, genre appears to play an important role, as features that – based on the affordances and constraints of the form of communication – could be expected to be used were found to be largely absent. This absence could even be interpreted as a sign of the genre of online comments being influenced by the closely related genre of letters to the editor, where such characteristics – as was to be expected – are largely absent.[338]

Genre factors are always closely intertwined with stylistic choices, and graphological resources can be drawn on for identity construction and performance (cf. Shortis 2007) as well as for signalling group membership. In the present data, however, there are no clear signs of users signalling their membership to the group of commenters via any of the strategies discussed above, which suggests that most commenters do not perceive this group as a clearly defined community.[339]

In any case, spelling variation in CMC is far more than a simple strategy for text-entry reduction, as so often suggested in the literature (cf. e.g. Hård af Segerstad 2002 for such a simplistic view).[340] While many researchers have also identified such features as signs of participants imitating orality (e.g. Werry 1996, Günthner and Schmidt 2002 and Shortis 2007), these strategies move beyond being mere indicators of conceptional orality when they are used to create and signal identity and group membership (cf. Androutsopoulos 2007b: 83f.).[341] In the below-the-line comments analysed, the aspects of economy and community hardly play a role. The strategies found are rather used to add expressive force while ensuring that the comment remains intelligible to all. They also signal and, at the same time, create a fairly relaxed communicative atmosphere reminiscent of casual conversation in that linguistic norms are not adhered to as strictly as in formal written discourse. However, the deviations from standard language on the graphological level are far from being as frequent as one might have expected. Nevertheless, the present analysis has shown that graphological choices are powerful resources that warrant careful investigation.

While it is usually the characteristics on the graphological level that receive most attention in public discourse and research (cf. e.g. Thurlow

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[338] See also the *principle of stylistic inertia* (*stilistisches Trägheitsprinzip*) (cf. Bausinger 1972: 81) briefly introduced above (see 1.2.3).

[339] In contrast, if users join a fairly tight-knit, closed online community, they are probably more likely to adopt strategies used by more experienced users (e.g. special greeting formulae, frequency of emoticons).

[340] Shortis (2007: 13) even laments that this is the "default explanation" before drawing attention to the vast range of functions respellings have been found to fulfil.

[341] Günthner and Schmidt (cf. 2002: 321ff.) call this phenomenon *stylised orality* (*stilisierte Mündlichkeit*), Bittner (cf. 2003: 180ff.) and Hauser (cf. 2010: 219) *emulated orality* (*emulierte Mündlichkeit)* and Androutsopoulos (cf. 2007b) *new literacy* (*neue Schriftlichkeit*).

2003 and 2006, Kersten and Lotze 2013, Lyddy et al. 2014), the present discussion also addresses the remaining levels of analysis, starting with lexical and morphological features before moving on to the syntactic characteristics of CMC.

5.3 Lexical and morphological features

When talking about 'the language of the Internet' and its influence on English as such, reference is often made to the fact that with the invention of the Internet and CMC, a large number of new words have been coined (e.g. 'to google', 'email', 'emoticon' or 'netizen') and, in addition, many existing words have been given a new meaning (e.g. 'web', 'to surf', 'to like' and 'to chat'). While it is highly intriguing to study the different word formation processes at work (e.g. conversion in the case of 'to text' vs. blending in the case of 'emoticon' or 'netizen' vs. prefixation in words such as 'cyperplay' or 'hypertext'), a clear distinction should be made between the language used to communicate *on* the Internet and the language used to talk *about* the Internet, be it online or offline.

5.3.1 Language *on* the Internet vs. language *about* the Internet

When talking *about* the Internet, the above-mentioned neologisms obviously play an important role, and there is no denying that they have entered the English lexicon. However, claiming that the use of such words in everyday communication is a sign of the 'language of the Internet' influencing English amounts to claiming that family members discussing the problems they have with their 'inlays', 'veneers' and 'crownlays' over dinner is a clear sign of the language of dentistry influencing everyday English. Even if new words such as 'email' and 'to google' are also used when communicating *on* the Internet, they are not the most characteristic feature of language use in CMC but rather the terminology needed to talk *about* CMC, just as technical terms of dentistry are necessary to talk about dental restoration, be it in a scientific paper, at the dentist's or in a family dinner table conversation. Unfortunately, this fundamental difference has often been overlooked (e.g. Greiffenstern 2010) or at least not stressed enough (e.g. Thurlow 2001: 288 and Herring 2012: 3f.).[342] Greiffenstern's

[342] Herring (2012: 3) includes such features under the heading of *morphology* and adds that "[t]hese processes are not unique to CMC, but they have been especially productive on the Internet, generating many new words that are increasingly making their way into dictionaries of Standard English". While she is certainly right in claiming this, in her section on *morphology*, she discusses the acronyms (most of which are, in fact, initialisms) 'lol', 'jk' ('just kidding'), 'OMG' ('oh my god') and 'wtf' ('what the fuck') together with other word formation processes (e.g. semantic shift, as in 'spam' and 'flame') without drawing attention to

(2010: 8) goal, for instance, "to investigate in how far and in what ways computer-mediated communication has influenced other spheres of English use" cannot be achieved by investigating whether words such as 'google' figure in the corpus *The Bank of English* or by looking for technology-related words in novels or TV series (cf. 2010: 166ff.). While the study of technology-related metaphors (e.g. a hard drive as a metaphor for the human brain) offers insights into conceptualisation processes (in this case, the brain as HARDWARE metaphor), it does not reveal anything about the influence of CMC, i.e. any form of communication transmitted via computer networks, on the English language. As the focus of the present analysis is language use *in* CMC and not language *about* CMC, the word formation processes in the semantic field of IT, the Internet and CMC and their spread to standard vocabulary will be excluded from the discussion. In the following description of CMC on the lexical level, the focus will be exclusively on those lexical features that have been identified by previous research as typical of CMC irrespective of the topic of the communicative exchange.

5.3.2 Narrow range of vocabulary and low type/token ratio

One of the lexical features usually mentioned in descriptions of CMC is its narrow range of vocabulary, resulting in a low type/token ratio (cf. e.g. Baron 1998, Herring 2001 and Thaler 2003). Again, this is a feature commonly associated with spoken language: as speakers have less time to produce their utterances, they are more limited in their choice of vocabulary than writers, who can take their time to compose, reread, correct and improve their texts (cf. Chafe and Danielewicz 1987: 88). In order to investigate whether CMC is more akin to speech than writing in this respect, Yates (1996) compares the type/token ratio of a corpus of asynchronous computer conferencing messages, i.e. multi-party discussions, to the London-Lund corpus (spoken language) and the LOB corpus (written language). Interestingly, the range of vocabulary used in his CMC corpus turns out to be more similar to the written corpus than the spoken one, while resembling the spoken corpus in features such as the use of pronouns and modal auxiliaries. As measures of lexical density, i.e. the ratio of lexical to grammatical items in a sentence (cf. Halliday 1987), also reveal the CMC corpus to be closer to writing than speech, Yates (1996: 39) comes to the

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the important fact that the former are used primarily while talking *on* the Internet but not necessarily *about* the Internet, whereas the latter may be used offline as well as online, but only to talk *about* the Internet. In the latter case usage may of course broaden with time, i.e. Internet-related terms may come to be used with a broader meaning, yet the fundamental difference remains.

conclusion that "CMC users package information in text in ways that are more written- than speech-like".

As intriguing as such comparisons may be, they are extremely rare in the history of CMC research.[343] The reason for this is simple: all the characteristics of CMC discussed so far complicate such measurements. If texts contain typos, orthographic mistakes, spelling variants and emoticons, the number of types rises automatically and reveals only little about the range of vocabulary used. Moreover, if punctuation or spaces between words may be lacking and if the corpus has not undergone part-of-speech tagging, features such as average sentence length or lexical density cannot be calculated.[344] This means that any analysis of the type/token ratio and lexical density of computer-mediated texts requires a thorough manual cleansing of the data, which poses a great challenge when working with more than a small number of texts.

With nearly 100,000 words, the corpus of online comments is certainly too large to allow performing such a manual preparation. Yet it is not only the nature of the CMC data that complicates the analysis but also the general composition of both corpora. As outlined above (see 4), the present corpora differ in the total number of words and consist of individual texts or threads of texts instead of text files of equal length. While the software used in the present study offers the option to count types and tokens, performing such an analysis on the basis of each corpus in its entirety would mean comparing unevenly sized corpora and thus lead to meaningless results. After all, the type/token ratio is also influenced by the length of the text studied: the longer a text is, the less likely it is that new words appear (cf. e.g. Kjellmer 1994: 122f.). Yates (cf. 1996: 34) therefore calculates type/token ratios on the basis of texts with 2,000 words, which is the length of the text files in the standard corpora used for comparison. In addition to the mean type/token ratios, he also measures standard deviation.

In order to be able to compare the average type/token ratio of the comments to that of the letters, the individual texts and threads of texts would first have to be merged and rearranged so as to contain exactly 2,000 words each. In addition, the information added automatically to each comment (see 4.3.8 above) would have to be deleted manually, just as the signature lines in the letters; after all, including features such as usernames, time stamps, numbers of recommendation or places of residence in the count

[343] An exception is Freiermuth (2011), yet his way of proceeding poses serious problems (see below).
[344] These difficulties are also at least partly responsible for the fact that large-scale corpora of CMC are still lacking. For a brief overview of the problems faced when trying to compile and annotate such corpora see Eller and Hirschmann (2014) and King (2012).

would distort the findings. Yet even if both corpora were prepared in this way, the characteristics of CMC described above would still exert considerable influence and thus severely limit or even undermine the conclusions to be drawn from the findings. Overall, the effort required to prepare the data is clearly disproportionate to the explanatory potential of such an analysis, which is why it was not performed.[345] In any case, a manual analysis of matters of register and formality promises to be far more revealing than such merely quantitative corpus-linguistic calculations.

5.3.3 Register and dialect

Other lexical features of CMC that are frequently mentioned in the literature are the use of non-standard (cf. e.g. Landert and Jucker 2011) or substandard register (cf. e.g. Thaler 2003), the use of colloquial or informal language (cf. e.g. Maynor 1994, Werry 1996 and Tagliamonte and Denis 2008), which is often said to be influenced by youth language (cf. e.g. Dürscheid et al. 2010), and the regular occurrence of dialect lexemes (cf. e.g. 2010). While the use of non-standard registers and colloquial or informal language is documented in the English, French and German literature on CMC, dialectal features at the lexical as opposed to the orthographic level are usually not the focus of researchers working with English or French data (cf. e.g. Thaler 2003) but figure prominently in studies of the German research community. This has a simple reason: several of the large-scale studies on CMC with German data were undertaken not in Germany but in multilingual Switzerland (e.g. Dürscheid et al. 2010). In the German-speaking regions of Switzerland, Swiss German dialects are used alongside standard German by all social groups; it is therefore to be expected that dialects also leave their traces in CMC. As a consequence, the feature of

345 Since both comments and letters are extremely varied, featuring a wide range of styles, performing a type/token analysis on the basis of a small sample of texts from each corpus is equally problematic. Even if the samples were chosen randomly, the risk that they are not representative of the individual corpora was considered too high. If differences were found, the likelihood of their being simply "an artifact of data choice" (Akinnaso 1982: 109f.) would be too strong to allow conclusions. Freiermuth (2011), for instance, compares the type/token ratios of a political chat (CMC), newspaper editorials (writing) and a televised political talk show (speech). However, his corpus of 9,000 words is far too small for the kind of conclusions he draws. Moreover, he seems to consider alternative spellings (e.g. 'govt' for 'governement') and misspellings individual lexical items and also mentions that the use of addressivity markers (i.e. usernames) leads to a greater lexical density in the chat corpus, which turns out to be almost on the same level as his written one. He concludes that the "similarities between writing and chat stop at the frequency level, however. […] literacy complexity, an identifying feature of writing in general, is markedly different from the 'complexity' of chat, whose makeup consists of innovative forms to assist in speed and reduce confusion" (2011: 135f.), thus inadvertently demonstrating how pointless such an analysis is in the first place.

dialect words has become part of the catalogue of CMC characteristics especially – but not exclusively – in this research community. Dialect can be used for code-switching (cf. e.g. Siebenhaar 2006 and 2008) and as a marker of identity as well as conceptual orality (cf. e.g. Dürscheid et al. 2010: 53). Although its occurrence is much higher in Swiss German data, it can also be found in German computer-mediated contexts, where it has similar functions (cf. e.g. Androutsopoulos 2000: 525). In studies working with English data, dialect is usually only discussed as a feature of orthography (see 5.2.5 above), which suggests that its occurrence on the lexical level is rare.

The use of lower registers and colloquial expressions, however, is fairly frequent (cf. e.g. Thurlow 2003 and Landert and Jucker 2011) and has usually been interpreted as a conscious strategy to "approximate speech" (Werry 1996: 57) and to "mimic the style of particular discourse communities" (1996: 58), especially when combined with non-standard orthography. As argued above, clippings of the type 'congrats', 'uni' and 'goss' (see 5.2.5.3.2 above) are also considered instances of colloquial language (as opposed to abbreviation strategies on the orthographic level) and will therefore be included in the lexical analysis as well. In addition to colloquial language, some studies also document a comparatively high occurrence of taboo words (cf. e.g. Thaler 2003 and Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan 2005), which are often considered to be linked to, or indicative of, aggressive behaviour, i.e. flaming (cf. e.g. Kayany 1998 and Turnage 2007).

In the present study, the texts from both corpora were coded manually for the occurrence of informal (i.e. colloquial) and taboo language as well as lexical features of dialect. Whenever a word was considered potentially informal, offensive or regional, it was looked up in the *Macmillan Dictionary Online* and coded according to the register label used there.[346] This manual coding process may be slightly limited in that it relies – at least in the first step – upon the judgement of an individual, yet it offers the advantage that the vocabulary is considered in context. Even if the noun *boy* is neither marked as formal nor informal, the use of 'the boys' in (277) is clearly informal and fits the general style of this comment, which was thus coded as containing informal language.[347]

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[346] As the entries in the corpus-based *Macmillan Dictionary Online* contain more phrases and more detailed usage-based information, this dictionary was preferred over the *OED* for this kind of lexical analysis. However, the *OED* was frequently consulted in addition.

[347] The *Macmillan Dictionary Online* lists 'the boys' as *informal* for "a group of men who are friends" and provides the example 'Friday night is his night out with the boys.' (; last accessed March 7, 2017). The entry in the *OED* is similar: 'the boys' is described as *colloquial*, used for "one's (male) fellows or habitual companions", and compared to 'lad' ("boy, n.1 and int." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 7 March 2017).

(277) Congrats! The boys down at the PR agency have done a good job on this one. […] [CMC G06-086 c8]

Thus, while some words may have been missed, the coding was performed consistently on the basis of the register labels used in the *Macmillan Dictionary Online* and according to the context of use. As outlined above (see 5.2.5.3.2), this coding also included the subcategory of lexical clippings (e.g. 'congrats' in (277) above), which is the first feature to be discussed.

Table 23 Lexical clippings in the comments (N=43)

clipping	**standard**	**occurrences**
admin(s)	administration (and derivatives)	4
info	information	3
uni	university	3
celeb(s)	celebrity/ies	2
congrats	congratulations	2
exec(s)	executive(s)	2
med(s)	medicine(s)	2
ops	operations	2
Brits carbs comp demos Dems doc Euros fab NuLab gov obit paedo para para polys postop rehab prez ref spag bol stand up stats temp veg video cam	British carbohydrates comprehensive school demonstrations Democrats doctor Europeans fabulous NuLabour government obituary paedophile paratrooper paragraph polytechnics postoperative rehabilitation president referee spaghetti bolognese stand up comedy statistics temperature vegetables video camera	23
total		**43**

As Table 23 above illustrates, lexical clippings clearly outnumber the clippings at the orthographic level discussed above (N=43 vs. N=6), yet with only 43 occurrences in a total number of 39 comments, they are not a particularly frequent phenomenon, the majority of words being used only once. Most of the clippings are fairly common and – especially when viewed in context – their meaning can be retrieved easily, i.e. their presence does not hamper understanding. They are all marked as *colloquial* or *informal* in the dictionaries consulted; in consequence, such clippings can be understood as cues signalling a colloquial style and creating a relaxed, informal communicative atmosphere.

This kind of atmosphere can also be created by using colloquialisms or informal language in general. All in all, 381 segments were coded as colloquial, distributed across 287 comments. Yet while 287 comments contain one or more structures marked as colloquial or informal, formality is a matter of degree. As the examples below illustrate, the contributions within this group range from fairly informal comments (278) to ones that – despite using a phrase marked as informal in the dictionary – are decidedly more formal overall (283). In (278), for instance, the informal verb 'whinge' is used twice, together with the very informal/insulting noun phrase 'moaning gits'; the effect created by this choice of vocabulary is further strengthened by the casual/regional respelling 'em' and syntactic reduction phenomena (see 5.4.1.1 below), thus lending the comment a very casual tone. The comments quoted in (279) and (280) are already slightly less informal, even if words like 'boozing' and 'bunk' would still stand out in many other contexts, where the equivalent standard terms 'alcohol consumption' and 'nonsense' are likely to be preferred.

(278) evilTory [USER], hardly surprising if " the more conservative (both small and large C) parts of society" [QUOTE FROM EVILTORY'S COMMENT] whinge about the BBC. They whinge about everything, all the time. Even when they're in government, the moaning gits. That's why no one listens to em. […] [CMC G08-104 c19]

(279) […] OldTraffordFrank [USER], there are lots of very good reasons to reduce boozing […] [CMC G09-008 c12]

(280) […] In the oil and gas and engineering industries, we tend to believe that feminism is bunk. Equal opportunity is one thing but gender or race-based positive discrimination is quite another. Pigs will fly before that happens. [CMC G07-102 c8]

While (279) and (280) above already illustrate that the use of vocabulary marked as colloquial does not prevent commenters from advancing reasoned arguments, (281) below shows that informal ('a tad gullible') or even offensive ('idiots') words can also appear in comments discussing complicated matters using technical terminology ('packaging of sub-prime debt', 'triple A rated asset backed securities', 'CDOs'). Example (282) is also interesting in this respect: on the one hand, it answers a previous commenter's question ('What is a Barcelona chair?') by providing detailed information in a rather formal manner. Yet on the other, the commenter chooses the very vague, informal term 'stuff' instead of more precise, non-colloquial terms (e.g. 'design objects', 'furniture', 'products' or 'inventions'). This allows the commenter not only to make a more general statement, as 'stuff' can refer to furniture as well as architecture, but also to underline his/her negative evaluation ('all show and no go') – an effect that would not have been achieved had the equally vague term 'things' been used instead.[348] An interesting mixture of styles is also present in (283); yet in this case, the commenter clearly signals the momentary lapse in formality ('make mincemeat of') by using the discourse marker 'frankly', thus lending further emphasis to the negative evaluation of the article found in the remainder of the comment.

(281) […] Perhaps you [PREVIOUS COMMENTER] missed the news about the collapse of every major US investment bank? On a technical level, yes the packaging of sub-prime debt to create triple A rated asset backed securities was a major part of the problem, but I think you are perhaps being a tad gullible if you fail to acknowledge the appalling carnage wreaked upon the global economy by the idiots who invented fresh air products like CDOs [COLLATERALISED DEBT OBLIGATIONS] and swaps [CREDIT DEFAULT SWAPS]. […] [CMC G06-046 c13]

(282) The Barcelona Chair was designed by Mies van der Rohe and Lily Reich for the German Pavilion at a 1929 exhibition in Barcelona.
It is, like most stuff from the Bauhaus and Mies van der Rohe, all show and no go, and ergonomically unsound. […] [CMC T011-14 c2]

(283) […] In his youth, he [NORMAN BORLAUG, THE BIOLOGIST AND HUMANITARIAN THE ARTICLE IS ABOUT] wrestled to a high standard and would, frankly, make mincemeat of this article - even while displaying a deep old-world courtesy that this article, shamefully, utterly lacks. […] [CMC T10-025 c13]

Such a casual style may be little surprising when used in the comments, yet letters to the editor may also contain informal vocabulary. While only one letter containing lexical clippings could be found, 70 were coded as featuring colloquial language use and a total of 83 segments were coded as

[348] The idiomatic expression 'all show and no go' is neither listed in the *Macmillan Dictionary Online* nor in the *OED* but included in the second edition of the *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Dalzell and Victor 2015).

informal.[349] Such use of informal vocabulary can be limited to individual words, e.g. 'mind-boggling' (284) or 'goodie' (285), or be more pervasive and affect the entire tone of the letter. In (286), for instance, the colloquial expression 'What's this stuff about' is followed by the equally informal phrasal verb 'cough up (more cash)' rather than the more formal 'pay (more money)', thus making the letter fairly informal in style overall.

(284) […] The funding prospects are mind-boggling. […] [NEWS T08-063_1]

(285) […] The whole system seemed to favour the less able but superficially organised goodie who could avoid the heat of exams. […] [NEWS T08-032_2]

(286) What's this stuff about "cheap and cheerful" [QUOTING A POLITICIAN QUOTED IN THE ARTICLE] (Tories adopt budget airline service model, 28 August)? If you want to be less miserable on a low-budget airline, you have to cough up more cash. […] [NEWS G07-115]

This use of informal language is even found in letters on fairly sensitive topics and in statements that are likely to be perceived as offensive by some readers. Talking about the danger of a figure of great political importance 'snuffing it' (i.e. dying) (287) and accusing a widely known art critic of being 'a pompous old twit' (288) is the kind of behaviour that most readers probably expect to come across in below-the-line comments rather than on the letters page of a quality newspaper.

(287) Please can the pretence of sending al-Megrahi back before he snuffed it in the UK – thus setting off a wave of terrorism – and keeping up the delusion of acting out of compassion be stopped (Marcel Berlins, 31 August)? […] [NEWS G08-028]

(288) Brian Sewell [ART CRITIC QUOTED IN THE ARTICLE] is entitled to his opinion (Spray it again, 1 September) and over the years he has had many. It is my opinion that he is a pompous old twit. […] [NEWS G08-051]

The letters are also similar to the comments in that informal vocabulary can be found not only regardless of the topic discussed but also irrespective of the moves performed (e.g. giving an opinion, providing information in the form of facts, analysing the situation). In (289), the topic is rock'n'roll music and the letter writer using words like the informal noun 'oomph' (instead of 'enthusiasm' or 'energy') combined with vocabulary marked as *impolite* ('crap') disagrees with the journalist's evaluation by giving his/her

[349] In one letter a reader recounts her personal experiences as a working mom in a "low-paid, part-time admin job in the women's unit of a poly-cum-uni", using three lexical clippings in the same sentence ('admin' instead of 'administrative/administration', 'poly' instead of 'polytechnic' and 'uni' instead of 'university') [NEWS G06-103].

own opinion, imitating a spoken style of delivery (e.g. the use of the response token ‘OK’). The letter quoted in (290), in contrast, is on a topic of considerable political and environmental importance and offers detailed factual information, citing official sources. The statement containing the informal adjective ‘bonkers’, which is emphasised by the adverb ‘utterly’, provides the author’s very blunt evaluation of one of the suggested solutions to the problem discussed. This letter thus closely resembles the comment quoted as (283) above, while the dialogic structure of (289) is similar to that used by the commenter in (281) above.

(289) While I share your delight about the Public Image Ltd reunion (In praise of…, 8 September), I was annoyed you chose to perpetuate the myth that the Sex Pistols suffered from “musical inability” [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE]. Steve Jones was (and is) one of the finest rock’n’roll guitarists on the planet (and superior on every level to PiL’s Keith Levene), while drummer Paul Cook was a metronomic powerhouse and gave the band their unmistakable oomph. OK, Sid Vicious was crap, but he didn’t actually play on any of the records anyway. […] [NEWS G09-038]

(290) […] Forecasts from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and other reliable sources suggest that global aviation industry emissions will rise to 2.4bn tonnes in 2050 from 610m in 2005. While aircraft and operational efficiency could improve by an average of 1.5% a year to 2020, it is likely to slow to around 1% as technology matures. There are simply no blended-wing hydrogen-fuelled aircraft ready to fly to the airlines’ rescue, let alone one recent utterly bonkers suggestion of nuclear-powered planes. […] [NEWS G11-053]

All in all, the level of informality is of course decidedly higher in the comments; however, as the examples above have illustrated, letters to the editor that are surprisingly informal in style may still be published.

While informal vocabulary is used in both types of reader response, words from dialects can hardly be found at all. In both corpora combined, only three contributions could be considered as falling into this category. In one comment, the interjection ‘aye’ is used and in another the noun phrase ‘the Auld Firm’.[350] The *OED* considers ‘aye’ to be “common dialectally” but also makes reference to its status as archaism and its use in the House of Commons, which makes it a borderline case.[351] The ‘Auld Firm’ is similar: the adjective may be regional, yet in combination with ‘firm’, it forms a commonly used collective name for the Scottish football clubs *Celtic* and

[350] The comments in question are CMC G09-061-62 c3, which will be discussed in 7.3.4.1.2.1 below, and CMC T08-004 c13.

[351] “aye | ay, int. (and adv.) and n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 24 February 2017. Since ‘aye’ is used as an affirmative response to a question and thus synonymous with ‘yes’, it was not included in the discussion of interjections above.

Rangers. The only letter containing words from dialect is also a special case because the Yorkshire terms 'ba-gum' (by God) and 'baht-at' (without a hat) are only used to allow the letter writer to engage in creative word play.[352]

In addition to colloquial and regional lexical items, the present data were also coded for *taboo words* or words that are categorised as *offensive*, *impolite, coarse, slang* or an *insult* in the dictionaries consulted.[353] In the corpus of comments, 85 words were identified as belonging to this category, distributed across 69 comments. In contrast, only four letters contain one such word each, the words in question being 'crap' (used twice), 'bastards' and 'damn'.[354] While these numbers reveal offensive language to be decidedly more frequent in the comments than the letters, it is neither fully absent from the latter (291) nor particularly prevalent in the former – after all, 93.1% of the comments are completely free from profanity.

(291) […] We all know who caused the meltdown, and it wasn't nurses, firefighters or even trade union barons. There is no excuse for not sticking it to the greedy, stupid, cynical bastards responsible, starting with a truly progressive tax system that goes right up to 100% and beyond of any bonus, incentive or backhander not directly and transparently earned by socially useful endeavour. [NEWS G10-056]

As Table 24 below reveals, the most frequent offensive terms are 'crap', 'idiot', 'arse', 'bastards' and the verb 'fuck'. If 'fuck' and its morphological ('fucking') and spelling (e.g. 'f.....g') variants are grouped together, it

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352 For a discussion of this letter see 7.3.4.1.5 below.

353 Crystal (cf. 2003: 173) distinguishes between taboo words, invective (i.e. the language of abuse) and swearing. As argued above, the present analysis is a lexical one, i.e. it is based on the register label provided in the dictionary. However, the words are always considered in context, i.e. 'pig' is *unmarked* when referring to the animal, *informal* when referring to "something difficult or unpleasant" and an *insult* when referring to a person (see ; last accessed March 13, 2017). While bankers may not rejoice about being called 'worthless dullards' [CMC G06-M13 c14], such cases were not included in the present discussion as neither 'worthless' nor 'dullard' is marked as *offensive* or *impolite* in the two dictionaries consulted. Crystal, on the other hand, would probably consider this a term of abuse, as he classifies 'wimp' in the same way (cf. 2003: 173). While excluded from the lexical analysis, such cases will be included in the functional analysis of criticism and matters of (im)politeness (see 7.3 below).

354 The letter in which 'damn' is used belongs to a string of short letters in which readers write about museums only to produce puns and play with words: 'Here in Atlanta we have the Margaret Mitchell House and Museum (Letter, September 8). But frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.' [NEWS G09-060]. 'Damn' is thus only used as an allusion to Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the wind* and Rhett Butler's famous line 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn' as uttered by Clark Gable in the movie adaptation. Although the letter writer does not use quotation marks, this quotation is sure to be recognised as such, as Knowles (2006: 35), who also points out that the word 'frankly' was added by the screenwriter, argues that "the words have become iconic".

moves to the top of the list with eleven occurrences; however, half (i.e. five) of these belong to a single comment posted by an enraged user.[355]

Table 24 Offensive language in the comments (N=89)

offensive lexical item	**occurrences**
idiot(s)	9
crap	6
bastard(s)	6
shit (noun and verb)/shitty	5
arse(s)	5
fuck (verb)	5
damn	5
tits	4
bollocks	4
git(s)	4
bloody	3
cretin(s)	2
f****ing/f.....g	2
fucking	2
moronic	2
p*ss of(f)	2
**** off (piss or fuck), balls, ballsy, bleeding, bugger, bullshit, bullshxt, chavvy, cock-ups, dammit, damned, frig me, goddamm, jacksy, moron, nincompoop, piss-take, scumbag, shag, shxt, sodding, whoopie f'kn doo, wifey	23
total	**89**

An analysis of the words in context reveals that profanity is used above all when criticising somebody (e.g. ‘idiot’, ‘bastard’, ‘git’, ‘cretin’, ‘nincompoop’, ‘scumbag’) or something (e.g. ‘crap’, ‘bollocks’, ‘(bull)shit’), as

[355] The somewhat surprisingly frequent use of ‘tits’ can be attributed to the fact that the data contain a comment thread on Rupert Murdoch, including a discussion of the *Sun*’s page three (see (293) below).

illustrated by (292).[356] This is also the case when offensive verbs (293) or intensifying adverbs are used (294).

(292) I think they're doing this for a bet. Inside the cabinet office, some weasel-brained asocial cretin (e.g. Ed Balls) lost a game of Spin-the-bottle Truth or Dare with another lapsed-Marxist authoritarian moron (e.g. Jack Straw), and this law is the result. […] [CMC G10-023-25 c13]

(293) […] Murdoch [RUPERT MURDOCH], on the other hand, degraded The Times, brought us the Sun and page three tits and the Ashes for a big wodge of cash. Piss off out it, mate, and take your spoilt brats with you. [CMC G08-104 c7]

(294) […] A more radical and innovative choice was required rather than the bleeding obvious celeb choice of Evans [CHRIS EVANS, RADIO BROADCASTER] […] [CMC G09-076 c13]

While this suggests that such offensive language is a means to vent the reader's anger, words labelled as *impolite* also appear in comments providing positive feedback and praising the author, as in (295) and (296), where they simply signal the readers' emotional involvement.

(295) Frig me that is one of the most life-affirming things I've read in a long time. Well done Phil [AUTHOR]. [CMC G09-008 c1]

(296) Dear Phil [AUTHOR], what a splendid article – you've every right to be proud. I don't want to kick a hole in my computer screen, which is my normal response to Guardian writers describing at length their serene rural-continental lives.
I can think of several men I should forward this to, and dammit I shall! […]
[CMC G09-008 c13]

The use of profanity or swearing is thus not necessarily a sign of aggressive behaviour, even if it is often linked to the move of criticising somebody or something.[357] In any case, it is not frequent enough to be considered a characteristic feature of online comments.

5.3.4 Code-switching and foreign languages

Directly linked to the use of colloquial language and dialect words is the use of other or foreign languages in CMC, which can take place on the basis of

[356] 'Arse' was not included here, as it is used more often in fixed expressions (e.g. 'my arse' or 'not to sound like an arse') than to refer to the person criticised.
[357] As will be shown below (see 7.3), criticism is one of the most frequent moves in reader response in general. Given the undeniable link between offensive language and criticism, one could thus have expected to find more profanity in reader response, especially online. As the number of comments deleted in the post-moderation process can be estimated to be fairly low, the scarcity of profanity is all the more noteworthy.

isolated, individual lexical items, i.e. when users borrow words from another language, or larger stretches of discourse, i.e. as code-switching. Since especially in the beginning, "English dominated the Internet landscape" (Androutsopoulos 2006a: 428) and since English is still the language of IT, youth culture and globalisation (cf. Hilmarsson-Dunn 2010), English is the language from which users borrow most often when they communicate in other languages on the Internet or in other computer-mediated contexts. Thaler (cf. 2003: 99ff.) has found frequent use of English expressions (among which are many interactional ones, e.g. 'hello', 'hi', 'sorry' and 'thanks') in French IRC and similar findings have been made in the case of Swiss German (cf. e.g. Spycher 2004 and Dürscheid et al. 2010) or German (cf. e.g. Schlobinski 2001b).[358] According to Haase et al. (cf. 1997: 52), using English words fulfils the function of signalling technical know-how and group identity and at the same time characterises the writer as being modern and youthful.

Given the predominance of English described above, it is little surprising that CMC in English is to a large extent free from the influence of foreign languages.[359] In the corpus of online comments, users switch to another language on only three occasions. The first one is a commenter summarising his/her negative evaluation of the radio station BBC Radio 1 by saying 'Hasta la vista Radio 1' [CMC G09-076 c8]. This kind of use of the Spanish farewell is common enough to have been included in *The new Partridge dictionary of slang and unconventional English* (cf. Dalzell and Victor 2015: 1110). According to Gooden (2005: 99), 'hasta la vista' is today "widely used as a jokey way of saying goodbye, popularised by Schwarzenegger" in the movie *Terminator 2*, where he uses it before shooting his opponent. The second occurrence of a foreign language is the French adverb 'très' (very) in the expression 'still tres difficult', used by a commenter discussing the role of hell and redemption in Christianity [CMC G11-034 c10]. While the *OED Online* describes 'très' as being particularly common as a collocate of 'snob', used to refer to "a fashionable or modishly superior quality", it states that the French adverb can be combined with

[358] As with lexical features in general, in such studies a distinction needs to be made between, on the one hand, the use of English words or larger stretches of discourse in cases in which the German or French equivalent could be used instead, and, on the other hand, the use of English words which either have no equivalent in these languages (e.g. 'email' or 'chat', which only have spelling variants in German but no corresponding German lexeme) or are in widespread use not only online but also offline (e.g. 'email' instead of the French equivalents 'courrier électronique' or 'courriel'). For a more detailed discussion of this distinction see 5.3.1 above.
[359] Obviously, this does not hold true for bilingual contexts or diasporic communities. However, the comment sections on the *Times* and the *Guardian* websites are monolingual.

English adjectives in general.[360] The third and last occurrence is a reference to the Welsh drinking toast ‘iechyd da’ in a direct reaction to a user who identifies as Welsh both via his username (*WelshPaul*) and the content of his contributions. In this fairly rare case of users interacting with each other, the commenter directly addresses *WelshPaul*, thanks him with a tongue-in-cheek comment for having corrected him and ends his/her contribution with ‘Long may your “yakkies” . . . “Dah”.’ [CMC G10-069 c10].[361] The switch in language is thus motivated by the overall topic of the discussion (the role of Wales for the Labour Party and the origin of the term ‘Welsh’) and the identity of the commenter addressed. As expected, the use of foreign languages is thus limited to an extremely small number of cases that can be understood fairly easily when viewed in context.

5.3.5 Concluding remarks on lexical characteristics

Compared to the vast range of features on the graphological level (see 5.2 above), the number of characteristics on the lexical level seems to be fairly limited if the analysis focuses on language use *on* the Internet as opposed to the language used to talk *about* the Internet. As the role played by foreign languages and dialect words is negligible in the present data, the only difference uncovered is that in comparison to the letters to the editor, more comments contain lexical items marked as *colloquial* or *informal* on the one hand and *offensive* or *impolite* on the other. While the range of vocabulary – a feature that could not be analysed – is usually attributed to the conditions of text production (and above all the time available to produce the message), the use of non-standard language is commonly regarded as a stylistic choice and, as a consequence, a way of positioning oneself and creating the identity one would like to have. The present findings could thus be interpreted as indicating that commenting online is perceived as a more relaxed communicative situation in which the commenters do not want to appear too stiff or too formal even when discussing complicated matters. However, this does not mean that below-the-line comments are always chatty and letters to the editor always eloquent. As the examples below illustrate, some commenters clearly favour a more formal, at times even literary style.

[360] “très, adv.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 9 March 2017. A quick search via Google Books yields several examples of ‘très difficult’ incorporated into English sentences.

[361] This construction is slightly unusual in that it lacks a verb, e.g. ‘last’, ‘be heard’ or ‘continue’. For a discussion of the interactional patterns of reader response see chapter 6 below.

(297) […] The Lib/Dem unfortunately, are dreadfully grand. They really have become the dowager aunts of British politics, appearing to be quite comfortably ensconced in their role as honourable also rans while pontificating from the sidelines. […] [CMC G11-001 c19]

(298) […] Not only are the public sector pensions unaffordable on a per capita basis, Labour has greatly exacerbated the problem by increasing public sector employment by almost a million.
This is one problem that Labour will gladly bequeath to a Cameron government. [CMC T07-55 c6]

In addition to setting the tone and influencing how the message and its author are perceived, word choice is often viewed as being linked to the medium a text is produced in. Although influenced by a wide range of different factors, including context, purpose and topic (cf. Akinnaso 1982: 103), the use of non-standard register, i.e. colloquialisms and dialect words, is generally considered a feature of speech rather than writing. The fairly frequent occurrence of such items in CMC is thus usually interpreted as a sign of CMC approximating spoken language (cf. e.g. Werry 1996 and Arendholz 2010). If it is assumed that speech in general is more informal than written language in general, the markedly higher occurrence of colloquialisms, lexical clippings and profanity in the comments can be interpreted as a sign that readers commenting online perceive this form of communication to be related more closely to a spoken conversation than letters to the editor. However, formality is very hard to quantify, and both genres exhibit a variety of styles and registers.

5.4 Syntactic and discursive features

There is strong agreement in the research literature about the characteristics of CMC on the syntactic level, despite the fact that such differences are not as easily identified and categorised as those on the lexical and especially graphological level. Since situational and functional factors can be expected to exert considerable influence on sentence and text structure, it is fairly surprising that such a uniform picture is emerging. After all, one could, for example, expect time constraints to leave more traces in the syntactic makeup of texts in forms of communication that are more synchronous and dialogic (e.g. IRC or IM) than in truly asynchronous ones (e.g. blogs). That there is little disagreement about the syntactic characteristics of CMC can have two reasons: either the factors expected to influence the syntax in the distinct forms of CMC play only a minor role in shaping the linguistic product or the uniform description is the result of a tendency to overgeneralise from limited sources, as it has also been observed with respect to the other levels of linguistic analysis discussed so far. As far as the factors influencing the linguistic product are concerned, caution is indeed warranted as the factor synchronicity is certainly not the only determining one, even if the syntactic peculiarities of CMC have often been attributed to the aim of saving keystrokes (cf. Herring 2012: 4). Similarities or differences between individual forms of CMC thus cannot simply be accounted for with recourse to the text entry conditions of a particular form of communication. What complicates the picture further is that detailed syntactic analyses of individual forms of CMC seem to be rare,[362] and although the syntax of CMC is often called speech-like (cf. e.g. Storrer 2001a, Thaler 2003, Baron 2010 and Herring 2012), systematic comparisons with equivalent written or spoken texts instead of prototypical speech and writing are still lacking.

5.4.1 Telegraphic and fragmented style

In both the research literature and public discourse, the syntax of CMC is frequently "described as 'telegraphic' and fragmented" (Herring 2012: 4), especially when viewed in comparison to the syntax of standard written English. Structurally reduced forms thus seem to be used not only on the level of individual words and phrases, as discussed when addressing matters of orthography, but also on that of clauses, sentences or even entire texts.

5.4.1.1 Omission of subject pronouns, auxiliaries and determiners

Maynor (1994: 50) is among the first to point out that in CMC, several of the constituent parts of a sentence or clause may be omitted and concludes that "[s]yntactical features of e-style sometimes reflect informal habits of speech and sometimes are even more simplified than informal speech". Among the features commonly omitted, she names subject pronouns (e.g. 'don't know', 'must have'), which are often deleted together with the corresponding verbal auxiliary, copula or modal (e.g. 'glad it hasn't', 'be back in a minute'), and articles (e.g. 'he's not on list').[363] Cho (2010: 10) adds omission of existential *there* to the list and calls these features "'oral' features of CMC". While some have also argued that such omissions can be used to minimise the typing effort (cf. e.g. Murray 2000), there seems to be general agreement that syntactically reduced forms, which have also been documented in asynchronous forms of communication (e.g. emails, cf. Cho

[362] Exceptions are Thaler (2003) and Frehner (2008), who both include aspects of syntax in their analyses and discuss examples. While Thaler (2003) focuses exclusively on syntactic reductions, Frehner (2008) also investigates what kinds of verbs are used (e.g. activity verbs, mental verbs, modals).
[363] Examples adopted from Maynor (1994: 50f.).

2010), are an indicator of the oral nature of CMC. Werry (1996: 55), for instance, claims that the "omission of subject pronouns and auxiaries [sic] is associated in non-virtual modes with an informal spoken style, further lending an air of spontaneous orality to IRC exchanges", and Herring (2012: 4) argues that "sentence fragments may be caused by people typing speech-like utterances". Interestingly, Maynor (cf. 1994: 50) is one of the few scholars to point out that the reduction phenomena found in CMC are not just a mere copy of structures of informal speech (see the quote above).

To be able to analyse the frequency, distribution and function of this type of syntactic reduction in reader response, the present corpora were coded manually for the omission of (a) subjects and subject pronouns, (b) auxiliaries, copulas, modals and finite predicates as well as (c) determiners. All in all, 221 comments were identified as belonging to this group, compared to only 25 letters to the editor. In both corpora, the subject/subject pronoun is the syntactic category that is omitted most frequently: it is absent on at least one occasion in 194 comments and 24 letters. Despite this stark difference in numbers, the letters lacking a subject or subjection pronoun hardly differ from the comments. Just like the comments, they may contain only one omission (compare (301) to (299) below) or a series of omissions (compare (302) to (300) below). While it is often the first person pronoun that is deleted, other subjects or subject pronouns may also be missing, as in (300), where the second omission ('Must be my lucky day') is either that of 'today' or simply 'it'.

(299) My, she [AUTHOR, STAUNCHLY DEFENDING MPS] does feel sorry for her chums. I had thought the life of an MP was about service. Guess I was wrong, it is about self pity. [CMC T06-030.2 c9]

(300) The Met [METROPOLITAN POLICE] are turning on the charm?
Can't believe I get to be the first to say "perfume on a pig".
Must be my lucky day. [CMC G06-086 c9]

(301) So now we know. Life in David Cameron's Britain would be a five-year journey on Ryanair. Hope it's cancelled. [NEWS G07-116]

(302) Must buy a heritage gift "with soul" [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE] (Museum stores booming, 19 August). Love the oh-so-English V&A [VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM] garden trowels with William Morris designs. As he's been dead rather a long time, it won't bother him at all that they're mass-produced in China. [NEWS G06-101]

As argued above, this type of reduced syntax is commonly regarded as a sign of the informal and speech-like nature of CMC (cf. e.g. Claridge 2007: 101, Cho 2010: 10 and Herring 2012: 5). However, the examples clearly illustrate that this view is too simplistic. English is not a pro-drop language, i.e. declarative sentences like the ones above require a subject to be grammatical. While the omission of the subject pronoun is accepted in certain registers, it is not a feature of spoken language in general and should thus not be considered an imitation of speech when used in CMC. If the reader quoted in (302) above, for instance, had shared her opinion in spoken form, she would most likely not have omitted the subject pronoun 'I'; the way this letter is worded is certainly more reminiscent of a 'note to self' than spoken discourse. According to Haegeman (2013: 89), "subject omission is one of the hallmarks of diary writing" and used in spoken language above all in "certain idiolects of colloquial English" (Haegeman 1997: 238). She argues that in addition to diary entries, the subject may also be left implicit in informal notes, on postcards, in telegrams and in texts printed on the packaging of consumer products – all of which are instances of writing, not speech (cf. 1997: 236ff. as well as Haegeman and Ihsane 1999). Thus, while the absence of subject pronouns makes the reader contributions cited above shorter (as in telegrams and on postcards) and more informal (as on postcards and in diaries or informal notes), informality is not always linked to spoken language but may have its origin in written registers. What the examples above also share is that the omissions are combined with several other characteristics that enhance the effect of this informal, relaxed style, e.g. the interjection 'my', informal vocabulary ('chums', 'oh-so-English'), the intonation question in (300), short and simple sentences (e.g. 'So now we know.') as well as the parallel arrangement of short, paratactic sentences ('Must buy … Love the …'). Interestingly, all four readers quoted above use sarcasm to criticise others, thus positioning themselves as witty commentators. While this is obviously not always the case in contributions with subject omissions, the reduced syntax can also be interpreted as a strategy to signal the contributors' nonchalance and wit, i.e. to position them as requiring little effort to produce a pithy remark.[364]

The second largest group of features to be deleted is that of auxiliaries, copulas, modals and finite predicates: 166 comments and 20 letters were identified as containing at least one such omission. These figures reveal that the number of contributions containing more than one type of omission is very high. As the examples below illustrate, most of the deletions of verbs are coupled with an omission of the subject pronoun (cf. also Maynor 1994: 50). In (303), for instance, the user addresses a previous commenter directly

[364] Put differently, this strategy creates the impression of spontaneity, i.e. it avoids that the contributions appear to have been crafted too carefully, which seems to be in line with Werry's (1996: 55) observation that this kind of omission lends "an air of spontaneous orality to IRC exchanges". Yet while it is true that spontaneity is usually associated with spoken discourse rather than writing, the way this impression of spontaneity is created need not be adopted from spoken language.

and first omits the subject pronoun ('I') and probably also the auxiliary 'have' before simply adding 'funny old word' instead of the syntactically complete sentence 'It's a funny old world'.[365] The commenter in (304) even combines all three types of omission: the positive feedback is provided in a syntactically reduced form by omitting not only the subject (the demonstrative pronoun 'this') but also the verb ('is') and the indefinite article ('a').[366] The comment quoted in (305), where the syntactically reduced sentence is not used to open the contribution, is similar to these examples in that the omission is fairly easy to reproduce ('It is better to …'). Example (306), in contrast, is slightly more complex: the first omission (i.e. 'This is a reasonably …') is a reference to the quote opening the comment, while the second is a reference to Catholicism (i.e. 'Catholicism is harmless …'). The last example to be discussed, i.e. (307), illustrates that auxiliary verbs ('is') may also be omitted without deleting the subject ('Mandelson'), even if this kind of use is far less frequent.

(303) Eviltory [USER].Never thought we would agree on anything,funny old world. [CMC G11-018 c12]

(304) Pretty good article actually. [...] [CMC G08-104 c2]

(305) […] Better to let the horse bolt for the door than whip it into line for no good reason. […] [CMC G07-005 c19]

(306) [QUOTE] It's [I.E. RELIC WORSHIP] no weirder than idolising Beckham [QUOTE]
A reasonably comprehensive summary of Catholicism. Harmless, futile, and all about personality cults and cash-rich endorsement values.
Thank you. [CMC G11-034 c14]

(307) [...] I see that once again Mandelson [PETER MANDELSON, LABOUR POLITICIAN], Brown [GORDON BROWN, AT THE TIME LEADER OF THE LABOUR PARTY AND PRIME MINISTER] and Labour have ducked this issue. Mandelson keeping very quiet indeed on this subject. [...] [CMC G06-M13 c11]

In the letters, verbs are omitted far less often and all of these omissions go hand in hand with a deletion of the subject – this joint deletion often simply consisting of 'it/this is'. Even if this form of syntactic reduction is only used in a few letters (i.e. 20), it is not restricted to a certain type of reader response. The letters quoted in their entirety as (308) and (309) are short

[365] Examples like (303) also serve to illustrate the problems encountered when trying to measure sentence length and lexical density (see 5.3.2 above). Since the commenter decides to use a comma instead of a full stop, the sentence becomes longer despite its elliptical structures; however, it would certainly be wrong to equate length with elaborateness in this case.

[366] As will be discussed below (see 7.3.5), positive feedback is frequently presented in this highly abbreviated form in the comments.

and witty tongue-in-cheek contributions that can only be understood with some background knowledge about the topics discussed on the letters page previously – the syntactic reductions adding to their indirect, concise and pithy nature.[367] The letter quoted in (310), on the other hand, is fairly long and lacks the implicitness and humour of the previous two examples. However, the reduced form 'no wonder' is fairly common and matches the somewhat relaxed style of this particular contribution, which not only features informal vocabulary ('mates') but is the only letter to contain lexical clippings (see 5.3.3 above).[368]

(308) The Concise Oxford Thesaurus has a list of 135 breeds of dogs. Helpful and sometimes vital (Letters, 26 August). [NEWS G07-065]

(309) I see that, once again, this year's results are better than last year's (I aim to become a legend, says Bolt after demolishing 200m record, 21 August). Clearly a sign of falling standards. The men's 200 metres was much tougher in my day. [NEWS G07-009]

(310) […] Bringing up children is very hard work, with no holidays, no pay, no recognition, no promotion, no glamour and no perks. No wonder women swap that job for the easier option. […] [NEWS G06-103]

The last type of omission, i.e. the deletion of determiners (above all, definite and indefinite articles), is markedly less frequent in both corpora. It is only used once in the letters, where it is combined with a deletion of the subject and verb, i.e. the sentence simply runs 'Great mate, surely' instead of 'He's a great mate, surely' [NEWS G09-059]. In the corpus of comments, in contrast, 54 such contributions were identified. In a substantial number of cases, the deletion occurs in combination with the other two categories of omission, especially in posts opening with the kind of syntactically reduced positive feedback discussed above (304) or those providing statements about the quality of something in general (as in (311) and (312) below).

[367] While the first belongs to a series of letters criticising the crossword compilers for their too enigmatic clues, the second constitutes an intriguing combination of two completely unrelated topics: the letter writer uses the news of Usain Bolt's new record to demolish the argument that the recently reported rise in A-level pass-rates and grades is evidence that the exams have been 'dumbed down'. By parroting a reaction very common among critics ('was much tougher in my day') but applying it to a different topic, the letter writer undermines the validity of the argument without even mentioning the topic in question (i.e. education). For readers following the letters page, however, the first and last sentence clearly establish this link. In both (308) and (309), the reduced syntax matches the implicit nature of the letters, making them even more compact and hence succinct and effective.

[368] The reduced form 'no wonder' is used three times in the corpus of comments. In the letters corpus, the phrase appears twice: once in its reduced form (310) and once as 'it's no wonder'. In (310), the deletion of 'it is' also has the side effect of extending the parallelism or enumeration of the previous sentence ('no holidays, no pay, no recognition …').

(311) Crazy idea, totally un-enforceable..... […] [CMC T10-055 c5]

(312) […] Yeah brilliant plan, let's take on the party most likely to win rather than the one on its knees. […] [CMC G11-001 c13]

When occurring in isolation, such deletions are fairly difficult to interpret; they might be unintentional, as the omissions of the indefinite article ('like shameless attempt', 'was almost unnecessary law') in (313) and (314) are likely to be, but this is not necessarily the case. In (315), for instance, the definite article before 'UK' may have been dropped accidentally, yet as 'to have foreign income' and 'to be considered resident for tax purposes' are more or less fixed expressions in the context of talking about tax returns, these forms may have influenced the style overall and thus led to this omission and that of possessive 'their' in 'to complete tax return'. In (316), in contrast, the omission of the articles appears more systematic and evokes the style of newspaper headlines, where articles are usually omitted for brevity reasons (cf. e.g. Dixon 2010: 160). However, it is impossible to say whether this was the commenter's intention – after all, the remainder of the comment does not feature such omissions.

(313) [...] This piece seems like shameless attempt at political capitalisation on a current topic. [CMC G10-086 c4]

(314) […] It worked for motorcycle crash helmets, by the time they became a legal requirement it was almost unnecessary law. [CMC T10-055 c7]

(315) [...] If your friends in the US work in the UK and are considered resident for Tax purposes then they would have to complete Tax return in UK if they have foreign income. [...] [CMC G07-067]

(316) [...] For example, Dostoyevskiy had sexual affair with hysterical woman Suslova, and their liaison was as deviated as Dostoyevskiy's works were. Whereas Tolstoy [...] [CMC G06-060 c8]

In any case, the deletion of determiners is far less frequent than the other two categories, especially if used on its own.

5.4.1.2 Syntactically incomplete sentences

In addition to the types of omissions discussed so far, both corpora contain syntactically incomplete sentences that do not fit the categories discussed above – either because the omission is more complex or because the elliptical structure allows for several interpretations at the same time. Excluding the types discussed so far, 95 letters and 151 comments were coded as containing such sentence fragments. While the diversity of this last category precludes a detailed discussion, some examples are cited below to illustrate this use. In the letters quoted in (317) to (319) and the comments in (320) to (322), for instance, the readers use verbless questions. Yet while these examples have in common that they lack a verb, completing the questions is a far less straightforward task than completing the omissions discussed above.

(317) […] So why the persistence on welfare-to-work by the British government? […] [NEWS G07-022]

(318) Most irritating Latin spellings (Letters, 24 August)? The use of "media" as a singular noun. [NEWS G07-046]

(319) […] Fair Outlook? I don't think so. [NEWS G09-003a]

(320) […] Preservation - yes, but for whom? [CMC T06-001 c2]

(321) […] The only solution is to change attitudes to prevent moderate consumption from progressing to binge drinking. But how? [CMC T06-002 c1]

(322) Lilly Allen, talent? Don't think so! [CMC T10-039 c12]

Interestingly, such syntactically reduced questions may also be followed by an equally reduced answer, as illustrated by (318) and (322) above. However, such answers are fairly common in general and need not be preceded by an elliptical question, as (323) and (324) illustrate.

(323) Sir, Your leading article ("Word perfect", Aug 31) states that "The words available to Shakespeare sufficed to write Hamlet, didn't they?" Apparently not. […] [NEWS T08-026]

(324) [...] where do you expect they will live?
on our green fields and woodland after they have been concreted over thats where. [CMC G09-0051 c20]

Although space limitations preclude a more detailed discussion, the present data suggest that syntactic reductions are used not because they minimise the typing effort but because they allow the readers to produce more concise, clear and crisp contributions. While they may be combined with a fairly informal style and phrases that the *Macmillan Dictionary Online* labels as *spoken* or *mainly spoken* (e.g. 'and about time too' in (325) below), this is not always the case. When readers use reduced question-answer pairs like the ones above or combine reduced syntax with interjections and spoken phrases as in (325) below, such a style is reminiscent of colloquial spoken language. However, syntactically incomplete sentences are also used in letters that are far more formal in register and do not mimic dialogic interactions. These letters are characterised by what could be referred to as a plain style, with short, clear and structurally simple sentences. In (326), for instance, such short sentences convey the author's point very effectively, the elliptical structure 'but not …' adding emphasis by separating the agreement in the first sentence from the disagreement in the (incomplete) second one.[369] The effect created by this kind of plain and somewhat staccato style is best illustrated by (327), where the author strings simple sentences together and thus gives the letter a structure that adds emphasis to every single statement advanced.[370] Instead of merging the three claims (i.e. 'it penalises', 'it will be expensive' and 'it could lead to') about the proposed property tax into one sentence, the author uses three parallel and fairly simple ones and thus invites the reader to pause after each sentence/claim and consider its impact.

(325) Sir, Hurrah. Rachel Sylvester tells us that our so-called "special relationship" with the United States is finally over ("Special Relationship. Passed away 2009. R.I.P.", Sept 1). And about time, too. Now perhaps we can […] [NEWS T09-018]

(326) Angela Knight [AUTHOR] may be right that we need big banks (Response, 25 August). But not the high-bonus-paying banks that contributed to the recession. […] [NEWS G07-068]

(327) Vince Cable has had a good economic war, but is in danger of losing the peace. He proposes a form of wealth tax more akin to the Harold Wilson era. A property tax penalises unjustly those who are asset-rich but income-poor, in particular the retired. It will be expensive to implement. And, once introduced, could lead to downward creep, with £500,000 houses soon seen as ripe for tax. Cable's boss, Nick Clegg, is right. The bloated public sector […] [NEWS G11-041]

The comparatively high occurrence of syntactically incomplete sentences in the letters corpus can thus be attributed, on the one hand, to a tendency to mimic interactive discourse and, on the other, to letters using a plain style of writing. In both cases, the result is a fairly matter-of-fact style with clear, concise sentences.[371]

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[369] The strategy of coupling a disagreement with a partial agreement is very common in reader response because it allows readers to soften the face threat involved in expressing disagreement. However, the letter writer quoted in (326) could also have chosen syntactically more complex structures, such as 'Angela Knight may be right that …, but …' or 'While Angela Knight may be …, she is …'. Though equivalent in meaning, these constructions differ in style.

[370] The term *staccato style*, first introduced by Suler (1997), is used by Thaler (2003) to embrace the different reduction phenomena on the textual, syntactic, morpho-syntactic and orthographic levels.

[371] As will be discussed below, brevity is one of the editors' criteria for choosing letters for publication (see 8.2). The syntactic makeup of the examples discussed above can thus also be

5.4.1.3 Sentence length and complexity

As the examples above have shown, a number of letters are characterised by a particular style in which short, simple sentences are preferred and where elliptical structures may be used for stylistic effect. The existence of such letters is made all the more interesting by the fact that these are characteristics usually attributed to CMC and its link to spoken language. Researchers have claimed, for instance, that the syntax of computer-mediated discourse appears speech-like because the texts consist of short and simple sentences (cf. e.g. Al-Sa'Di and Hamdan 2005) with few subordinate clauses (cf. e.g. Baron 1984) or because paratactic structures predominate (cf. e.g. Storrer 2001a). However, there is some disagreement about whether such features are truly characteristic of spoken as opposed to written language, as Miller (2008: 674) draws attention to the conflicting findings of research into the differences between speech and writing on the syntactic level:

> Some analysts reported that spoken discourse had significantly more subordination, elaboration of syntax and adverbs. Others reported that written narratives contained more subordinate constructions than spoken narratives but fewer coordinate constructions.

Halliday (cf. 1989: 76ff.), for instance, is among those who argue that the syntax of speech is indeed more complex than that of written language, which in turn is more compact. As intriguing is it may be to contrast the syntax of CMC to that of speech on the one hand and writing on the other, such a comparison can only lead to legitimate results if the communicative settings are comparable and if differences in topic or participants are not so great as to skew the findings (cf. Akinnaso 1982 and Miller 2008). Yet even if an attempt was made to hold these variables constant, any comparison of syntactic features such as sentence length and complexity is severely complicated by the fact that sentence boundaries are not easy to determine in speech, which leads Miller (2008: 680) to the conclusion that "sentences are not suited to the analysis of spoken language". When it comes to analysing CMC, the situation is similar: as became evident above, full stops and other punctuation marks may be missing, and in quasi-synchronous forms of communication, sentences may even be broken down and transmitted in smaller chunks (cf. e.g. Baron 2010), which severely hampers the analysis of sentence length and structure. Yet even if a way is found to

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interpreted as a sign of readers trying to avoid producing lengthy, prolix or verbose letters that are less likely to be published. While letters may be edited and cut, it is unlikely that they are completely rewritten by the editors. Nevertheless, the plain style discussed above may be partly influenced by the editing process.

measure the mean sentence length in the individual corpora, this finding is only of little value, since the number of words within a sentence is not necessarily an indicator of its structural complexity. While the Flesch reading ease formula (cf. Flesch 1951) is sometimes used to calculate the complexity of a text (cf. e.g. Chafe and Tannen 1987: 386 and, in the case of CMC, Cho 2010: 10), such an automatic analysis is unsuitable, since all it does is measure sentence length and number of syllables per word. Even if a correlation between sentence length and complexity does not seem counterintuitive, simply counting the number of words between two full stops is not sufficient to draw accurate conclusions about the structural complexity of a sentence. Glazer (1974: 466) illustrates this by contrasting the following two sentences, each consisting of exactly 15 words:

(a) The boy is big, and the boy is good, and the boy has a dog.
(b) The big, fat boy, who is very good, has a marvelous small brown sheep dog.

Glazer (1974: 466) argues that the first sentence consists of "three simple kernels", a *kernel* being defined as "a single sentence in which nothing can be removed without changing the meaning". In this example, the kernels are simply strung together by the coordinating conjunction 'and'. In contrast, the great number of adjectives modifying the two nouns 'boy' and 'dog', the subordinate relative clause and the intensifier 'very' add complexity to the second sentence. A simple word count, she therefore concludes, cannot detect syntactic complexity.

While one could argue that counting not only sentence length but also the number of syllables – as done when the Flesch reading ease formula is used – would hint at the second sentence being more complex, this complexity is not necessarily syntactic in nature but may just as well be lexical. If, for instance, the monosyllabic lexical items 'boy', 'big' and 'good' in (a) above are replaced by 'infant', 'overweight' and 'well-behaved' respectively, the Flesch reading ease formula would calculate a lower readability score despite the fact that the syntactic structure is identical. The difference in score is simply the result of the greater number of syllables per word. Yet while more syllables per word or sentence may make a text less readable, they are not necessarily an indicator of structural complexity.[372] Thus, sentence length and number of syllables per sentence cannot be used for automated syntactic analyses. Flesch scores may certainly hint at differences between texts, especially if combined with an

[372] It is even debatable if the mere number of syllables is indicative of the readability of a text, as ease of reading is not only influenced by word length but also by how common a word is in a given language and how varied the vocabulary of the text in question is.

analysis of the respective type/token ratios; however, they fail to mirror structural complexity.

A comparison of the structural elaborateness of the texts in the present corpora could thus only be carried out if the syntactic structure was analysed by hand. Unfortunately, such a detailed manual analysis is extremely time-consuming and cannot be achieved within the scope of the present study. As unsatisfactory as this may be, this kind of problem is a common one in CMC research. As long as computer-mediated equivalents for the standard, part-of-speech tagged corpora of spoken and written English are lacking, most studies will focus on "micro-linguistic structural features below the syntactic level" (Bieswanger 2013: 463).

Yet even if the common claim that the fabric of CMC is less carefully structured and woven far more loosely than that of what is considered typical writing cannot be tested systematically, some of the features discussed above suggest that this is the case. While Lewin and Donner (2002: 31) group a feature they call *run-on sentences*, i.e. the "lack of [a] full stop at the end of a sentence", under the heading of *punctuation*, this characteristic could also be considered a structural particularity of CMC on the syntactic or even textual level. Clauses or sentence fragments may simply be strung together without the use of conjunctions or (proper) punctuation, i.e. features commonly used to build complex sentences and to establish textual coherence. Indeed, the analysis on the level of punctuation has shown that suspension dots (and also dashes) are often used for this purpose (see 5.2.4.4.3), as illustrated by (328). As (329) and (330) reveal, commas may also be used to string sentences together. While this may result in fairly long sentences (if only full stops, question marks and exclamation marks are considered boundary markers, as it is common practice when using tools for automatic text annotation, cf. Wilcock 2009: 45ff.), these constructions are often not hypotactic and thus lack structural complexity. Example (330) may consist of only one fairly long *orthographic sentence* (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1728), but this sentence constitutes a sequence of five syntactically independent sentences (clauses).

(328) […] No wonder satire is dead....anyone can join in the fun...you don't even have to make it up ! [CMC G11-001 c7]

(329) […] i love the beeb [NICKNAME FOR THE BBC] but their current management seem to to be oblivious to any criticsm whatsoever, carry on like that and there will be mass refusal on licence fee paying, they can't lock us all up!
they need to wise up and fast or murdoch will have them for breakfast. […] [CMC G08-104 c5]

(330) We should never have been in Afghanistan, we've given the poor Afghans false hope, when we leave and we will have to leave sometime - they will suffer as always, you cannot bring about a lasting peace by war - if the money spent on this war were to invested into farming of alternative crops to poppies like the pomegranate (POM354) than progress would eventually be made. [...] [CMC G09-017a c6]

All in all, the data suggest that the structure of comments tends to be far more fragmented than that of letters to the editor. While the latter may also be marked by reduced syntax, this feature is decidedly more frequent in the comments.

5.4.2 Emotes and performative predications

One of the rare CMC features that seem to be truly novel is what is commonly called an *emote*, i.e. "third person singular present tense performative utterances" (Herring 2012: 4), e.g. the automatically generated chat message 'USERNAME waves'. Such performances of actions as opposed to the written representation of spoken utterances (e.g. '<USERNAME> hi everybody!') have their origin in MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and IRC, where the users need to know the special commands necessary to produce the respective action. In the above example, they have to type either '/me waves' or '/waves' into the chat window, depending on the IRC client or MUD used (cf. e.g. Werry 1996 for IRC and Cherny 1999 for MUDs). What is special about these performatives is the fact that the users produce them in the third person; thus, by typing in the command they in a way adopt the role of a third person narrator describing their own actions. This peculiar shift in perspective when writing about one's current actions, state of mind or whereabouts was also present in the early days of Facebook, when the default prompt for status updates was still 'USERNAME is' (cf. Herring 2013: 10f.).[373]

Emotes have most likely given rise to what Crystal (2001: 39) calls *verbal glosses* and Herring (2012: 4) *performative predications* (e.g. '*waves*' or '*confused*'), which have by now spread to other CMC contexts besides IRC and MUDs.[374] Just like emotes, they describe the user's action or state of mind; yet as they are not produced with the help of special commands, writers usually – but not always – set them off from the

[373] Nowadays the verb 'is' is no longer added automatically to the username in Facebook status updates, so that users are less restricted in what they post; they can stick to the third person, as in 'USERNAME loves her new shoes', or write in the first person 'USERNAME I love my new shoes!'. Both status updates would have resulted in ungrammatical sentences with the old prompt 'USERNAME is'.

[374] Examples adopted from Herring (2012: 4f.).

rest of their text by adding asterisks or angle brackets. While some forms are highly conventionalised (e.g. ‘*grin*’ or the abbreviated versions ‘*g*’ or even ‘*fg*’ for ‘fat grin’, which also exist in German as ‘*grins*’, ‘*g*’ and ‘*fg*’ for ‘fettes Grinsen’), anything seems possible, as the German nonce-formation examples ‘*dich ganzdollknuddel*’ (Schlobinski 2001a: 192), ‘*Sektflaschebereithalt*’ (Beißwenger and Storrer 2012: 117) and even ‘*AufschreidurchdieMengegehenhoer*’ (Runkehl et al. 1998: 109) illustrate.[375] Such performative or descriptive utterances may be inflected or uninflected in English (compare the examples ‘*grin*’ and ‘*waves*’ above); in German, they are usually uninflected, as the corresponding technical terms *inflectives* (*Inflektive*) or *inflective constructions* (*Inflektivkonstruktionen*) indicate.[376] Thaler (2003: 94) claims that these ways of expressing one’s feelings or describing actions are frequently used in English and German chats, but her analysis reveals them to be very rare in her French data.

While it is technically not possible to use commands to produce real emotes in the online comments of the present study, the directly related verbal glosses/performative predications can be employed, as all the users need to do is to enclose the respective item in asterisks or angle brackets. Considering that both strategies are commonly used to construct the missing physical context and to compensate for missing visual cues (cf. Werry 1996 and Thaler 2003), it can be assumed that they are more likely to occur in dialogic, quasi-synchronous forms of communication like those studied by Storrer (2001c) and Beißwenger and Storrer (2012) than in the user

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[375] The morphological differences between English and German make it impossible to translate these examples without obscuring or even losing their grammatical peculiarity in the process. Instead, following Bücking and Rau (2013: 59), word-for-word glosses are provided below, with ACC signalling accusative case, STEM signalling lacking inflectional morphology and the full stop indicating word boundaries.
‘*dich ganzdollknuddel*’
you.ACC very.much.hug.STEM
‘*Sektflaschebereithalt*’
Champagnebottle.ready.keep.STEM
‘*AufschreidurchdieMengegehenhoer*’
outcry.through.the.crowd.go.hear.STEM

[376] For English see Herring (2012: 4) and for German see Schlobinski (2001a: 192ff.) and Storrer (2009: 2221). According to Schlobinski (cf. 2001a: 20), the origin of inflectives in German lies in the German translations of the Mickey Mouse comics in the 1950s, where inflectives such as ‘schnapp’ (snatch.STEM) and ‘knarr’ (creak.STEM) were first used to translate English sound words. Teuber (1999), however, also provides examples predating that time. For a more thorough discussion of German inflectives see Teuber (1999), Schlobinski (2001a) and especially Bücking and Rau (2013), who review Schlobinski (2001a) critically and further explore the performative nature of what they call *German non-inflectional constructions*.

comments of the present study. However, performative predications can also be an important indicator of how a potentially ambiguous message is meant to be understood, and their use has also been observed in informal emails and even newspaper texts (cf. Bücking and Rau 2013: 63).

All in all, only five occurrences of such performative predications could be found in the corpus of online comments; they can be categorised quite nicely as belonging to two slightly distinct groups. The first one encompasses verbs that describe the non-linguistic yet meaningful sounds speakers may produce with their mouths (i.e. to yawn, to groan and to sigh) and is thus closely related to the strategy of paralinguistic restitution introduced above (see 5.2.8.1). In (331) and (332) the commenters even use these verbs together with other paralinguistic features (trailing dots for a pause and reduplicated letters signalling a drawn-out pronunciation) to express their dissatisfaction. In (333), in contrast, the performative item '*sigh*' is not used to open the comment but embedded, expressing the commenter's frustration and sadness.

(331) Yawn.... more tiresome "look at me" indulgent nonsense.
What will those wacky guys and girls come up with next? [CMC G08-017 c5]

(332) Groooooaaann. Yet another divisive victim article about education in the UK. […] [CMC T08-032 c14]

(333) […] Finally, if you want to know why Norm's [NORMAN BORLAUG, THE BIOLOGIST AND HUMANITARIAN THE ARTICLE IS ABOUT] work is still really important, do read my review of his biography, at Technology Review's website: the chilling risk of a global blight is still with us.
As - *sigh* - is ill-informed environmental hysteria from those with full bellies at the expense of those who cry themselves to sleep each night in hunger. [CMC T10-025 c13]

The second group of verbal glosses describes actions performed by the commenter that involve body movement, i.e. to duck (335) and to run for cover (336). The function is the same in both cases: the commenters make jocular but potentially offensive remarks and signal that they are aware of this by describing themselves as trying to evade physical retaliation. The very short and at first sight rather cryptic comment reproduced as (335) below is taken from a thread below an article on a book genre called 'misery memoirs', i.e. biographies focusing on the frailties and misfortunes of artists. It not only constitutes a reply to another user's question ('Who reads this stuff?') but also contains a word play on the word 'grief porn' used by that commenter (334). By pretending to lower his/her head to avoid being hit, the poster communicates his/her humorous intentions, while at the same time acknowledging that his/her tongue-in-cheek contribution may be considered offensive. This is also the case in (336), which constitutes a contribution to a discussion about why second incomes have become the norm and are now necessary to sustain a family. With his/her argument that feminism could be blamed, this commenter goes out on a limb, yet signals the explosive potential of this claim by preceding it with the metaphorical announcement that he/she will 'toss this grenade into the pot' and then describing him/herself as running for cover.[377]

(334) I prefer the term Grief Porn.Who reads this stuff? [CMC G06-060 c3]

(335) troyka [USER]: Weeping wankers?
ducks [CMC G06-060 c12]

(336) […] I'll toss this grenade into the pot and suggest that - given that traditionally men previously did the main income-earning - you could blame feminism?... (Runs for cover!) [CMC G10-001-04 c20]

While these examples illustrate the expressive potential of such verbal glosses, their use is extremely rare in the online comments, where the need to simulate multimodal aspects or to create a common interactive space seems to be far less important than in chat rooms, where the interlocutors meet to spend time interacting with each other.[378]

5.4.3 Concluding remarks on syntactic and discursive characteristics

As the discussion has shown, the syntactic features of CMC are fairly difficult to examine and describe. While the literature on this topic paints a largely uniform picture, this could be attributed to the fact that large-scale systematic analyses and comparisons still have to be undertaken. Even if it may be true that the texture of CMC is characterised by fragmentation, this may also hold for other types of discourse or genres produced in more traditional media. The problem is of course that syntactic analyses are very time-consuming, especially if performed on entire corpora. While the comparative analysis presented above may be a step in the right direction, it is only a small step, as only a small set of features could be investigated and discussed. However, it could be shown that some of the below-the-line

[377] The question mark used in both (335) and (336) can be interpreted as indicating rising intonation as commonly used when making tentative suggestions (cf. Davidson 2005; also see the phenomenon of uptalk briefly commented on in 5.2.4.4.5 above). The use of two adverbs ('traditionally' and 'previously') in (336), however, is most likely a production error.

[378] This is for instance the case in the contexts studied by Beißwenger (2007), where such features figure far more prominently and where they can be interpreted as signalling a user's insider status and experience with such forms of communication.

comments are characterised by fragmentation on the syntactic and even textual level. The types of omissions mentioned in previous studies could be found, yet they sometimes also appear in letters to the editor. In contrast, the CMC-specific feature of performative predication was found to be extremely rare in the comments and – as to be expected – completely absent in the letters. All in all, the findings and the examples above suggest that the syntactic texture of the comments is far looser than that of most letters, even if numerous exceptions exist. However, the discussion clearly calls for more research in this field.

5.5 Linguistic whateverism or functional re-purposing?

All in all, the analysis has revealed the majority of features called typical of CMC to be largely absent from the below-the-line comments on the websites of the *Guardian* and the *Times*. Those features that could be found were above all the use of capitalisation and other graphic means for emphasis, the strategy of signalling pauses and hesitation as well as the overall tendency to use fairly informal vocabulary (including lexical clippings) and a fairly loose sentence structure marked by unusual punctuation. However, even these characteristics were far from being as frequent as might have been expected. Moreover, many comments could be found that do not fit this pattern while a number of letters to the editor clearly do. All in all, even the well-established genre of letters to the editor is stylistically diverse, ranging from very formal, elaborate contributions to ones characterised by informality and a fairly loose structure; it is thus not surprising that the comments display a variety of linguistic styles.

In his analysis of the language of text messages, Thurlow (2003) identifies three so-called *sociolinguistic maxims* that underpin the language of texting: (a) brevity and speed, (b) paralinguistic restitution and (c) phonological approximation. While there are clear signs (e.g. typos, construction errors) that commenters probably spend significantly less time reading and editing their contribution before hitting the send button than letter writers, the features of CMC typically interpreted as saving time and space were found to be largely absent from the present corpus. Moreover, there were hardly any signs of phonological approximation (e.g. phonetic respellings or reduplication of letters, see 5.2.5 above). The only maxim that also seems to play at least a small role in below-the-line comments is that of paralinguistic restitution, i.e. the signalling of hesitation or pauses and the use of markers of vocal emphasis. In comment sections on newspaper websites, the need for brevity and speed is thus clearly overridden by the desire to be intelligible to a potentially very large mass of unknown readers.

While the claim that the language used to communicate on the Internet is substantially different from the language used in other contexts could not be supported, the analysis has revealed at least some aspects in which the linguistic make-up of the comments constitutes a blend of speaking and writing (see 1.2.3 above). As shown above (see 5.2.3.3), the way marked focus is signalled is adopted from speech, and punctuation marks are used to represent pauses and hesitation, i.e. paralinguistic features of spoken language (see 5.2.8.1). However, the remaining aspects can only be considered speech-like if spoken language as such is considered informal (both in terms of vocabulary and structure) and written language formal.

As argued above (see 3.2.3), Koch and Oesterreicher's (1985) model of conceptional orality and literacy is a valuable contribution to the conceptualisation of the differences between spoken and written language; however, its weaknesses make it difficult to apply the model consistently, and the discussion has shown the danger of categorising genres or even entire forms of communication on a merely intuitive basis. If characteristics such as colloquial language, profanity, interjections, iteration of punctuation marks, reduplication of letters, emoticons, capitalisation for emphasis, performative predications and direct addresses are considered features of conceptional orality (cf. e.g. Richling 2008), then a number of comments can indeed be positioned further towards the spoken end of the continuum (i.e. the language of immediacy) than the majority of letters.[379] However, most of these features are comparatively rare, and the comments are better characterised as displaying a more relaxed attitude towards linguistic accuracy (in terms of punctuation, spelling and sentence structure) and as creating a more casual and informal communicative atmosphere than to be found in most letters.

When discussing the question "Is the Internet destroying language?", Baron (cf. 2008: 161ff.) argues that the generation of digital natives is marked by an attitude towards language that she dubs *linguistic whateverism*, i.e. "a marked indifference to the need for consistency in linguistic usage" (2008: 169). While she considers CMC not the cause of this trend but merely a booster (cf. 2008: 171), her plausible scenarios for the future include one in which "[w]riting will increasingly become an instrument for recording informal speech rather than the distinct form of linguistic representation that emerged by the end of the seventeenth century in England"

[379] However, Richling (2008) also considers acronyms and the complete absence of capital letters features of conceptional orality. In general, there seems to be a tendency to categorise everything that is simply non-standard or a sign of liguistic economy as oral. Yet as argued above (see 5.2.3.1), considering the absence of a feature that does not exist in spoken language (e.g. mixed case) a sign of the written language being influenced by speech is an untenable conclusion.

(2008: 171). This somewhat gloomy view does not surface in her analysis of IM, where she notes the users' tendency to "functionally re-purpose" traditional punctuation marks (Baron and Ling 2011; see 5.2.4 above). In the present data, both tendencies can be noted. Some of the deviations from standard language can be attributed to a clear goal (e.g. to compensate for missing paralinguistic cues), i.e. they are purposefully employed. Others are the result of less concern for linguistic correctness and a tendency to devote less energy to linguistic eloquence. However, I would not go as far as to call the behaviour in the comments a sign of linguistic whateverism – after all, numerous contributions are conform to the norms of standard language and a number of meta-comments suggest that there is indeed an awareness of linguistic standards (see 5.2.6 above). Rather, the commenters' attitude towards language could be described as more relaxed, especially when compared to writers of letters to the editor, who, after all, know that their contributions will only be chosen for publication if they meet the expectations of the editors.[380] One could of course argue that the people commenting on the websites of the *Times* and the *Guardian* are considerably older than the speakers Baron (2008) has in mind and that the readership of these two newspapers is not representative of the population at large. Both objections are valid, of course, as studies focusing on particular genres can never be representative. What they can do is offer some glimpses into linguistic practices and uncover tendencies, as done above.

Interestingly, shifts towards non-standardness (or at least what is considered non-standard writing) have also been observed in other areas of language use, in particular in the realms of journalism. Cotter (2003), for instance, discusses in her diachronic study of news discourse the increasing occurrence of the sentence-initial connectives *and* and *but* and interprets their use as "invoking spoken discourse norms" (2003: 45) as they "indicate a closer level of interaction" (2003: 64). She claims that, just like informal vocabulary, such structures have become "accepted and even conventionalized in certain contexts" (2003: 66). Landert (2014) also notices a general trend towards linguistic immediacy in the mass media (e.g. the use of direct speech or first and second person pronouns) – a finding supported by Luginbühl (2012), who speaks of "staged immediacy" ("inszenierte Nähe") and Haselow (2015), who finds several speech-like syntactic structures in written news discourse. Yet such shifts are neither new nor restricted to media discourse. Schwitalla (2000), for instance, discusses how German has moved back and forth between the poles of linguistic immediacy and distance over the centuries, noting a trend towards the language of imme-

380 See chapter 8 below for a discussion of the editors' criteria for selecting letters for publication.

diacy in the twentieth century – a development he calls *reoralisation* (‘Reoralisierung’). In a similar vein and focusing on English, Biber and Finegan (1989: 487) claim that the past 300 years have been marked by a “‘drift’ towards more oral styles”, Hundt and Mair (1999) speak of a trend towards *colloquialisation*, and Fairclough (1992) advances his *informalisation* theory.

As the above has shown, these tendencies are also noticeable in some of the letters; however, only a diachronic study would be able to reveal whether this genre is affected by the proclaimed general drift or whether the features commonly considered indicative of colloquialisation have always been a resource letter writers draw on. In any case, the present data suggest that while certain genre conventions have developed over time (as will be discussed in detail in the chapters to follow), there is clearly not a single default genre style – neither in the letters nor in the comments. Even if different types (see 3.1.4.4 above) can be distinguished (e.g. short and witty contributions vs. elaborate analyses of the situation), they are marked by considerable linguistic and stylistic diversity, thus making the two genres intriguing sources for further research.

While the focus of the analysis has so far been on the (micro)linguistic surface structures of individual contributions, the attention will now turn to the links between individual contributions on the one hand, and the link between contribution and trigger on the other.

6 Interactional patterns

Reader response published in newspapers or on newspaper websites does not occur in a vacuum but is part of the current public discourse and in the majority of cases closely related to other newspaper products. While letters to the editor are commonly considered a means of ‘talking back’ to the media (e.g. opposing or supporting the journalist’s stance, providing feedback, correcting errors or misrepresentations), the comment sections on newspaper websites invite readers to ‘join the discussion’, presenting themselves as forums for interactive debate – interactivity, after all, being one of the buzzwords of computer-mediated communication in general and web 2.0 in particular (cf. Herring 2013). The interactional structures in the two genres can therefore be expected to be quite different.

As so-called *follow-ups,* i.e. “communicative acts […], in and through which a prior communicative act is accepted, challenged, or otherwise negotiated by third parties” (Fetzer et al. 2012: 4), the user contributions of the present analysis may be subdivided into three major categories, depending on what the *initiation* (cf. Fetzer and Weizman

2015), i.e. the trigger, is. They may constitute a reaction to (1) a newspaper article, (2) another reader's contribution, or – in the case of self-initiated letters without trigger in the newspaper – (3) a current public event or situation. Given these different possibilities and the particularities of the communicative situations outlined above (see, in particular, 4.1.2 and 4.2.2), the first move usually performed is to establish coherence and to signal how the individual contribution (the *follow-up*) relates to what has gone before (the *initiation*). It is therefore possible to distinguish between different types of user feedback depending not only on what triggered the contribution but also on how it is woven into the thread of public discourse.

In light of the different ways in which the communicative acts of writing a letter to the editor ('talking back') and commenting online ('joining the discussion') are conceptualised, one could expect more letters to belong to the first category, i.e. to constitute a reaction to the media product, and more comments to belong to the second category, i.e. to constitute a reaction to another reader's contribution. Moreover, since letters to the editor, unlike online comments, are both physically and temporally separated from their initiation, the contextualisation strategies used can be expected to be more explicit than those in comments posted below the line. These two intuitive assumptions will be tested below after a brief discussion of the method used to categorise the individual contributions.

6.1 Method of categorisation

To be able to determine the level of interactivity in the two genres, each contribution needs to be assigned to one of the three categories mentioned above, i.e. it needs to be ascertained whether the contribution is a reaction to the media product (see 6.3 below), a reaction to another reader's contribution (see 6.4 below) or self-initiated (see 6.5 below) – the last category only being an option in letters to the editor. In the corpus of letters, this task is fairly easily accomplished: owing to the time lag between the publication of the trigger text and the reaction to it, different contextualisation strategies are employed to allow readers to identify the trigger text. These strategies, such as referring to the article and/or journalist in the opening move, make the categorisation fairly straightforward.[381] However, not all letters contain such clear clues, and since online comments are displayed directly below the newspaper article commented on, such explicit links are only necessary (but by no means obligatory) in this genre if the trigger is another user's comment instead of the article. This entails that to be able to decide whether a user simply comments on the journalistic product or replies to another

[381] The individual contextualisation strategies will be discussed in detail below (see 6.3.1).

comment, more subtle forms of contextualisation, such as providing the answer to a question posed in another reader's contribution, need to be considered as well.

Therefore, when coding the data using the move analysis approach presented above (see 3.4), each user contribution was read carefully in the context of all preceding contributions (by both journalists and other readers) and scanned for links signalling responsiveness on the textual level. These links included fairly explicit signals, such as direct addresses, references to, or quotes from, other contributions, as well as more subtle ones, such as allusions to previous content, second parts of adjacency pairs (e.g. answering a question) and the *format tying* strategies described by Muntigl and Turnbull (1998).[382] This process of reading in context and manual coding enabled identifying the trigger for each text and hence categorise the contribution as either responding to the journalistic product or another reader's contribution. Some letters to the editor were clearly unrelated to the prior discourse (e.g. readers raising a topic that in their eyes ought to have received news coverage); these were grouped together in the additional category of self-initiated letters. In both genres, the default assumption was that reader response constitutes a response to the media product. Therefore, in the case of multiple, contradictory signals of responsiveness (e.g. a contribution quoting from the newspaper article but directly addressing another reader), the contribution was considered a reply to another user, whereas in the total absence of such cues, it was considered a response to the journalistic product.[383]

This method of categorisation has its limitations, but at least the criteria for classifying the individual contributions are clearly defined and used consistently across the different sub-corpora. While Richardson and Stanyer (2011: 994), in their analysis of reader opinion in the digital age, distinguish

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[382] These strategies are diverse and may occur on different levels: "[i]n format tying, [the] current speaker produces an utterance that is connected or 'tied' by means of semantic, syntactic, morphemic, or phonological operations to [the] previous speaker's utterance" (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998: 231). See (437) on p. 338 below for the discussion of such a strategy.

[383] This decision was necessary in order to be able to compare the corpora. However, contributions with explicit links to both the media product and another reader's contribution are rare, as are contributions completely lacking cues. The latter did not occur at all in the letters, where the trigger (if there was one) could always be identified unambiguously, even if the ties between initiation and follow-up are fairly weak in some cases. In the online corpus, on the other hand, contributions without cues can be found, but at least it can be argued that users wishing to reply to another user (instead of simply commenting on the article below which the comment is posted) can be assumed to signal this in one way or another, as otherwise their reply risks not being recognised as such by potential readers, including the commenter reacted to.

between comments directed at (1) the column, (2) the general issue, (3) other readers' comments and (4) comments representing a combination, they unfortunately fail to explain how they drew the line between these categories. Especially in the online corpus of the present study, it was, for instance, impossible to distinguish between (1) and (2) in any systematic, satisfactory way: as the examples in the following sections will show, classifying comments that lack clear references to the author or article as contributions directed at the general issue would undoubtedly have distorted the findings. Moreover, the vast majority of contributors, even when criticising or quoting the author and hence clearly reacting to the journalist, also comment on the general issue; as a result, almost any follow-up would belong to the fourth category, thus rendering the entire categorisation meaningless. In light of these problems, using the categories and method of categorisation presented above seemed the best option.

6.2 Degree of interaction

Despite the substantially smaller time lag between individual user contributions when published online and the often asserted claim that CMC allows for more user interaction than other media, there was found to be very little difference between the CMC corpus and the written one on the interactional scale, i.e. the extent to which users do not just talk back to the media producers but also interact with each other.

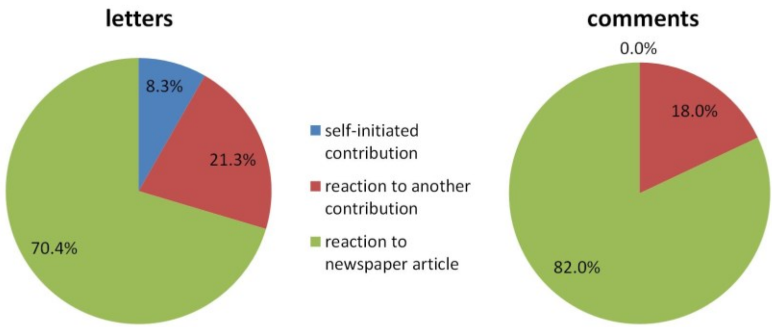

Figure 18 Interactional structures in the written (N=1,000) and spoken (N=1,000) corpora

As Figure 18 above illustrates, the percentage of user contributions that constitute a direct or indirect reaction to another user's contribution as opposed to the newspaper article is even slightly higher in the written corpus: 21.3% of all letters to the editor and slightly less, i.e. 18.0% of all online comments are written in response to another reader contribution. In both corpora, however, the clear majority of contributions represent a reaction to the journalistic product, which strongly suggests that at the time of data collection, online readers were far from exploiting the interactive potential of the Internet – a finding that supports those of previous case studies (cf. e.g. Langlotz and Locher 2012 as well as Neurauter-Kessels 2013). While the finding that only 18.0% of the comments are written in reaction to a previous comment does not allow any conclusions about whether the respective comment writers read the other comments before posting their own one or follow the discussion once they have put in their two cents, it still suggests that the activity type of writing a below-the-line comment is understood above all as a means to comment on the respective articles or topics, and not primarily as a means to participate in interactive debates with other users.

Even if including only the first 20 comments of each thread (which, after all, can be up to 1,000 comments long) could be argued to distort the picture, Ruiz et al. (2011: 476), analysing 16,494 comments from the *Guardian* in 2010, found 88.6% of the users to contribute just once, which also suggests that the level of interactivity at that time was rather low. In the present corpus, only 81 comments are written by users who have already contributed to the same thread, and in some cases, the second comment is just an afterthought added immediately after the first and not a sign of the user following the unfolding debate.[384] In contrast, Richardson and Stanyer (2011: 993) claim that the online broadsheet readers of their study "were more likely to respond to other readers' messages […] than respond to journalists", with 286 comments in the former category and only slightly fewer, i.e. 254, in the latter. Unfortunately, the authors fail to provide any information about the number of threads used to collect the comments. Their brief statement on corpus compilation suggests, however, that they selected only a few comment threads with highly contentious topics.[385] While the degree of reader-to-reader interaction might have been higher if the threads of the present study had been included in their entirety, user behaviour in debates on hot-button issues certainly cannot be considered representative of the genre as such.

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[384] See Figure 20 on p. 303 below for such an example.

[385] The only information about the corpus is the statement that the authors "focused on readers' comments on two 'hot button' issues, racial and religious difference, and immigration – which combined attracted a much higher than average ratio of comments per column or article entry" (Richardson and Stanyer 2011: 993).

In what follows, the different types of user contributions will be presented in detail. Even if at this stage the focus lies on interaction and the different contextualisation strategies employed (depending on both the genre and the type of reaction), a first glimpse at functional aspects is also offered, especially when discussing the substantial formal and functional differences between the genres in the use of direct quotations and direct references to journalists and previous contributors.

6.3 Reaction to a newspaper article

The most common type of user contribution in both corpora is a direct reaction to a newspaper article, which shows that the two channels originally introduced to allow the readership to talk back to the media producers (in front of a large audience, of course) are still predominantly used for this purpose. As outlined above (see 4.1.2), in the case of newspapers, the dialogue between media producers and consumers is complicated by the time lag between the publication of the initiation, i.e. the newspaper article, and that of the follow-up, i.e. the letter to the editor written in response. For this reason, strategies to create a link between the two have emerged.

6.3.1 Contextualisation strategies

Especially in the letters to the editor, a genre with a fairly long tradition, several strategies for establishing coherence between reader response and media product can be distinguished. As the following sections will show, not all of them are employed by the letter writer; the editor also plays an important role in creating and enhancing coherence.

6.3.1.1 Direct reference to the article and/or journalist

Of the 704 letters written in reaction to a newspaper article, 200, i.e. 28.4%, are introduced by a direct reference to the article or the journalist, sometimes even citing the full headline:

(337) Sir, In "Unions threaten an alliance at next election harming Labour vote" (Sept 12) you imply that the National Union of Students will be forming an anti-Labour alliance with Bob Crow before the general election. […] [NEWS T10-016]

(338) I read your article about the Cycle Friday scheme (Report, 15 August) with interest. […] [NEWS G06-079]

(339) Vikram Dodd's [AUTHOR] piece on London Tory claims to have seized control of the Metropolitan police raises some interesting political issues. […] [NEWS G08-082]

(340) Sarah Boseley [AUTHOR] reports on the critical challenge of getting drugs for treating malaria to people who need them in Africa (In Katine, you can buy a Coke anywhere. But medicine is a lot harder to find, 20 August). […] [NEWS G07-034]

As these examples illustrate, such cues allow the authors to connect their contribution to the content of the newspaper, thus helping the readers to recall the trigger or at least the overall topic.

Unsurprisingly, this strategy plays a negligible role in the comments, as the position of the comment section makes it unnecessary to identify the article serving as trigger or to bring its topic back to the readers' minds. In the 820 comments constituting a reaction to the newspaper article, only 47, i.e. 5.7%, start with a direct reference to the author or article. What is more, in all of these cases, the reference is embedded in moves used to give positive or negative feedback on the journalistic product or moves used to express agreement or disagreement with the journalist's views.[386]

(341) This is the most sensible article I've ever read in the Guardian. Well done sir [CMC G10-056-59 c10]

(342) While I agree with a lot of what this article says I cannot put out of my mind that these two thugs knew that the 'law' could not touch them. […] [CMC T08-059 c4]

(343) I think we should cut Miss Allen [AUTHOR] some slack, she has a valid point. […] [CMC T10-039 c11]

As these examples illustrate, the function of naming or referring to the article or author in the comments is not primarily that of establishing coherence but rather a side-effect of one of the evaluative moves performed at the same time.

This overlap of moves is also present in the written corpus, where 117, i.e. 58.5%, of the 200 letters containing a direct reference as first move have this contextualisation move embedded in some sort of evaluative move, the most obvious types being *disagreement/criticism*, as in (344), and *agreement/positive feedback*, as in (345) and (346) below.

(344) Reading the front page article about executive pay (Executive pay keeps rising, Guardian survey finds, 14 September), I couldn't help feeling that it missed the point somewhat. […] [NEWS G10-032]

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[386] These moves will be discussed in detail below (see 7.3.4.1 and 7.3.5).

(345) Your editorial on university finance (22 September) is the most reflective I have seen. […] [NEWS G11-058]

(346) Your leader (2 September) is right to state that Britain's drink problem is not just with the young. […] [NEWS G09-032]

However, in 69 cases, i.e. 34.5%, the first move does not contain an evaluation but merely fulfils the function of contextualisation: it identifies the respective article by providing a brief summary, i.e. repeating or sometimes even directly quoting the most important argument(s) – a strategy that is not used at all in the comments:

(347) Sir, Libby Purves [AUTHOR] highlights how recent trends in education are blatantly failing many of our more able students. […] [NEWS T08-032.1]

(348) Simon Jenkins [AUTHOR] (End these bogus parallels. We are fighting no Nazis now, 1 September) alludes to the oft-repeated claim that Polish cavalry charged at concentrations of armour in some sort of futile expression of valour. […] [NEWS G08-089]

(349) Sir, In your obituary of Brian Barron (Sept 17) you state that "Barron was in Saigon in 1975 as US forces lost control of the city". […] [NEWS T10-052]

The fact that such cases are fully absent in the CMC corpus clearly shows that online users do not deem it necessary to use such contextualising moves if this is their only purpose. However, this does not mean that letters to the editor are more neutral: in the majority of cases, the authors go on to provide some sort of evaluation in the remainder of their letter, as will be discussed in detail below (see 7.3.4.1 and 7.3.5).

As has been shown with the help of examples containing explicit feedback and ones that only contain neutral summaries, the first moves in letters to the editor starting with a direct reference to the author or article can be evaluative or non-evaluative. A closer look at all 200 instances, however, reveals a slightly more complicated picture: Figure 19 below provides a detailed overview of the first moves performed in all 200 letters introduced by a direct reference to the author or article. While in 58.5% of the cases (represented by the four columns in red), there is an overlap with an evaluative move, in 34.5% (represented by columns 5 and 6 in green), the purpose of the reference is purely that of contextualisation. Examples (344) to (346) cited above have served to illustrate the use of *disagreement/ criticism* and *agreement/positive feedback* (first two columns), and (347) to (349) that of mere contextualisation strategies with and without direct quotes (columns 5 and 6).

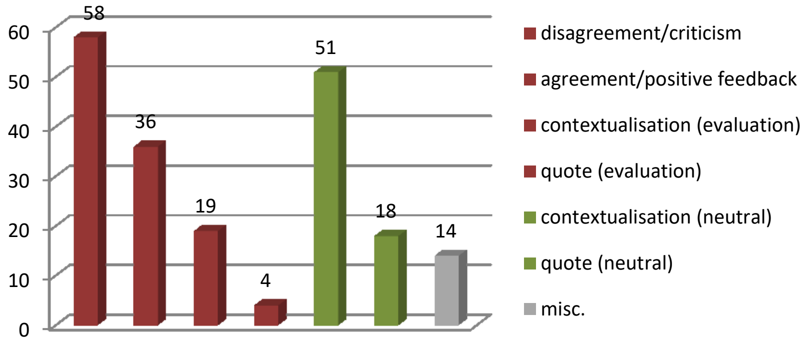

Figure 19 Contextualisation in letters with direct reference to the author/article (N=200)

The third and fourth columns represent special cases in that they look like mere contextualisation moves (i.e. the authors sum up or quote what has been said), but – unlike the letters grouped together in columns 5 and 6 – are not entirely neutral. Thus, in addition to *disagreement/criticism* and *agreement/positive feedback*, where the evaluation plays the dominant role, cases exist in which the contextualisation move seems to be the predominant one, if it were not for some small evaluative component:

(350) Sir, In your excellent piece by General Guthrie [AUTHOR] you cite, in a list of much-delayed defence projects, the Nimrod MR4 as an example of delay in the MoD. […] [NEWS T07-056.1]

(351) Your article Slow walk to freedom (Society, 2 September) vividly illustrates how patients are denied treatment that they need, by the pervasive culture of risk-aversion that has grown up as a result of pressure from litigation and insurance companies. […] [NEWS G09-004]

If the adjective 'excellent' and the adverb 'vividly' were deleted from (350) and (351) respectively, the two letters would be examples of mere contextualisation strategies. Yet by choosing to add these evaluative components, the authors go beyond contextualisation and express their stance. As this is done without turning the move into a purely evaluative one, a distinction between such cases and cases of clear criticism or positive feedback was drawn.[387] The same holds true for direct quotes: they can be used to contextualise the letter in a neutral way, as illustrated in (349)

[387] It is probably best to conceive of evaluation as a cline on which the examples can be positioned depending on how strong the evaluative component is.

above, but they can also contain an evaluative component, such as the adjective ‘salutary’ in (352) below.

(352) Martin Kettle [AUTHOR] makes a salutary point (A land lost to Labour, 16 September) when he says “a political earthquake is about to hit Wales, with the Tories set to become the dominant party”. […] [NEWS G10-069]

However, the majority of quotes in this type of follow-up are neutral (i.e. 18), with only four of the total number of 22 including an evaluation (see Figure 19 above).

There are thus different degrees to which evaluation can play a role in the first moves of the 200 letters introduced by a direct reference, ranging from pure criticism or positive feedback via more subtle evaluation to a neutral stance, i.e. mere contextualisation. Only 14 of the letters could not be clearly assigned to any of the categories presented above; they were grouped together under *miscellaneous* (see Figure 19 above). In this group, two major types can be distinguished: on the one hand, appellative moves, i.e. the journalist is asked to do something (see (353) and (354) below), and, on the other hand, moves in which the letter writer describes his/her reaction to reading the article (see (355) and (356) below).

(353) Sir, I urge Derwent May [AUTHOR] to take another look at the bristly oxtongue (Nature notes, August 26). […] [NEWS T07-050]

(354) When Ariane Sherine [AUTHOR] has finished popping off the seagulls in London perhaps she could come up here and do the same (To kill a squawking bird, 17 August). […] [NEWS G07-012]

(355) Your report (Turning charcoal into Carbon Gold, 27 August) about Craig Sams’ and Dan Morrell’s biochar project filled me with despair. […] [NEWS G08-018]

(356) Sir, I read with interest Antonia Senior’s [AUTHOR] opinion piece, “Just how short are rations at Westminster?” (Aug 14). […] [NEWS T06-030.2]

Stating what the article makes the letter writer feel like could also be considered an evaluation in the widest sense – after all, such moves are definitely not neutral; yet in (355) and (356) above, it is not the journalist’s text, argument or viewpoint that is evaluated but rather the situation as such, which is why these cases were grouped separately. By revealing their feelings or attitudes in this highly personalised way (especially when compared to (357) to (361) below), the users not only take a stance but also perform identity work, as will be discussed in more detail below (see 7.4.1.2.2).

Interestingly, in the CMC corpus, evaluative moves can also be performed without direct references to the respective author and/or article.

Indeed, it is not uncommon for online comments to start with a syntactically incomplete sentence expressing *agreement/positive feedback* or *disagreement/criticism*:

(357) Rubbish! [CMC G09-061-62 c1]

(358) Indeed. What possible excuse is there [...] [CMC G08-074-74 c5]

(359) Excellent!!! […] [CMC T06-046.1 c18]

(360) Spot on. […] [CMC T08-032 c4]

(361) What complete and utter twaddle! […] [CMC T06-030.2 c1]

While it would be impossible to interpret such abbreviated and/or exclamatory evaluations in the case of letters to the editor, the fact that the comments are positioned on the same page as the respective newspaper article makes the link clear, even without direct references. This does not mean, however, that it is always obvious what precisely such comments evaluate, as the following case of two successive comments posted by the same user illustrates (see Figure 20 below).

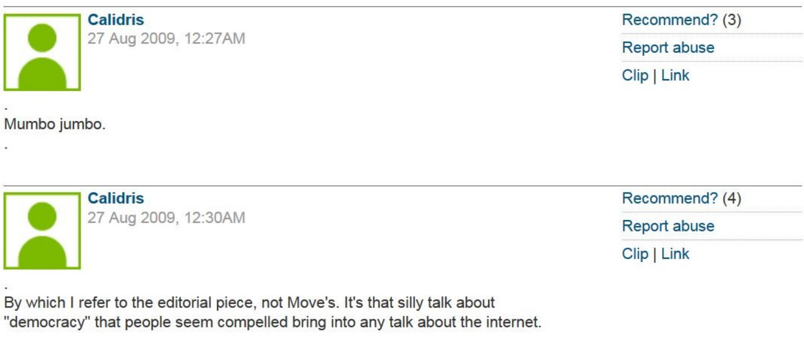

Figure 20 Evaluative move with unclear reference [CMC G08-037.1 c2 and c3]

The user's first post displayed above is the second comment overall, the very first one having been written by a user called *MoveAnyMountain*. Upon having produced the very snappy and scathing comment, the user *Calidris* probably realised that his/her evaluation could be misunderstood as referring to the first user's contribution instead of the article itself, which is why the author felt the need to add a second post to clarify this shortly afterwards.

In summary, direct references to the author and/or article are comparatively rare in the comments, and if they occur, they are embedded in evaluative moves. Such evaluative moves, which will be discussed in more detail below (see 7.3.4.1 and 7.3.5), can also occur without direct reference in the CMC corpus although this may lead to misunderstandings. In the written corpus, on the other hand, direct references occur in almost one third (i.e. 28.4%) of all letters written in reaction to a newspaper article and need not be evaluative in nature but can also be used for contextualisation purposes only – a strategy not found at all in the CMC corpus.

6.3.1.2 Information in brackets

If no direct cues are provided in the text of the letter itself, as is the case in the remaining 504 of the 704 letters written in reaction to the media product, both newspapers usually add a reference to the respective article in brackets:

(362) We're also enormously proud of Lee Hall in the north-east (In praise of... The Pitmen Painters, 18 September), and his capacity to express the creative energy of working people that is timeless. […] [NEWS G10-012]

(363) Sir, We are told that Guides and Scouts are going to lose their sheath knives (report, Sept 7). […] [NEWS T09-030]

If the brackets were omitted in these cases, the readers would be entirely alone in facing the task to interpret the 'also' in (362) and to identify the source of the information reproduced in (363). The information provided in brackets is thus vital to fully understand the users' contributions. Yet such brackets containing the date of publication (e.g. 'Sept 12'), the type of article (e.g. 'Report') and sometimes also the entire headline (see (340) and (362) above) may also be inserted when the article or author has already been identified, as is the case in (337), (338) and (340) above. These indicators in brackets can thus be assumed to have been added by the editor and not the author of the letter; in the online version of the newspaper, they fulfil the important function of directly linking the letter to its trigger in the form of a hyperlink, thus making the article commented on easily accessible for browsing readers.[388]

[388] Such brackets are not used in the comments for a simple reason: not only is there no editor to add the relevant information, there is also no need to do so, as the newspaper article referred to can easily be accessed by simply scrolling up.

6.3.1.3 Grouping letters to the editor

However, some letters contain neither direct references nor information in brackets. If viewed in isolation, many of them are hardly understandable, as illustrated by the following examples:

(364) "Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,/ The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,/ Become them with one half so good a grace/ As mercy does." Measure for Measure. [NEWS G07-041]

(365) Why stop with banks? The whole financial sector is arguably socially useless, along with insurance, sales, marketing, advertising, security. None of it actually creates genuine value. […] [NEWS G07-082]

(366) What, no Viz? What a swiz. [NEWS G10-107]

Without contextualisation cues, the readers have no chance to work out the meaning the author of (364) wants to convey by quoting this particular passage from Shakespeare, and they can only guess what process should not be stopped with banks according to the author's opinion in (365). The letter in (366), quoted here in its entirety, would probably be totally cryptic. In these cases, it is the whole letters section (called 'Reply' in the *Guardian* and 'Letters to the Editor' in the *Times*) that provides the necessary cues: all three letters are preceded or surrounded by other letters in which a direct reference and/or information in brackets are/is included. When reading them in this context, the readers can deduce that the quotation from Shakespeare expresses the author's support for the much criticised decision taken by the Scottish Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill to release Abdelbaset al-Megrahi on compassionate grounds in the Lockerbie bombing case. In the context of the 'Reply' section, they also understand that (365) refers to the suggestion proposed by the Financial Services Authority chairman to introduce a tax on banks, calling them 'socially useless', and that the author of (366) expresses his/her disappointment about the selection of free comics from the 70s inserted as reprints in all print copies of the *Guardian* during that particular week.

Especially when users comment on an event that has dominated the public sphere and received extensive coverage in the news, as was for instance the case with the release of al-Megrahi and the bonus scandal, several letters to the editor are published together, thus making it unnecessary to include direct references or information in brackets in each of them.[389] Many letters to the editor are thus not only to be read and

[389] What occurs only sometimes in the letters almost always holds true for the comments: not only do they always appear on the same page as the article that triggered them, there is usually an entire thread of contributions commenting on the same article. This structure automatically

understood in relation to the news item they comment on but also in relation to other letters commenting on the same item in the same edition of the newspaper, and – most importantly – in relation to other letters published in recent editions, as will be discussed in detail below (see 6.3.2).

6.3.1.4 Quoting

Another feature that automatically creates coherence between initiation and follow-up is the use of direct quotations from the former in the latter. It is thus not surprising that readers writing letters or comments fairly frequently quote the journalist or someone quoted by the journalist.

As illustrated above (see 6.3.1.1), quotes can be part of the direct references to the article/author used in the opening move of letters to establish coherence between the letters and their trigger. Yet even if not used in the opening move, the act of quoting is always a form of (re-)contextualisation (cf. Bublitz 2015: 4ff.), as inserting parts of a text in another text necessarily creates a link between the two and – in the case of reader response – helps readers to position the contribution in the overall discourse.[390] However, although direct quotes always have a contextualising function, in the present data this seems to be neither the only nor the major motivation for their use. Instead of being employed as a mere contextualisation strategy, they are frequently embedded in or combined with other moves, with substantial differences existing between the two corpora. Therefore, the act of quoting from the newspaper will be analysed as an interactional feature in its own right in the following.

6.3.2 Direct quotes from the newspaper

Of the 704 letters commenting on a newspaper article, 133, i.e. 18.9%, use direct quotes, and in 36, i.e. 5.1%, the words of a third party quoted in the article are also quoted in the letter. In the corpus of comments, this usage is less frequent, with only 95 of the 820 comments reacting to an article, i.e. 11.6%, containing quotes from the newspaper and only 11 comments in

contains all the contextual information that in the case of letters to the editor needs to be provided with a conscious effort on the part of the author or editor.

[390] According to Bublitz (cf. 2015: 4ff.), in quotations the three meta-communicative acts of *re-contextualising* (i.e. the context is changed), *re-focusing* (i.e. the focus is changed to that of the quote) and *reflecting* (i.e. the perspective is changed to an evaluating one) are performed. The prefix *re-* is placed between parentheses above, as, according to Bublitz (2015), it is the quote itself that is *re*-contextualised and not the text in which the quote is used. In contrast to the quotes used in them, letters to the editor and online comments do not have a prior context, which is why it is better to speak of contextualisation instead of re-contextualisation in their case.

total, i.e. 1.3%, quoting somebody who has been quoted in the article. In both corpora, the absolute numbers of occurrences are slightly higher, i.e. 164 and 43 for letters and 107 and 11 for online comments, which suggests that especially in the letters, it is not unusual to use more than one direct quote per letter (see, among others, (368), (373) and (374) below). As the following chapters will show, the two corpora not only differ in how frequently direct quotes are used but also in what they serve to accomplish and how they are woven into the follow-up.

6.3.2.1 Letters to the editor

6.3.2.1.1 Criticism directed at the author

In 99 of the 164 instances in which the journalist is quoted in the letters corpus, this quote is embedded in *criticism directed at the journalist*, which, as a move in its own right, will be discussed in more detail below (see 7.3.4.1). This means that in the majority of cases, i.e. 60.4%, the quote is used to create a clear contrast between the journalist's opinion or argument and that of the author of the letter by juxtaposing the words of the former and those of the latter. The advantage of using direct quotes instead of paraphrases is of course that the letter writer cannot be accused of having distorted or misrepresented the journalist's argument or assertion. As such a juxtaposition of arguments creates a striking contrast, this strategy is often used to refute claims made in the newspaper and to present counterclaims. This can be done in a fairly factual manner, as in (367), or in a more aggressive way, as in (368). In the latter case, the letter writer not only uses multiple quotes but also frames one of the assertions quoted as an 'accusation' and directly comments on the journalist's choice of words in a qualifying parenthesis ('(a far too general term)') inserted in the general argument.

(367) I was interested to read your article about Cycle Friday in London (Report, 15 August). However, I was surprised by the claim that it's a "first for a British city" since Manchester has had at least two of these happening for a year or more. […] [NEWS G07-017]

(368) […] As for the comment that "the left just gave up on economics", in my part of the left we've talked about it constantly over the past 35 years. And as for the accusation that "Most of the left … did not see the great financial collapse of 2008 coming," the difference between "the left" (a far too general term) and mainstream commentators was that most commentators really did talk and behave as if there would be "no return to boom and bust". […] [NEWS G06-035]

Especially in reasoned arguments, when the letter writers discuss the claims of the journalist in a factual way before advancing their own claims, the quotations are usually longer and introduced by a reference to the respective author, thus following the standard rules for the use of quotations in writing:

(369) While I agree with much of Aditya Chakrabortty's [AUTHOR] analysis of the Tobin tax proposal by Adair Turner (This unexpected radical shows up an abject failure to tame the banks, 28 August) he is wrong to suggest that "in this debate over financial regulation the people making the running do not hail from Westminster." […] [NEWS G08-022]

Yet quoting may not only be used to refute the journalists' claims or arguments, it also allows the letter writers to distance themselves clearly from the journalists' viewpoints. This is achieved by not quoting their entire argument but rather placing their particular choice of words between quotation marks. The use of such so-called *scare quotes*, "with which quoters distance themselves from someone else's words, often in an ironical and 'sneering' way" (Bublitz 2015: 9), is illustrated in the following examples:[391]

(370) I certainly do not "ditch" my secondhand books at Oxfam, nor are they "battered editions" (Dan Brown: the write stuff to get rid of, August 21). I read them and recycle them, in the safe knowledge that I'm making a small donation to a worthy charity and respected bookseller, and keeping perfectly good copies in circulation. [NEWS G06-096]

(371) […] Far from "passing away" in 2009, there has been nothing "special" about the US-UK relationship for decades. It should not be mourned. [NEWS T08-050]

In such cases, which make up 30.3% of all direct quotes used to criticise the author, the quotation is not introduced by a direct reference to the author or article, thus leaving it to the reader to identify the exact source.[392] As in the

[391] Predelli (2003) differentiates between several types of scare quotes with slightly different functions. While such quotes might simply signal that a certain term is unsuitable in the particular context in which it is used, thus performing an apologetic function, this function may also be "entirely absent" (2003: 2). The use of the term in the present analysis is based on the definition provided in the *Macmillan Handbook of English*: in scare quotes, the quotation marks signal that "the writer is repeating someone else's words, is opposed to their use, […] and is about to offer his own opposing views" (Kierzek et al. 1977: 343 as quoted in Predelli 2003: 2f.).

[392] Since the contextualisation strategies employed in letters to the editor allow readers to identify the trigger text, these scare quotes can easily be attributed to a particular journalist even if that journalist is not named. In (370) above, for instance, the information in brackets automatically identifies the source of the quotes. While scare quotes "do not necessarily refer to an original utterance" (Brendel et al. 2011: 9), only those that do so are considered in the present analysis. The use of the scare quotes analysed thus goes beyond "signaling that the

more standard quotations discussed above, the quotation marks still indicate that the wording is not the choice of the letter writer but that of the person quoted. However, in combination with the opposing viewpoints presented, the quotation marks fulfil the additional function of signalling that the letter writer has taken offence not only at the argument expressed but also at this particular choice of words, making them an important indicator of disagreement (cf. Predelli 2003: 4).

6.3.2.1.2 Special cases: Counter-statements

In the special category of letters called *reaction by the person/organisation in question*, i.e. letters authored by the person/organisation in focus and – in most cases – under attack in the original newspaper article, quotes are used in 21% of the time to introduce the counter-statement. As the purpose of counter-statements is to assert that the allegations or accusations published in the newspaper are false, it is common to reproduce these claims before refuting them, as done in a straightforward manner by Cherie Blair in (372).

(372) Gary Younge [AUTHOR] accurately quotes me condemning the Taliban treatment of women in Afghanistan (Comment, 14 September) but describes me, bizarrely, as doing so "from behind a burka". I wasn't wearing a burka, have never worn a burka, and have no plans to wear a burka in the future. […] [NEWS G10-072]

Depending on how easy it is to refute the claim and how offensive and damaging the public figure takes the article to be, the quotations can also be longer and more numerous, as in the letter written by Jack Straw (at the time Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice) in response to an opinion piece authored by David Cameron (at the time still leader of the Opposition):

(373) Sir, David Cameron [AUTHOR] (Opinion, Sept 1) charges that "even to hint that a convicted terrorist [al-Megrahi] could be used as makeweight for trade is a betrayal of everything that Britain stands for". This charge has no substance, as I believe Mr Cameron himself knew when he wrote those words for, in his very next sentence, he tries to absolve himself from responsibility for this unseemly slur by saying "it could be that this reading of events is

writer does not accept the meaning of a word as it is being used by others in this context" (Pinker 2015: 43; emphasis added) and clearly signals that what is not accepted is how a particular journalist used an expression in a particular article. The use of scare quotes without preceding utterance as described by Pinker (and illustrated with the help of the example 'They executed their sister to preserve the family's "honor".' (2015: 43)) is also fairly frequent in the present corpus. Yet in the present chapter, only those cases are considered in which the disagreement is clearly directed at the journalist and his/her use of a term on a particular occasion.

unfair and that the British Government played no substantive role in al-Megrahi's release". It did play no such role, […] [NEWS T08-029]

The counter-statement written by the chief executive of *The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment* (the architecture charity of Prince Charles) even goes a step further and follows a structure in which statement after statement is first quoted in its entirety before it is refuted, a strategy illustrated in the excerpt reproduced as (374) below.

(374) […] Booth [AUTHOR] writes: "The heir to the throne has a significant say in the plans for more than 17, 000 houses." To put it in context, this is over a 20-year period, and amounts to about half of 1% of the government's growth target for the same period – enough to demonstrate commercial viability, but hardly market domination.
Booth says: "Designers are being urged to embrace historical styles, whether they are building workers' cottages or grand Georgian-style town homes." In fact, what the foundation does is […] [NEWS G06-052]

In such letters to the editor, quotations can thus not only occupy a central position as the argument to be torn down or dismantled piece by piece, they can also take up a substantial amount of space and even determine the structure of the letter.

While rebutting someone's argument in public is always a face-threatening act, the way the quotations are introduced can add further weight to the face threat. In the letter quoted in extracts in (374) above, for instance, the letter writer introduces the author's claims in a neutral way, twice using 'Booth writes' and once 'Booth says', thus letting Booth's words speak for themselves. In (372), on the other hand, Cherie Blair expresses her irritation by describing the journalist's behaviour with the adverb 'bizarrely', and in (373), Jack Straw even uses the terms 'charges' and 'charge' and calls Cameron's statement an 'unseemly slur', thus not simply juxtaposing Cameron's point of view and his own but unmistakably rebuking the leader of the Opposition in public.[393]

While it is common to clearly identify the author of the claim to be refuted in such counter-statements (as in the examples above and (375) below), the corpus also contains an exception to this general rule: the letter written by the chief minister of Guernsey (376).

(375) Jonathan Freedland [AUTHOR] says Ofcom is "bloated" and gets involved in issues where it is not needed. First, Ofcom […] [NEWS G08-105]

[393] In the quotations used to criticise the author, there is a tendency to introduce the quote in a neutral way, with 62.6% of the occurrences being of this kind. However, in 37 letters, i.e. 37.4%, the quote is accompanied by an evaluative component (e.g. 'displays naivety when he writes' [NEWS T09-034] or 'a lazy and inappropriate accusation' [NEWS T06-046.2]). These face-threatening acts will be discussed in detail below (see 7.3.4.1).

(376) I cannot foresee any circumstances where the need would arise for the UK taxpayer to "bail out" Guernsey. […] [NEWS G10-052]

In this case, the function of the quotation marks clearly exceeds that of marking the words as a direct quote; rather, they underline how far-fetched the author considers this idea to be. Just as in (370) and (371) discussed above, the use of such a scare quote allows the author to distance himself from the meaning of the word enclosed within quotation marks (i.e. 'bail out') and to emphasise his disagreement with those people who use it.[394]

6.3.2.1.3 Other functions

In summary, in the letters, direct quotes from the newspaper are in the majority of cases (i.e. 60.4%) used to criticise the author of the newspaper article – be it by simply repeating the original claim in a neutral way before refuting it or by explicitly passing negative judgement. This finding is in line with Bublitz's (2015: 9) conclusion that this perspective of assessment, i.e. the reflecting meta-communicative act referred to above, plays a pivotal role in quoting in general:

> In fact, this seems to be the essential motive for performing the act of quoting in the first place: not to recycle prior text to inform the recipient but to allow the quoter to express his or her stance towards the quoted text.

When combined with, or embedded in, the move of *criticising the journalist*, the letter writer's stance is certainly made explicit; however, it is also present in the remaining 65 occurrences of quoting, in which the quotes serve a diverse set of functions. Among the most prominent ones are quotes used when agreeing with what has been said and quotes used to express positive feedback (12 and 4 occurrences respectively, see (377) and (378) below), quotes used in witty, humorous remarks (9 occurrences, see (379) below) and quotes used in so-called "yes, but…" structures, i.e. moves in which the authors first agree with some aspects, only to express their disagreement with others immediately afterwards (6 occurrences, see (380) below).

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[394] As argued above, scare quotes are often not explicitly attributed to the author since the contextualisation cues already identify the trigger text and hence the source of the quote. In the example above, an additional reason could be that the term 'bail out' is used several times in the original article – both in statements with and without quotation marks. Moreover, the article fails to clearly identify the source of the claim reproduced in its headline "Britain 'may be forced to bail out tax havens'" (Mathiason 2009) and thus leaves the quote unattributed. Be it because it is not known who advanced the claim first or because too many people have used the term, what matters to the author of the letter is to show that he strongly disagrees with whoever speaks of having to 'bail out' Guernsey.

(377) […] For all its faults our NHS system is amazing and I agree with Janice Turner [AUTHOR]: "How dare they." [NEWS T06-018.3]

(378) In their splendidly written and fascinating testimony to the life of Berta Freistadt (Other lives, 31 August), her friends note that "she could even turn a trip to Ikea into a magical adventure". […] [NEWS G08-032]

(379) I seek some reassurance that your suggestion of "going vegan for three days a week" is enough to offset the possible side effects of increasing my consumption of beans and pulses. [NEWS G08-111]

(380) Sir, It might be true that "any potential jurors find it hard to tell right from wrong" (report, Sept 7), but many of us have learnt that those with the greatest difficulty in such matters are lawyers. [NEWS T09-047]

In all these cases, the letter writers' stances towards the original texts are expressed, yet this function is certainly most noticeable in the case of explicit criticism.

6.3.2.2 Online comments

The picture emerging from the analysis of the CMC corpus is almost the exact opposite: in only 41 of the occurrences of direct quotes, i.e. 38.3%, are they used in combination with criticism directed at the author. In the majority of cases, i.e. 61.7%, the quote is not used to criticise the author's argument or choice of words or to juxtapose his/her assertion with counter-statements but rather to select a particular passage from the newspaper article to which the comment writer can then directly refer and react. The quotes have thus a very important contextualising function as they create coherence between the article and the comment by calling to mind the point(s) of the article that are taken up and reacted to. Of course, this contextualising function can also be considered to be present in those cases in which the quotes are used to criticise the author, both in letters to the editor and online comments. Yet whereas the point of such criticising quotes is to illustrate that the journalists' arguments or assertions are wrong or that their choice of words is considered offensive by letting them speak for themselves, the point of contextualising quotes is not primarily to reproduce exactly the words of the author but rather to pick up the general idea or topic by indicating which part of the whole newspaper article triggered the comment. Instead of being made the target of the criticism, the verbatim quote is thus used to select one aspect from the newspaper article or to set the scene in general, as in (381). This explains why in 74.2% of the

66 cases, the direct quote is used to open the comment and why such quotes can be as long as 70 or even 80 words.[395]

(381) [QUOTE] Barnet wants householders to pay extra to jump the queue for planning consents, in the way budget airlines charge extra for priority boarding. And as budget airline passengers choose to spend their budget on either flying at peaktime or having an in-flight meal, recipients of adult social care in Barnet will choose to spend a limited budget on whether to have a cleaner or a respite carer or even a holiday to Eastbourne. [QUOTE]
Hmmm. Can't say I care for the analogy, but in terms of policy, if widely applied, this runs the risk of providing opportunity for those who can afford it, and those who actually need input from the state and government losing out. If this is how they plan to run the country, people with shorter memories are going to be in for a shock. [CMC G07-015-17 c3][396]

In comparison to (381) above, where both quote and comment are fairly long, both can also be substantially shorter, as illustrated by (382) below. In this comment, parts of the same quote as in (381) can be found; however, instead of setting the scene, they are used to pick out and highlight one argument from the article. This argument can then be referred to easily with the demonstrative pronoun *this*, thus allowing the commenter to produce a very succinct rhetorical question criticising the council's decision and thus the Conservatives' view of society:

(382) [QUOTE] *Barnet wants householders to pay extra to jump the queue for planning consents, in the way budget airlines charge extra for priority boarding* [QUOTE]
Is this just not letting the rich pay for preferential treatment? [CMC G07-015-17 c1]

Despite such sub-corpus-internal differences in length and function, direct quotes from the newspaper used in the comments are, with their average length of 23.6 words, nearly three times as long as those in the letters,

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[395] The percentage of 74.2 is even more remarkable when considering that several comments contain multiple quotes (of which, of course, only one can appear in initial position). Moreover, quotes in which only a few words are put between quotation marks were not counted as initial quotes if embedded in a sentence, which was – with only one exception – always the case. In addition, the fact that the average length of online comments amounts to only 87 words makes quotes like the 73-word quote in (381) all the more noteworthy.

[396] As described above (see 4.3.7), the *Guardian* website offers its users a quote function which allows them to mark parts of their comments as quotes by clearly setting those passages off from the remainder of their comment, thus making it unnecessary to add quotation marks (see also Bublitz (2015: 11ff.) for the different formal devices to signal quotations in spoken, written and computer-mediated communication). Whenever this quote function is used, the quoted segments are displayed in grey, as in the example above. Since this quote function does not exist on the *Times* website and since quotes may also be indicated by other typographic features even on the *Guardian* website (e.g. italics, as in (382) below), square brackets ([QUOTE]) have been added to the beginning and end of all quotes.

where the average quote from the newspaper counts only 8.3 words. As the two examples above show, adding the quotes – which is fairly easily achieved with the *Guardian's* quote function – saves the comment writers the effort of introducing and contextualising their comments by using any of the strategies presented so far and makes their comments understandable even to readers who have not read the entire newspaper article. It is thus a very convenient and quick way to secure understanding without having to summarise or paraphrase the argument that builds the foundation for the follow-up. On the *Times* website, which does not offer this function, quotes are used far less frequently, with only 5.9% of all comments posted in response to the article quoting the journalist, compared to 15.6% in the *Guardian* sub-corpus.[397]

Having outlined the most striking overall difference between the corpora, what follows is a closer look at the individual moves into which the quotes in the comments are embedded. As the main function of quotes from the newspaper in the letters is to criticise the author, this usage will be given special attention in order to illustrate some intriguing stylistic differences.

6.3.2.2.1 Criticism directed at the author

In the 41 cases in which the quotes are used to criticise the author, it is fairly common (i.e. 18 occurrences or 43.9%) to directly address him/her, using the second person pronoun *you* (see (383), (384), (386) and (387) below), an imperative (385) or the journalist's name (386). Repeating the author's claim in the form of a verbatim quote thus serves as a kind of prompt or first turn, to which the comment writer then reacts in a second turn.

(383) [QUOTE] Labour will not reverse this; only the Tories **might**. [QUOTE; emphasis added by the commenter]
Are you sure the LibDems won't? They are usually pretty hot on civil liberties (better then Lab/Con anyway), and I don't see any quote from the LibDems to confirm their position - have you even asked them about it? [...] [CMC G10-086 c4]

(384) [QUOTE] And allowing the BNP's malignant leader a seat on a David Dimbleby panel as the pubs close some wintry Thursday is the least of our democratic dilemmas. [QUOTE]
The fact you think it is a dilemma to allow a man representing a million voters to have a say on publicly funded broadcasting is quite telling. [CMC G09-033-37 c4]

[397] When reacting to another user, quotes are used far more frequently on both websites. However, a considerable difference in frequency between the *Guardian* and the *Times* still remains, as will be discussed below (see 6.3.2).

(385) […] [QUOTE] "A further £700 million could be saved if procedures with limited clinical benefits — such as tonsillectomies, varicose vein removal and some hysterectomies — were no longer performed." [QUOTE] - Tell that to the patient anxiously waiting on her hysterectomy, for this procedure, like a tonsillectomy, can make such a huge difference to quality of life. [CMC T08-063 c5]

Example (385) above is the only such occurrence in the *Times*, where the habit of talking back to the author in this way is – not just in the case of quotes used for criticism or disagreement – far less frequent than in the *Guardian*, where such replies can be very hostile in nature:

(386) [QUOTE] But then Megrahi's return was not the product of the Scottish justice minister, Kenny MacAskill, on a lonely search of his Presbyterian soul. [QUOTE]
Do you have *any* evidence that it wasn't Simon [AUTHOR]? Because you've not provided any above, just a lot of hot air, opinion and suppostition. […] [CMC G07-083 c14]

(387) […] [QUOTE] Intellectually and morally, Brown is a towering figure [QUOTE]
My God, you got paid for this? [CMC G09-061-62 c9]

In these cases, the comment writers not only criticise the authors but challenge them to react to the face threat by directly addressing them and even asking questions, i.e. producing the first part of an adjacency pair. This dialogic structure is a very powerful tool, as it implies that the journalist has to answer to the reader and thus imposes a certain power hierarchy.[398]

Even when the author is not directly and explicitly addressed (e.g. by using a vocative or the second person pronoun *you*), quotes are frequently used as prompts or first turns to which the commenter then reacts directly, using markers of disagreement or agreement (e.g. *no* or *exactly*, as in (388) and (389) respectively), interjections (e.g. *goodness*, as in (390) below) or rhetorical questions (391).

(388) [QUOTE] That is not Brown's style. He condemns himself to an agonised deviousness whose sole virtue is honesty. [QUOTE]
No, whose sole virtue is *deviousness* thus it was ever so when it comes to Britain's interests [CMC G07-083 c12]

[398] Matters of addressivity in criticism directed at the journalist will be discussed in more detail below (see 7.3.4.1.1). Nonetheless, it needs to be stressed at this point that the strategy of talking back to the author by addressing him/her directly is also used in some letters to the editor, where it may even be combined with direct quotes, as in the examples from the CMC corpus discussed above. However, there is an important structural difference between the two corpora: while commenters tend to imitate the turn-taking of face-to-face conversation by simply adding the comment to a direct quote in isolation, this structure is not used at all in the letters, where the quote is always woven into the follow-up, e.g. 'You take the view that [… QUOTE OMITTED], but that can only be a matter of opinion.' [NEWS T07-010_2].

(389) [QUOTE] "The photograph violates one of the oldest taboos, by intruding into the sacred privacy associated with the moment of death." [QUOTE]
Exactly. The photo should never have been published. [CMC T10-005 c4][399]

(390) @A C Grayling [AUTHOR]
[QUOTE] The interests of justice and compassion often clash [QUOTE]
Goodness! Philosophy is just getting so sophisticated these days. [CMC G07-035.2 c14]

(391) [QUOTE] It was about pouring money down the throat of commercial London [QUOTE]
and whats wrong with that?? considering we subsidise the rest of UK including scotland and the benefits they enjoy such as free education for their kids while in england we have to pay for it. [CMC G07-083 c15]

Despite not explicitly and unambiguously addressing the author of the newspaper article, these writers frame their comment as a conversational turn produced in reaction to the author's turn reproduced in the form of a direct quote.

The examples above thus clearly illustrate the stark contrast between the CMC corpus and the written one regarding not only the frequency in the use of quotes when criticising the author as opposed to other functions but also their formal and stylistic characteristics. In the CMC corpus, such quotes are usually not embedded in the sentence structure of the comment but stand in isolation as prompts to which the comment writer then reacts in a second step. This structure is reminiscent of that of adjacency pairs in spoken conversation: quote and comment form a unit, are produced by different speakers/writers, and they are not only adjacent but ordered (cf. Levinson 1983: 303f.). The fundamental difference is, of course, the speech situation. In below-the-line comments, the two interlocutors producing the first and second part are not co-present but separated from each other in both space and time. It is not the case that "[h]aving produced a first part of some pair, current speaker must stop speaking, and next speaker must produce at that point a second part to the same pair" (Levinson 1983: 304). Rather, the adjacency pair is created by the recipient of a written message in reaction to a certain passage of this monologic text. The pair is thus in a way created in reverse, as it is the producer of the second part who choses what part of the

[399] Even though the comment writer seems to agree with the journalist here, this move is still categorised as *criticism directed at the author* because the journalist, despite admitting that the photograph violates a taboo, defends its publication in the remainder of the article. The comment writer thus first uses *exactly* to agree with one of the arguments put forward only to criticise the author for arriving at the conclusion that the publication of the photograph was justified in the second sentence of the comment. The short, simple syntactic structures and the full stop which separates the agreement from the disagreement add further weight to the criticism, leaving no room for discussion.

prior discourse (i.e. the written text in this case) to select as first part. However, the second part of the pair (i.e. the comment) is clearly provoked by the first (i.e. the quote) and often cannot be interpreted correctly without it, as it frequently contains elliptical structures and linguistic units that refer back to the prompt (e.g. the relative pronoun *whose* and the demonstrative pronoun *that*, both pointing back to the introductory quote in (388) and (391) respectively).[400] In contrast to the letters, where the quotes tend to follow the standard rules for quotation in written texts (i.e. quotation marks are used, the source is identified and the quote is introduced or even woven into the sentence structure), the comments tend to imitate the dyadic structure of spoken interaction.[401]

What the two corpora share, however, is that the readers use scare quotes to distance themselves from the author's argument and choice of words, as illustrated by (370), (371), (375) and (376) above and (392) and (393) below.

(392) I fail to see the point of asking "leading thinkers" to comment with reference to a case of which they variously appear to be largely or wholly ignorant. [...] [CMC G07-035_2 c11]

(393) This horror will never have seemed "inevitable" - there are thousands of children with equally difficult circumstances who don't grow up to commit terrible crimes. […] [CMC T08-059 c6]

[400] The last criterion of adjacency pairs mentioned by Levinson (1983: 303), i.e. the fact that they are *typed*, "so that a particular first part requires a particular second", is not fully met in this special use. Obviously, the second part is related to what the commenter selects as the first part of the adjacency pair – otherwise this choice would not make sense. It can thus be assumed that what comes to be the first part somehow triggers certain kinds of responses but not others. However, some of the responses, i.e. second parts, are clearly not of the kind envisaged by the author of the first part, who, after all, did not intend this particular passage as a first part of an adjacency pair in the first place (even though he/she most certainly wanted to provoke some sort of impression and/or reaction in the reader). Thus, while the first parts undoubtedly trigger certain kinds of responses, these cannot be considered to be required, as newspaper articles as such are not dialogic in nature. In a conversation, on the other hand, failing to produce the required second part usually needs to be accounted for if conversational breakdown is to be avoided.

[401] Herring (1999) discusses the problem of disrupted adjacency in both synchronous and asynchronous forms of CMC and describes several strategies used to establish interactional coherence, among which she also names quoting (parts of) another user's contribution. Especially in discussion and newsgroups, "[q]uoting creates the illusion of adjacency in that it juxtaposes (portions of) two turns – an initiation and a response – within a single message" (Herring 2001: 620). While the usage of quotes discussed here may well have had its origin in this type of quoting, it is novel in that it is used to simulate the dyadic structures of spoken dialogue when 'talking back' to the newspaper: the journalistic product, i.e. a monologic text, is treated as if it was the initiation turn and the comment the required response turn.

All in all, there are no discernible differences in the use of scare quotes between the two corpora – neither in form nor in function. Even the frequency is fairly similar, with 24.4% of the quotes used to criticise the author in the comments constituting scare quotes, compared to 30.3% in the letters.

6.3.2.2.2 Other functions

As outlined above, in the remaining 66 cases in which the quotes do not fulfil the function of criticising the author, they are used to contextualise the user's comment by making it clear to readers to which part of the newspaper article the comment refers, thus clarifying how the two are connected. The users can, for instance, use the quote to select one statement from the newspaper article before expressing their agreement, giving positive feedback and even thanking the author (394), before voicing their opinion (395), or before supporting the author by relating a personal experience and producing a humorous remark (396).

(394) [QUOTE] It's [I.E. RELIC WORSHIP] no weirder than idolising Beckham [QUOTE]
A reasonably comprehensive summary of Catholicism. Harmless, futile, and all about personality cults and cash-rich endorsement values.
Thank you. [CMC G11-034 c14]

(395) [QUOTE] he'll find Auntie [I.E. THE BBC] matches the NHS in public affections [QUOTE]
I'm on her side, but I'm prepared to wager she'll get a rare old kicking here... [CMC G08-104 c1]

(396) [QUOTE] That appetite [I.E. THE READING APPETITE FOR THE LURID AND SHOCKING IN BOOKS] is nowadays fed in an alarming way by the genre known in the trade as misery memoirs (or, as one section of my local Waterstone's is now actually labelled, "Painful Lives"). [QUOTE]
I was in Asda the other day and noticed that you can now buy 'misery memoirs' in polythene-bound packs of three. To my horror the shelf label actually referred to it as 'MISERY VALUE PACK'. So that's more misery for your money, presumably. [CMC G06-060 c1]

In such cases, the comments can only be understood in combination with the direct quotes and – as illustrated by the fact that some information needed to be added in square brackets to the examples above – with a certain amount of background knowledge about the original newspaper article.

The move that is most frequently combined (i.e. in 30 of the 66 cases) with such contextualising quotations is that of criticising a third party – usually a public figure or institution (e.g. political parties) mentioned in or at the heart of the original newspaper article:

(397) [QUOTE] The reason for cuts-blindness is that the one sphere of the public sector that continues to expand is ... central government. [QUOTE]
Mr Brown has claimed for twelve years that what he spends on central government is 'investment', whereas most of it appears to be cash-splashing on payroll and the office-space to house it. The Tories have never nailed this pompous fiction. I keep wondering why – they're not short of analysts. [CMC G10-056-59 c5]

(398) [QUOTE] 390,000 individuals will have access to ContactPoint [QUOTE]
they all have CRB [CRIMINAL RECORDS BUREAU] checks of course
won't they ? [CMC G10-086 c12]

The two examples above, both reproduced here in their entirety, nicely illustrate that even though both comments are introduced by a direct quote from the newspaper article serving as the basis for the subsequent criticism directed at a public figure/institution, there are nevertheless striking differences. In the first example, the comment writer repeats an argument from the newspaper article in the form of a direct quote, which he/she then not only supports but expands in his/her comment. He/she thus sides with the journalist in criticising a public figure and even extends the criticism to other people/parties. This criticism can be understood fairly well without knowledge of the newspaper article and, what is more, it could even be understood if the quote was omitted, as the comment is self-contained: it does not include any direct or indirect references to the quote and consists of syntactically complete, independent statements.

This is different in the second example, which is hardly understandable without additional background information from the newspaper article and which would be entirely unintelligible if the quote was omitted, as it is needed to identify the referent of the personal pronoun *they*. However, this does not mean that the quote in (397) is superfluous, as it still has the important function of linking the comment to the newspaper article, thus signalling the commentator's support. In (398), however, the function of the quote is to select one simple fact from the newspaper article as the focus of concern, i.e. the number of people having access to ContactPoint, a government database with contact details and other personal information on all children under 18 in England, designed to improve child protection but heavily criticised for security and privacy reasons. The comment following this straightforward fact is intended to highlight the absurdity of such a database by pointing out a severe security, financial and organisational problem not mentioned in the article: if this database is really to protect children instead of exposing them to even more danger, access to such sensitive data would need to be limited to responsible, trustworthy professionals. It would thus be necessary for every member of the very large group of individuals having access to the database to have a CRB check, i.e.

a criminal records check, which, in addition to the security and privacy concerns mentioned in the newspaper article, adds to the costs of the scheme.[402] Yet instead of explaining these concerns in the way it has just been done, the comment writer first pretends that this is a fact that has 'of course' been considered carefully by the government before he/she calls this assertion into question by adding the question tag 'won't they?'. In first pretending to have confidence in the government before severely shaking and undermining this confidence, the author not only sides with the journalist in criticising the government for its irrational and potentially dangerous measures but does so in a way that is likely to leave a bitter taste. The seemingly innocent assertion ('they all have CRB checks of course') is turned into sharp-tongued criticism by casting doubt not only on the assertion as such but also on the trustworthiness and rationality of the government. The fact that the two parts of the comment, i.e. assertion and question tag, are separated by a line break, as if the tag was added very tentatively after a short pause, adds further emphasis to the irony that government measures intended to protect and help children might end up making them even more vulnerable than before (besides costing an exorbitant amount of money). It is thus the structure of this very short comment that gives it its force – after all, the criticism is not explicitly stated even if it can hardly be missed. Had the commenter used a paraphrase instead of a quote or produced a lengthy argument, the comment would not have been as succinct and punchy and might not have received as many recommendations as it did (i.e. 47). Using quotes to focus the attention on individual parts of the newspaper article is thus a very useful strategy to ensure coherence and understanding in pithy comments.

As outlined above (see 6.3.2.2), in below-the-line comments both quote and comment can vary substantially in length, depending on whether the quotes are used to set the scene for a detailed discussion of the topic or to single out the aspect on which to comment. This also holds true for comments in which a third party is criticised. In (399) below, the fairly long quote is followed by a lengthy analysis of Gordon Brown's behaviour, culminating in the final verdict that 'he failed'. The quote is only used to introduce the overall topic (i.e. Gordon Brown's behaviour in face of a difficult political situation), and the rest of the newspaper article, i.e. the broader political circumstances and the journalist's assessment, is not considered.

[402] As the Criminal Records Bureau has in the meantime merged with the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) to form the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), these checks are now called DBS checks.

(399) [QUOTE] *" Everyone except Gordon Brown has played the Megrahi case wrong, and he had no option. He was stuck. That only shows to what depths the "war on terror" has now sunk, both in justice and diplomacy in international relations."* [QUOTE]
Yesterday I watched Mr Brown in the Channel 4 and later BBC1. He was making a statement […] [CMC G07-083 c4]

In (400) and (401), on the other hand, the fairly short quotes are followed by comments consisting of only one word and six words respectively. These commenters do not intend to use the quote to set the scene for their detailed criticism of a certain person's behaviour but rather to single out one piece of information before expressing their discontent with the government in a very succinct and straightforward manner. While the first rather scathing comment is probably intended as a pun on the Labour and Co-Operative Party member Ed Balls, the second comment not only mimics spoken interaction by using the interjection *yay* but also expresses the author's negative assessment of the government's policy decision via irony.[403]

(400) [QUOTE] Conservatives want to revive educational divide [QUOTE]
Balls. [CMC G07-102 c4]

(401) [QUOTE] As a result of this shakedown the US government will get millions of tax dollars that it could otherwise never have got its hands on. [QUOTE]
Yay, 6 months more in Iraq. [CMC G07-067 c12]

Interestingly, the topic of the article in (401) is tax evasion, and the 'shakedown' mentioned in the quote refers to an agreement between Swiss banks and the US government to disclose information on wealthy US citizens holding bank accounts in Switzerland. The author's wry remark pointing out a – in his/her eyes highly likely – consequence is thus not in line with the overall topic and focus of the newspaper; while the article is about tax evasion and how the government strives to tackle the problem of clandestine wealth, the comment picks out one fact from the article, i.e. the money thus recovered by the government, to change the focus to the US war on terror and hence foreign policy. By flouting the maxim of relevance, the user invites the implicature that the US government uses any additional financial resource available on its war on terror; the ironical interjection *yay* (flouting the maxim of quality) both criticises the government and communicates the user's stance, as it can only be understood as the very opposite of an expression of joy. As in (398) above, using quotes to mimic a dialogic communicative situation allows the comment writers to produce pithy, snappy or even biting retorts without risking that the comment is not

[403] The quote in (400) is from the headline of the article, which runs "Conservatives want to revive educational divide, claims Ed Balls" (Curtis 2009).

understood because of a lack of coherence or insufficient knowledge about the article.

6.3.2.3 Comparison

The above has shown that in contrast to using quotes mainly to criticise the author, as is common practice in the letters, the authors of comments use quotes more frequently either to select one fact, piece of information or idea from the newspaper article on which to comment directly, or simply to set the scene for the subsequent comment. Quotes in online comments have thus a very strong contextualising component, linking the comment not primarily to a certain newspaper article (which is unnecessary given the design of the comments section) but rather to a particular part or idea of that article. Thus, while both major functions of quotes in reader response, i.e. to criticise the author and to contextualise the reply, are present in both corpora, their distribution differs markedly.

In terms of form, the differences between the two corpora are even more striking: while the quotes in the letters to the editor are usually attributed and woven into the texture of the letter, thus following the standard rules for quoting in written texts, the quotes in the online comments hardly ever follow this structure but are usually presented as the first parts of an adjacency pair, to which the comment writer adds his/her comment in the form of the second part of that pair. The quotes in the comments thus not only differ from those used in the letters in that they are nearly three times as long, they also tend to be used to create dyadic structures mimicking the turn-taking system of spoken conversation.

6.3.2.4 Special case: quoting somebody quoted in the article

Despite the stark differences in the use of quotes discussed above, there is one aspect in which the two corpora are surprisingly similar – at least as far as form and function are concerned. In both types of reader response, quotes can be found in which somebody quoted in the newspaper article is again quoted in the reader contribution. While the numbers differ, with 43 such occurrences in the letters compared to only 11 in the comments, the function is – with only a few minor exceptions – always the same: the quotes are used to strongly criticise the person quoted.

(402) Nick Clegg [THE LEADER OF THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS] condemns universal child benefit as “patently silly and patently unfair”. He has a short political memory and a weak sense of principle. […] [NEWS G11-002]

(403) [QUOTE] Martin Narey, the Barnardo’s chief executive and former director general of the Prison Service, said: “If the vetting and barring scheme stops

just one child ending up a victim of a paedophile then it will be worth it." [QUOTE]
Hard to argue with such monumental stupidity. [CMC G10-023-25 c16]

While the examples above nicely illustrate the formal and functional similarities, they might give the impression that this form of criticism is both harsher and more personal in the comments. However, this is not the case, as the examples below illustrate. In (404), the author of the letter directs a make-believe polite request ('could you please') at the newspaper to indirectly criticise the British National Party councillor's double standards. The use of mock politeness and consideration of the councillor's preferences makes the face-threatening act all the more severe by masking it on the surface level.

(404) BNP councillor Pat Richardson says "A brick through a window is a British method ... of showing displeasure" (Muslim man claims he was abducted, 27 August). Could you please publish her address so that those of us who wish to show our displeasure at her could do so in a manner of which she approves. [NEWS G08-010]

A similar strategy is used in (405), where the seemingly innocent question ('Has he…?') is clearly not an *information-seeking question* but a rhetorical one intended to provide information instead (cf. Athanasiadou 1991: 108). By flouting the maxim of relevance and asking whether Simon Morris has been on Venus for the past few years, the author insinuates that this is the only possible explanation for his apparent inability to judge the current situation adequately (the implied meaning being: 'Only if he has been on Venus for the past few years can he come to such a conclusion'). The fact that this explanation is not only highly unlikely but literally impossible adds further weight to the attack. The choice of a prolonged stay on Venus as a possible explanation is not random but inspired by reports that flooded the press at that time about the Japanese first lady claiming to have been abducted by aliens once. By indirectly likening Simon Morris to the Japanese first lady, whose revelations earned her not only wide media coverage but also the image of a "pedlar of new age bunkum", to use the words of a highly entertaining but fairly derisive article in the *Guardian* (McCurry 2009), the author strongly insults Simon Morris, implying that he is as irrational, unreasonable and untrustworthy as she is.

(405) Sir, Simon Morris, of CMS Cameron McKenna [A LAW FIRM], chastises the FSA [THE FINANCIAL SERVICES AUTHORITY] for publishing details of complaints against the banks and other financial organisations ("Banks top the bill as financial customers deliver 9 million complaints", Business, Sept 4), with the aside that "it creates an alarming, and inaccurate, impression that (these) firms are not to be trusted". Has he, like the Japanese first lady, been on Venus for the past few years? [NEWS T09-004]

The last example to be discussed here briefly serves to illustrate that quoting somebody quoted in the newspaper cannot only be used for very harsh criticism by talking about that public figure in the third person, as in the examples above, but also to introduce a reply addressed directly to the person in question:

(406) Chris Grayling [THE SHADOW HOME SECRETARY] claims that a "culture of deprivation, harm, addiction and failure" has been imported from the US to the streets of Britain. If this is the case, he should […] Harm and addiction? Mr Grayling – you ain't seen nothing yet. [NEWS G07-058]

While this letter writer first assesses Chris Grayling's statement and position by talking about him in the third person ('Chris Grayling claims', 'he should …'), he/she switches to the second person and even uses a vocative ('Mr Grayling') to end the letter, thus lending additional force to his/her criticism.[404]

In sum, the strategy of quoting somebody quoted in the newspaper is used more frequently in the letters than in the comments. It usually fulfils the function of criticising the person quoted, and this criticism tends to be fairly harsh and personal in both corpora.

6.4 Reaction to another reader's contribution

As outlined above (see Figure 18), 213 letters to the editor and 180 comments represent a reaction to another reader's contribution instead of the journalistic product. In both genres, this connection between the individual reader contributions can be made explicit with the help of contextualisation strategies, some of them being identical or similar to the ones used in reactions to the media product discussed above. What makes the compari-

[404] Using non-standard *ain't* combined with the double negative as intensifier to imitate working-class speech is intended to illustrate the bemoaned influence of the US, where *ain't* "is more widely used and accepted in informal style" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1611). While the use of absolute negators in negative clauses is not only a feature of dialects such as African American Vernacular English but also Cockney English (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 846), the fixed expression 'You ain't seen nothing yet' is still strongly associated with the US, where it gained prominence not only as the title of a song from the 1970s, but also after being used by Ronald Reagan in an Address to the Nation in 1984 (cf. McArthur 1992: 403). That the expression is perceived in the UK as an Americanism rather than simply non-standard (cf. e.g. Eggington and Wren 1997: 60) may have to do with the fact that it was used as such by Margaret Thatcher during a speech at a banquet at the British Residence in Washington, DC, held in 1985, where she admitted that she could not "imitate this wonderful American English accent". The full text of the speech is available on the Website of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation (http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105971; last accessed January 23, 2017), and video footage of the relevant parts of the speech can be found on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooi4VViNFZ8; last accessed January 23, 2017).

son particularly interesting, however, is the fact that especially in the corpus of letters, the link between two reader contributions can also remain largely implicit, i.e. the trigger reader contribution is either not identified or only vaguely evoked, which means that the intertextual ties between the two are only discernible for those following the response section closely. In this respect, there is thus a remarkable genre-internal difference: if the trigger of a letter to the editor is a journalistic text, there is a strong preference for more explicit forms of contextualisation. In contrast, if a letter is triggered by another reader's contribution, the ties between the two may also be far less obvious, depending on the function of the letter written in reply. In the comments, on the other hand, the tendency seems to be the opposite: when users simply comment on the article, contextualisation strategies play a less important role than when they react to another user's contribution, as will be shown in the following sections.

Since the contextualisation strategies have already been introduced above, the discussion of contextualisation in replies to another reader's contribution will proceed in a slightly different manner. Instead of a one-by-one examination of the individual strategies including a comparison of the corpora in each case, the focus will first be on the corpus of letters and the distinction between direct and indirect reactions before the attention is turned to the online corpus and its characteristic use of direct addresses. In both cases, special consideration will be given to the use of direct quotes, and comparisons between the individual sub-corpora and types of contributions will be drawn.

6.4.1 Contextualisation in letters reacting to letters

6.4.1.1 Direct vs. indirect reactions

As discussed above, owing to the time lag between the publication of the trigger and the letter reacting to it, contextualisation strategies, such as direct references to the article/journalist, are of vital importance in letters to the editor. However, among the letters reacting to previous letters, there are also some cases in which they are lacking completely. The way the letter writer introduces the topic of his/her letter in (407) below ('Gamelan … has certainly been added') for instance clearly signals that the letter constitutes a reaction to a previous discussion of the topic, yet the newspaper reader is not provided with any further clues as to where and in what form this discussion occurred. Only those following the letters page on a regular basis may be able to figure out that this letter (published on September 16) must have been written in reply to the letter reproduced as (408) below (published on September 12). This initial letter writer not only complains about the crossword clues being 'somewhat esoteric' but reaches out to other readers with an appellative move, asking them to agree, which the author of the subsequent letter does, albeit in a highly indirect manner.

(407) Sir, Gamelan, with its new meaning, has certainly been added to our vocabulary in this household now.
It will be used in such statements as "I couldn't finish the times2 crossword yesterday: the compiler ran out of ideas and threw in a gamelan." [NEWS T10-020.2]

(408) Sir, In the times2 crossword of Sept 9, we needed to know that an Indonesian orchestra is known as a "gamelan". Would other readers agree that the general knowledge questions in the crossword have become somewhat esoteric? [NEWS T09-063]

The indirectness of the reply becomes most striking when (407) above is compared to letters in which explicit contextualisation strategies are used. In the September 15 edition of the *Times*, two more letters reacting to the reader contribution in (408) are published (see (409) and (410) below). In contrast to the reader quoted in (407), however, both clearly signal that their letter constitutes a response to the appellative move of (408) by not only naming the initial letter writer but even summarising the main argument, i.e. repeating his question, which has been shown to be a strategy typical of letters reacting to a newspaper article (see 6.3.1.1 above).

(409) Sir, Brian Levy [LETTER WRITER] (letter, Sept 12) asks whether "Indonesian orchestra" (gamelan) is too esoteric a crossword clue. In coming years, the great nations of Asia will play increasingly a leading role on the world's stage. If we in the UK wish to act as participants rather than onlookers […] [NEWS T10-011.1]

(410) Sir, In the letter from Mr Levy [LETTER WRITER] we are asked to consider whether the times2 crossword is becoming more esoteric. Surely the very purpose of a crossword is […] [NEWS T10-011.2]

These contextualisation clues allow readers of the newspaper to understand the replies even without knowledge of the trigger text, which is hardly possible in the case of the fairly short, indirect reaction in (407) above.[405]

Of the 213 letters reacting to other reader contributions, 136 contain clear references to the previous letter or letter writer, whereas 77 fail to do

[405] The use or absence of contextualisation strategies may in this case be influenced by the fact that the function performed by the reactions is markedly different. Whereas the two direct reactions above are serious contributions about the importance of Asian music and the purpose of crosswords respectively, the indirect reaction in (407) is intended above all as a humorous remark. This objective makes the use of explicit contextualisation strategies not only less important but even cumbersome; after all, the more words are needed, the less pithy and wry a humorous letter can be.

so and thus have been classified as indirect reactions. In order to make the identification of such indirect reactions easier, both newspapers frequently add information in brackets – a contextualisation strategy also used in reactions to newspaper content (see 6.3.1.2 above). In contrast to newspaper articles, however, letters do not have a headline, which means that the information provided in brackets is limited to the label 'letter/s' and the date of publication.[406] Of the 77 letters belonging to the indirect category, 56 are cases in which this kind of information was added in brackets whereas 21 contain no such clue (see (407) above). In (411) below, for instance, taken from a letter published in the *Times* on September 7, the information 'letter Sept 5' makes it possible to link the disagreement ('There is no firm evidence that …') to a letter published two days before, even though neither the letter nor its author(s) is/are mentioned.

(411) Sir, There is no firm evidence that illegal file sharing costs jobs (letter Sept 5). The notoriously parsimonious entertainment industry […] [NEWS T09-005.1]

While such brackets do not provide readers with any information about the content or stance of the letter reacted to (as do brackets containing the headline of the newspaper article replied to), they at least signal that the trigger text is a reader's letter instead of a newspaper article; in addition, the date of publication makes it possible to search for that particular letter if desired.[407]

The individual contextualisation strategies used in the letters clearly differ in how strong a link they forge between initiation and follow-up. While the information 'letter/s DATE' added in brackets offers some clues as to how certain letters are to be positioned in the overall discourse, this strategy establishes far weaker links than direct references, as used in (409) and (410) above, as well as (412) below. In this latter case, the initial letter writer is named ('David Lowry'), a summary of his main argument is provided ('the Tobin tax has been …') and the letter writer's stance towards this argument is expressed ('rightly'). As is the case in the vast majority of letters reacting to another reader's letter, the initial letter writer is not addressed directly but referred to in the third person.[408]

(412) David Lowry [LETTER WRITER] (Letters, 1 September) rightly points out that the Tobin tax has been raised in parliament for some years. […] [NEWS G08-059]

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[406] The *Guardian* uses 'Letters', whereas the *Times* uses 'letter'.

[407] As mentioned above (see 6.3.1.2), in the online version of the newspaper, where the letters to the editor are also published, the information in brackets is a hyperlink leading the browsing reader directly to the trigger text.

[408] Matters of addressivity will be discussed in further detail below (see 7.3.4.1.1 and 7.3.4.2.2).

Examples (413) and (414), in contrast, are fairly cryptic despite the information provided in brackets and illustrate why, despite these brackets, such letters have been classified as indirect reactions in the present analysis.

(413) Where I come from, the answer was always "Hame'lldaeme" when you weren't off anywhere exotic (Letters, 28 August).
Jack Collins
Edinburgh [NEWS G07-108][409]

(414) "… it took me four days to hitchhike from Wythenshawe …" (Letters, 21 August). [NEWS G06-098]

In order to be able to decipher these reactions, the readers need to recall the trigger letters published in a previous edition of the newspaper. In the first case, the semantic content of the reader's reaction at least offers enough clues to deduce that the reaction is a witty, humorous remark about spending one's vacation at home.[410] Only regular followers of the letters page, however, will be able to interpret this letter as an answer to a reader's call for a British term to replace the American expression 'staycation':

(415) I think it's time to drop the US-influenced term "staycation" (Letters, 27 August). Why not celebrate our own values of stubborn resilience by using the word "stoliday"? [NEWS G07-088]

Example (414), on the other hand, is much harder to interpret. The use of ellipses and quotation marks suggests that this fairly short letter is a quote; yet even for those readers who might recognise the quote as being a slightly amended version of a line of the Simon & Garfunkel song 'America', the letter writer's message or intention most certainly is still nebulous; it simply cannot be ascertained solely on the basis of this letter. In fact, it is a continuation of another letter writer's witty, humorous remark in reaction to a newspaper article announcing the launch of the famous American Greyhound coach service in the UK:

(416) "Kathy, I said, as we boarded a Greyhound in Portsmouth, Maida Vale seems like a dream to me now … " (Greyhound buses hit the road in the UK with a £1 ticket to south coast, 20 August). [NEWS G06-082]

At first glance, this initial letter seems just as cryptic as the reply to it, yet the contextualisation strategy of adding the headline of the newspaper article reacted to in brackets (see 6.3.1.2 above) at least signals that this letter is meant to comment on the news that 'Greyhound buses hit the road

[409] Since the signature line stating the letter writer's place of residence is important for understanding the letter above, it has been included in this example.
[410] 'Hame'lldaeme' is intended to represent the Scottish pronunciation of 'home will do me'.

in the UK' and that the quotation probably makes sense when seen in this context. In the newspaper article reporting on the launch of the coach service, the journalist claims that the "Greyhound bus inspired Simon & Garfunkel to 'look for America' but British passengers will have to make do with views of Southampton and Portsmouth" (Milmo 2009), thus laying the groundwork for the intertextual references to the lyrics of this song that both letter writers employ for humorous effect in their replies. The underlying strategy is introduced in (416): the letter writer simply reacts by quoting the line of the song in which the word *Greyhound* is mentioned but replaces the American place names with British ones ('Pittsburgh' becomes 'Portsmouth' and 'Michigan' becomes 'Maida Vale'), thus taking up and playing with the journalist's claim that the passengers in the UK will have to content themselves with Southampton and Portsmouth. The second letter writer (414) clearly continues this strategy, applying it to the line directly following the first quote and replacing 'Saginaw' with 'Wythenshawe'. While the intertextual allusion in the second letter is hinted at by the information added in brackets, it is missed if the reader cannot remember the first letter or recollect the context in which it was written. Such indirect reactions thus require not only inferential work but also contextual knowledge in order to be understood.

6.4.1.2 Direct quotes from previous letters

When discussing the contextualisation strategies used in letters reacting to the media product, quoting was identified as playing an important role not only in creating coherence but also in criticising the person quoted, i.e. the journalist (see 6.3.2 above). Interestingly, the similarities between the letters reacting to the media product and those reacting to another reader's contribution are quite astounding in this respect. In the former case, 18.8% of the letters were shown to contain a direct quote and in the latter this holds true for 12.2%, i.e. 26 of the 213 reactions to another reader quote that reader directly. What is more, in 69.2% of the cases, this quote is used to criticise the previous letter writer (compared to 60.4% in the case of quoting the journalist), as in (417).

> (417) Richard Ainsworth [LETTER WRITER] talks of the Red Tractor logo as a "symbol of superior British production standards" (Letters, 26 August). Has he overlooked the millions of chickens and pigs who live in squalid, overcrowded factory farms? […] [NEWS G07-062]

Examples like this one illustrate that in both types of letters, quotes are not only used to create coherence; their major purpose seems to be to criticise the person quoted. The move of quoting is well-suited for this purpose: by letting the journalists or readers reacted to speak for themselves, the letter writers (a) avoid being accused of having distorted the original claim, (b) are able to distance themselves from the people they criticise, and (c) may even show their anger or aversion. While the person quoted is usually named, he or she is not addressed directly.[411] This means that in the majority of cases, direct quotes are combined with the contextualisation strategy of using direct references to the initial letter writer (as in (417) above).

In sum, the majority of letters written in reaction to another reader's contribution use direct references to the letter or its author to guarantee or at least facilitate understanding (N=136, i.e. 63.8%). To these direct references quotations may be added, especially if the overall goal is to criticise the person reacted to. In 56 letters (26.3%), on the other hand, the only contextualisation clue provided is the information 'letter/s DATE' added in brackets, and another 21 letters (9.9%) do not even offer this much.

As hinted at above, which contextualisation strategy is chosen partly depends on the function of the letter. When criticising other readers, there is a strong tendency to use more explicit strategies or even quote the respective reader directly. In witty, humorous remarks, on the other hand, letter writers tend to avoid direct references as well as lengthy summaries – in short, they compromise on coherence in favour of wit and style. In those cases, greater knowledge is needed to understand the letter and 'get the joke', which suggests that such contributions are mainly aimed at regular followers of the letters page.[412]

6.4.1.3 Special case: strings of letters

Short and witty letters like the ones discussed above seem to be fairly popular with both readers and editors; they often trigger yet another letter in return, resulting in entire strings of letters, some of them being upheld over several weeks, both in the *Times* and in the *Guardian*. Even in the present corpus, which covers the readers' correspondence of only six successive weeks, five such strings counting four letters or more could be identified.[413]

[411] For a more detailed discussion of criticism directed at other readers and matters of addressivity see 7.3.4.2 below.

[412] Grouping letters to the editor, which was identified as a contextualisation strategy in letters reacting to the media product (see 6.3.1.3 above), plays only a negligible role in the letters reacting to other readers' letters, as it is fairly rare that two or more such letters are published in the same edition of the newspaper.

[413] Only the letters published during the time span covered by the present corpus are considered here; however, some strings already start before the time of corpus compilation or go on afterwards, which means that the number of strings active during the six weeks investigated is even higher. All in all, 81 of the 1,000 letters to the editor of the present corpus belong to strings.

The most productive one, the *museum-wordplay string*, consists of 22 different letters to the editor published in the *Guardian*; it is already active in the first week and upheld over more than four weeks. All letters follow a similar structure: they are extremely brief (most of them consisting only of one fairly short sentence), and on the surface level, the letter writer recounts a personal experience (see 7.4.1.1 below), i.e. that of visiting (or liking) a certain museum:

(418) I took a friend to the Ellesmere Port Boat Museum, and we rowed all afternoon. Never again (Letters, 18 August). [NEWS G06-043]

(419) We went to the Victoria and Albert Museum but we were not amused (Letters, 19 August). [NEWS G06-064]

(420) I'm fond of the Teddy Museum in Petersfield, but my husband can't bear it (Letters, 21 August). [NEWS G06-102]

(421) I recently made a tour of Germany's spa museums and sausage museums (Letters, 8 September), but the whole trip just went from bad to wurst. [NEWS G09-042]

The underlying function of recounting these experiences – be they fictitious or true – is of course to play with the name or type of museum by producing a pun (or two, as in the last example). If the letters are viewed in isolation, the pun might not even be noticed, which seems to be part of the appeal. As in the comments on the Greyhound bus discussed above, the in-joke is only detected or fully appreciated by regular followers of the letters page.

The same holds true for the string of letters providing feedback on the *Guardian*'s quick crossword.[414] In contrast to gamelan, i.e. the 'Asian orchestra' clue which led to complaints in the case of the *Times*, the crossword clue causing a stir on the *Guardian*'s letter page is 'Large dog (from Zambia or Zimbabwe?)' [NEWS G07-009]. As in the museum examples above, a series of in-jokes containing puns is triggered. Since their humorous potential can only be recognised and enjoyed by those who know about the serious complaints over the crossword clue, readers can be claimed to use them to construct an in-group (consisting of the regular, witty newspaper readers who have no troubles grasping intertextual allusions and who

[414] Interestingly, readers complain about the difficulty of the crosswords in both newspapers. In both cases, several letters are written on this issue, and while the first ones in each string are serious complaints, the letters written in response adopt a tongue-in-cheek perspective. The number of letters published on this and similar issues might be influenced by the fact that the present corpus was compiled in August and September, thus silly season: with Parliament in recess and other European governments and institutions on vacation, there might be a shortage of more serious news on which to comment.

appreciate subtle jokes) and to distance themselves from the out-group (comprising all those readers on whom the joke is lost).[415]

(422) Isn't it time your dogged quick crossword compiler got their canine teeth into a meatier theme before we all become barking mad? [NEWS G07-010]

(423) Please, let's not start hounding the crossword compilers. [NEWS G07-045]

As mentioned above, such humorous strings often have their origin in a serious letter to the editor. This is also the case in the *Latin-spellings string*, consisting of eight letters: it begins with a reader voicing his/her concern over David Cameron's language use (424), which is quickly followed by a number of witty remarks (see (425) and (426) below). In reaction to the letter writer's complaint that Cameron uses a wrong, or rather old-fashioned, plural form of a Latin borrowing ('premium'), the readers mockingly apply the original Latin inflectional morphology to well-established assimilated Latin loan words ('agenda') or use Latin terms where English ones are commonly used ('Littorae, passim' instead of 'Letters, passim', which is sometimes added in brackets to letters reacting to strings of letters in the *Guardian*).[416] Again, these humorous remarks can only be understood with enough background knowledge about the preceding debate on the correct plural of Latin words; readers unaware of this context inevitably fail to grasp the intertextual allusions and hence the letter writers' intentions.[417]

(424) Your correspondent is concerned at the increasing incidence of American spellings (G2, 17 August). I am more concerned at David Cameron's attempt to return to the Latin of his Eton days. You report (19 August) that he fears the risk of lenders demanding higher "premia". The plural is surely "premiums". [NEWS G06-061]

(425) Does the letters editor have a new agendum (Letters, 28 August)? [NEWS G07-110]

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[415] Matters of identity will be explored in greater detail in chapter 7 below.

[416] According to the *OED Online*, the word 'letter' is a borrowing from French, not Latin. For 'premium' it lists both 'premiums' and 'premia' as plural forms, and in the entry for 'agenda' it states "[o]riginally as collective plural; now always treated as singular" ("agenda, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 23 January 2017.). Interestingly, the fact that the letter writer in (426) plays with the information in brackets ('Letters, passim') suggests that these brackets may also be provided by the letter writer and need not necessarily be added by the editor (see 6.3.1.2 above).

[417] A comparison of (425) or (426) to (422) and (423) clearly shows that the information 'letters DATE' added in brackets offers only minimal help in understanding the letters written in reply. While the former examples, unlike the latter, contain such references to previous letters, they are still clearly indirect (see 6.4.1.1 above).

(426) Grauniad readers expect neither errata nor corrigenda (Littorae, passim). [NEWS G08-034][418]

Interestingly, such strings frequently contain meta-comments about the act of writing letters to the editor as well as humorous criticism directed both at the newspaper (see (425) and (426) above as well as (428) below) and at letter writers themselves (427).

(427) The Olive Oil Museum in Italy is, like the letters on this topic, virgin on the ridiculous (Letters, 23 August). [NEWS G07-029]

(428) We would commend the Plantin-Moretus Museum of Typography in Antwerp (Letters, 31 August), but perhaps you wouldn't print it in the Grauniad. [NEWS G08-050]

Again, these moves may be claimed to foster the in-group identity of close and regular followers of the letters page and allow letter writers to position themselves as witty critics, launching playful challenges or even attacks at the newspaper as well as their fellow letter writers, yet still capable of humorous self-criticism. By printing these contributions, the editors of the *Guardian* in turn intend to demonstrate their self-confidence and sense of humour.[419] That the prior discourse on the entire letters page sets the context for the interpretation of any new letter published is also nicely demonstrated by several humorous contributions in which the two separate strings of letters presented above (i.e. the *museum-wordplay string* and the *Latin-spellings string*) are merged:

(429) Should we now have a sign pointing to all the musea mentioned in your letters columns? [NEWS G07-047]

(430) If the correspondence on museums (or should that be musea?) isn't closed (Letters, 2 September), may I just warn people about the Walnut Museum in Bergerac, which is not all it's cracked to be. [NEWS G08-088]

Such letters clearly illustrate that some reader contributions require far greater knowledge of the prior discourse (which may cover a time span of several weeks) than it is the case in letters written in reaction to newspaper articles. However, since the number of letters published each day never exceeds ten, reading and remembering all of these comparatively short texts

[418] 'Grauniad' is a humorous, fairly common way of referring to the *Guardian*. This deliberately misspelled term was coined by the satirical magazine *Private Eye* based on the newspaper's reputation for containing numerous typographical errors when it was still printed in Manchester.

[419] How the two newspapers manage not only humorous but also serious criticism will be discussed in more detail below (see 7.3.4.1), with special attention given to the identity or image they strive to create for themselves.

is far more easily achieved than reading and remembering all newspaper articles.

In sum, indirect reactions to other reader contributions, i.e. letters in which the initial letter or letter writer is neither named nor referred to in the text, are far from uncommon in the corpus of letters to the editor. These short replies usually consist of witty, humorous remarks which can only be grasped and fully appreciated by those readers able to recognise the veiled intertextual allusions. Since this requires being a regular follower of the letters page, it can be argued that such humorous indirect reactions, which may result in entire strings of letters, are used to create an in-group consisting of regular, attentive and sharp-witted newspaper readers.

It is particularly surprising, however, especially considering the differences between the communicative situations in the two genres, that the number of indirect reactions is far greater in the letters (N=77) than the comments, where only 16 such contributions could be found, as will be discussed in the following.

6.4.2 Contextualisation in comments reacting to comments

As argued above, contextualisation work in newspapers is partly performed by the editors (e.g. grouping letters or adding information in brackets); since these are not present in comment sections, online readers have to rely on the cues provided by other users. As the discussion of the contextualisation strategies found in reactions to the media product has shown (see 6.3.1 above), comments tend to be more indirect than letters because the design of the comment section makes it unnecessary to identify the article referred to. The general default assumption seems to be that any comment posted below an article constitutes a reaction to that particular article; direct references to the article or journalist are only used in evaluations but not for contextualising purposes (and even in evaluative moves, direct references are not obligatory, as the examples above have shown). However, this entails that if a comment is not intended as a reaction to the journalist or article but another user, this deviation from the default pattern needs to be signalled with the help of clear cues. Especially if large numbers of readers have already contributed to the thread of comments, the ties between individual contributions need to be made visible in order not to be lost. This explains the infrequency of indirect reactions, which will, nevertheless, be considered briefly in the following section.

6.4.2.1 Indirect reactions

If the thread is not very lively and the comment is written in reaction to a fairly recent comment, indirect reactions are fairly easy to interpret, as illustrated by (432) below. In the comment thread on an article reporting the theft of tropical birds from the Natural History Museum in Tring, Hertfordshire, the discussion quickly moves away from this particular incident to the management and purpose of museums in general. As signalled by the word 'actually', the information about the opening days of a certain museum provided by the user in (432) clearly constitutes a reply to the complaint ('Would you believe …') voiced in (431). The proximity of the two comments (with only one comment in between) allows the readers to figure out this connection even in the absence of more precise contextualisation cues.[420]

(431) I've never even heard of this Tring museum. About time the tax paying public were better informed and given access to all these stores held in our name.
Would you believe there is a huge science museum airfield in Wiltshire which is open only a few days a year?
Preservation - yes, but for whom? [CMC T06-001 c2]

(432) The Science Musuem site in Wiltshire is actually open on the 12th and 13 September - see www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/wroughton for info [CMC T06-001 c4]

However, as soon as more comments are posted to a thread, it becomes far more difficult to trace such reactions back to their trigger. Example (434) below, for instance, can only be understood as a reply to the question asked in the comment reproduced as (433) because it follows directly. If it had been posted at a later point in time, with several comments separating the initiation from the follow-up, it probably would not have been understandable anymore.

(433) [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE] *I walk for at least four hours, or swim or mountain bike for two.* [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE]
Do you do any work? It appears to be a well-paid gig being a Grauniad writer if half the time is spent doing something else. I am, of course, jealous. [CMC G09-008 c2]

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[420] The use of 'actually' in (432) makes the reaction sound like a disagreement or correction (cf. the third entry in the *Macmillan Dictionary Online*: "used when correcting what someone has said or thinks, or what you yourself have said"; http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/actually; last accessed March 13, 2017.). The information provided, however, seems to support the initial claim (i.e. that the museum 'is open only a few days a year'). Since these comments were posted in August, i.e. some weeks prior to the rare opening days of the museum, the function of the second comment can also be understood as advertising, the adverb 'actually' emphasising the user's surprise (which would also explain why a link to the website of the museum is provided).

(434) ^this. [CMC G09-008 c3]

Yet even given this proximity, it requires considerable inferential work to understand that the user producing the extremely brief comment '^this' probably intended to answer the user's question addressed to the journalist ('Do you do any work?') by pointing – using both the deictic expression *this* and the caret grapheme or circumflex diacritic to represent an arrow pointing upwards ('^') – to the work the journalist does, i.e. his article above the line.

The two examples discussed above have served to illustrate how weak the ties between individual comments can be and how easily they can be overlooked.[421] This certainly explains why, in the clear majority of cases (i.e. 91.1%), readers reacting to previous comments actively signal such links with the help of a set of strategies to be presented and discussed below. All in all, only 16 of the 180 comments written in reaction to another user's comment are as indirect as the examples above.

6.4.2.2 Direct reactions: direct addresses

The strategy used most often to signal how the current comment ties in with the previous discourse is to address a previous comment writer directly, as done in 143 (i.e. 79.4%) of the comments reacting to another reader's contribution. The term *direct address* as used here is based on the discussion of the concept provided by Chandler and Munday (2011: 104), who define *direct address* as "[c]ommunication that is explicitly indicated as being targeted at a current listener, reader, or viewer as an individual". As they point out, in face-to-face interaction, direct addresses may be signified by gestures, eye contact, the personal pronoun *you* or the addressee's name (cf. 2011: 104). This means that utterances containing neither second person pronouns nor vocatives, such as general questions (e.g. 'Is it raining outside?') or even general statements (e.g. 'Unemployment is a huge problem in Europe') can also be used as direct addresses if the speaker clearly identifies the intended addressee via gesture, gaze or posture. In online comments, however, such kinesic means are not available (see 4.3.5.3), and even the second person pronoun *you* is not enough to identify the individual addressed in this multi-party interaction. Comment writers thus have two choices: either they use vocatives, i.e. they add the user's name as a call or address (cf. Schegloff 1968 and Zwicky 1974), or they quote from the

[421] It is impossible to say how many readers interpreted the comment in (434) as a reply to the preceding comment. The fact that the comment was recommended five times suggests that it was at least understood by some, even if the two preceding ones were recommended far more often (62 and 52 times respectively).

comment reacted to and thus frame their reply as the second part of an adjacency pair.[422] The first strategy is used in 117 comments, i.e. 65.0% of the comments reacting to a prior comment, and the second in 69, i.e. 38.3%. Combinations are also possible, which is why the percentages do not add up to 100.[423]

6.4.2.2.1 Vocative

The fairly long comment reproduced in abbreviated form in (435) below is clearly addressed to a particular user, as suggested by the imperative structure ('calm down') in the opening move and the repeated use of the second person pronoun *you* in the remainder of the comment; in order to specify who this user is, the user's name ('cspage') is added to the very first sentence. In this example, the vocative is used to identify the user reacted to, but addressivity is also signalled by other means, i.e. even without the vocative, the comment is clearly dialogic in nature. In contrast, the vocative use of a user's nickname may also be the sole or at least main indicator that a comment is written in response to another one, since users may also be addressed in comments that contain neither second person pronouns nor imperative structures, as in (436) and (437). In the former, the commenter provides an answer to a question posed by the user *IanKemmish*, and in the latter, the commenter attacks another user who started his comment by saying that he has 'always been amazed how lawyers can earn so much money' [CMC T09-020 c5].

(435) Calm down, cspage [USER]. No-one is accusing A level students as a group as being dumb. […] Doesn't that strike you as unfair - to you? [CMC G06-011-12 c14]

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[422] As the vocative is the only way to signal which reader out of the potentially very large group of readers having contributed recently is addressed, the distinction between *calls*, which are "designed to catch the addressee's attention" and *addresses*, used to "maintain or emphasize the contact between speaker and addressee" (Zwicky 1974: 787), is irrelevant in the present data in the majority of cases. Any first use of the addressee's name as a vocative always has the function of a call, and only if it is repeated (as in (582) to be discussed below) could it also be considered an address.

[423] It is important to stress at this stage that the concept of *direct address* used in the present analysis entails that comments with markers of addressivity (e.g. *you* or imperative structures) may not count as direct addresses (e.g. when addressed not at individuals but readers or people in general) while comments without any such markers may well constitute direct addresses (see examples below). This clearly demonstrates that when analysing such complex interactional features, the fairly labour-intensive manual coding process used in the present analysis is a true asset: not only does it guarantee that all instances of generic *you* and all cases in which people or readers in general are addressed (e.g. by saying 'Did you know that …') are excluded here, it also makes it possible to spot direct addresses that are only marked by quoting or the vocative use of a user's name.

(436) IanKemmish [USER], some teachers have already been told that any work they do out of school/college is the property of their employers. […] [CMC G08-094 c9]

(437) […] What needs to stop, Mr David Speight [USER], are sweeping generalisations of what lawyers earn based upon little knowledge and an apparent personal dislike of the profession. [CMC T09-020 c7]

In both cases, the connections between the respective pairs of comments and their dialogic nature would be far less obvious (or possibly even left unnoticed) had the vocatives not been added.[424] Including the vocative thus serves the important function of signalling addressivity and hence framing the contribution as the reaction to someone else's comment.

Although the vocative may also be integrated into the first sentence (435) or even appear only towards the end of the comment (437), its most salient and therefore also most typical position is at the very beginning of the comment (436); when in front position, it may even be separated from the remainder of the comment by a line break, as (438) and (439) below illustrate. In CMC, the convention of indicating the intended addressee by opening one's message with the addressee's username (followed by a colon) originated in IRC (Internet Relay Chat), where "such a high degree of addressivity is imperative […], since the addressee's attention must be captured anew with each utterance" (Werry 1996: 52). Online comments are far from being as fast-paced as that type of quasi-synchronous interaction, yet the number of people interacting may be substantially larger, which explains why addressivity is signalled in a similar fashion.

In order to make the address signal even more easily discernible, both for the particular user addressed as well as all other readers, the @ sign is sometimes added to the respective username in the present corpus (35 occurrences), especially if more than one user is addressed within the same comment (439).

(438) @exiledinrotherham [USER]
absolutely spot on […] [CMC G06-046 c18]

(439) @MartynInEurope [USER]
Good point, hiding money is Tax Evasion.
@BoredwithLabour [USER]

[424] Example (437) nicely illustrates the use of format tying (cf. Muntigl and Turnbull 1998) on the level of syntax and information structure: the pseudo-cleft structure 'What needs to stop …' takes up the last sentence of the comment reacted to: 'We are been [sic] taken to the cleaners by the legal profession and it needs to stop.' [CMC T09-020 c5]. However, this kind of tie is far more subtle than the use of the vocative and might not be noticed in the absence of more obvious signals of responsiveness.

If your friends in the US work in the UK and are considered […] [CMC G07-067 c10]

This marker of addressivity has its origin in discussion forums but is probably best known for its more recent use in Twitter. Just like in IRC, on these multi-participant, public and fairly noisy CMC platforms, adjacency pairs are fairly often disrupted, thus making coherence particularly problematic (cf. Honeycutt and Herring 2009). Since the convention of adding the addressee's name "compensates for the weakened link between sender and receiver" (Werry 1996: 52), it is hardly surprising that it has been adopted in (and partly adapted to) other forms of CMC as well. In the comments of the present corpus, the use of @ is not particularly widespread yet (only 35 occurrences in 117 comments containing vocatives), but it is certainly a well-known convention.[425]

6.4.2.2.2 Direct quotes from previous comments

Quoting other users (78 occurrences in 69 comments) can also be considered a strategy to signal that the comment constitutes a direct reaction to another user's contribution. The quote may be used in combination with a direct address, as in (440), where a vocative ('@ Absolutes') and the second person pronoun *you* are used to address the user directly before an answer to his/her (rhetorical) question is provided. Yet the quote can also stand on its own, as in (441), where it is only accompanied by a pithy, ironic remark. In both cases, the quote is used to open the comment and to present the argument commented on, thus allowing the commenters to use deictic expressions (*that* and *they* referring back to the quotation, i.e. the prior discourse, in (440) below) and elliptical constructions ('Must be …' in (441) below) which could not be interpreted otherwise.

(440) @ Absolutes [USER]
[QUOTE] What's wrong with the rich paying for preferential treatment - this doesn't mean that everyone elses service has to suffer [QUOTE]
I'll tell you exactly what's wrong with that - they get **preferential treatment**. Does this mean that the rich person's need is greater than the poor person? No. Does this mean that the rich person will get a service which bumps the poor person out of the way? Yes.
There is **everything** wrong with the rich paying for preferential treatment. This is what creates a rich/poor divide. This is what creates the haves and the

[425] While the @ sign is used as a marker of addressivity in 90.96% of the tweets analysed by Honeycutt and Herring (2009), in 5.43% of the uses its function is that of referring to (but not addressing) another user. In the present data, only two such instances could be found (e.g. '[…] Our weakness as @Yong Choi implies is in consumerism. We enslave ourselves […]' [CMC T11-013 c14]). Since both of them are located in the same thread, it can be assumed that this function is as rare in below-the-line comments as it is in tweets.

have nots. The very notion that there is nothing wrong with this is utterly contemptable. [CMC G07-115-17 c17]

(441) [QUOTE] "Teachers don't live that long after retirement as we've been worn out." [QUOTE]
Must be all those holidays and 3:30pm finishes. Simply exhausting. [CMC T07-055 c17]

What the two comments above also share is that the quote is not merely used to contextualise the reply but rather to criticise the person quoted. In the first case, the user not only argues against the quoted user's implicit claim ('What's wrong with …' being understood as 'Nothing's wrong with …') by asking and immediately answering several questions him/herself but also judges the user's opinion (and by extension the user) explicitly ('The very notion […] is utterly contemptable [sic]'). In the second case, the criticism is expressed via ridicule: the user mocks the quoted user's argument and in doing so shows disrespect for teachers, i.e. the profession the quoted user identifies as belonging to by using the first person plural pronoun *we*.

However, criticism is not the most important function of quotes from other users' posts: only in 30 of the 78 occurrences (i.e. 38.5%) is the quote used to criticise and attack the author of the comment quoted. In the remaining 61.5% of the occurrences, the predominant function seems to be to contextualise the reply, which may be used to express agreement or even praise (as in (442) to (444) below), to contribute to the debate by offering explanations (as in (445) and (447) below) or to answer a (rhetorical) question posed by a previous user and thus advance the discussion of the topic (as in (445) and (446) below).

(442) [...] [QUOTE FROM OTHER USER OMITTED]
Nothing to say but hear, hear! [...] [CMC G07-115-17 c16]

(443) […] [QUOTE FROM EDMUNDBERK OMITTED]
Well spotted Edmunberk [USER] […] [CMC G09-033-37 c8]

(444) **Deathbymaumau** [USER] [QUOTE FROM DEATHBYMAUMAU OMITTED]
Brilliant! [CMC G09-061-62 c16]

(445) IANMIDDX [USER]
11 Sep 09, 8:21am (4 minutes ago)
[QUOTE] How have we come to this when at one point one breadwinner was enough for most households ? [QUOTE]
Personally I think it started in the 80's and no this isn't an attack on Maggie.
The cause is that couples realised they could buy much better houses if […]
[CMC G10-001-04 c13]

(446) [QUOTE] I prefer the term Grief Porn.Who reads this stuff? [QUOTE]
A lot of people.
The memoirs and 'true stories' section of the bookstore can be bizarre [...] [CMC G06-060 c13]

(447) [QUOTE] **I haven't seen a similar tax law in the UK. So I don't understand the UK interest in getting these 'tax havens' to share details of savers.** [QUOTE]
It serves several purposes:
If you come into large sums of money that are [...] [CMC G07-067 c4]

As in the contextualising quotes discussed above, the quotes usually open the comment and indicate what part of the prior discourse triggered the reply. Imitating the dialogic structure of adjacency pairs in this way not only saves the users the effort of summarising the argument or question reacted to but even allows them to use elliptical structures (e.g. 'Brilliant!', 'A lot of people.') or pronouns without antecedent (e.g. *it* in (445) and (447) above) – features both common and easily interpretable in spoken interaction. As the examples above show, the tone in such comments is anything but critical or hostile, and the quotes are used to contribute to the joint discussion rather than attack other users.

This finding is highly intriguing as it reveals a remarkable genre-internal consistency: in the majority of letters, quotes are used to criticise the person quoted, be it the journalist (60.4% of the letters quoting the journalist are critical) or another letter writer (69.2% of the letters quoting other letters are critical). In the majority of the comments, however, this criticising function is absent. Only in 38.3% of the cases in which the journalists are quoted are they also criticised – the figures for quoting and criticising other users being very similar (i.e. 38.5%).

However, it needs to be stressed that the figures above reveal trends and tendencies instead of clear-cut, black-and-white differences. Of course, there are also some letter writers who quote other letter writers simply to provide an answer to their question (448), just as some commenters use multiple quotes to dismantle another commenter's argument piece by piece, severely criticising him/her in the process (449).

(448) "What great discovery has ever come from a solitary life in the countryside" (Letters, 28 August)? How about Edward Jenner's discovery of cowpox as […] [NEWS G07-105]

(449) As expected, this story has brought out the paranoic fantasists:
[QUOTE] Do we really want to be on their fascist database for the privilege of transporting our children's friends around? [QUOTE]
You wont be, informal arrangements between parents arent covered.
[QUOTE] Will we need a CRB check to take our children to school? [QUOTE]
No, again your paranoia has got in front of you.

> [QUOTE] And if we decide to educate our children at home, will the government want to inspect our homes? [QUOTE]
> Yet again, no, there is nothing in this to cover entry into anyones homes. On a sidepoint, if you really think this is fascist you dont know what your talking about. [CMC G10-023-25 c 7]

Such examples do not undermine the general argument: quoting others can have numerous functions. While all of them are present in all types of reader response, the two genres clearly differ irrespective of the type of contribution, i.e. whether the quote is taken from the newspaper article or another reader's contribution. In addition to these functional differences, the use of quoting also differs between the two genres on the formal level – again, irrespective of the source of the quote. While those in the letters follow the basic rules for quoting in written texts, those in the comments are predominantly used to mimic the dialogic structure of spoken interaction. This is also mirrored in the length of the quotes: since the direct quotes in the letters are usually woven into the texture of the follow-up, they tend to be fairly short (8.3 words on average when quoting the journalist and 7.3 words when quoting another reader). In the majority of comments, in contrast, the quotes are not integrated into the follow-up on the syntactic level but used to represent speaker turns; thus, they can be far longer (23.6 words on average when quoting the journalist and 21.3 words when quoting another commenter).

In terms of frequency, on the other hand, the difference between the genres depends on the type of follow-up: 18.8% of the letters and 11.6% of the comments written in reaction to the journalistic product quote the journalist; of the letters replying to a previous letter, 12.2% use quotes. While these figures are fairly similar, the comments responding to a previous comment stand out, with 38.3% containing a quote.[426] This finding suggests that even if comments are not as interactive as might be expected, quotes fulfil the important function of signalling responsiveness when used in online debates with other users.

6.4.2.3 Direct reactions: talking about others

The last type of direct reaction to be discussed here briefly is that of talking about, i.e. naming, but not addressing, others. This strategy is related to

[426] As was the case when quoting the journalist (see 6.3.2.2 above), there is a remarkable difference between the *Guardian* website and that of the *Times*: on the former, 42.9% of the comments written in reaction to a previous comment contain a quote, while on the latter this is only the case in 29.5%. As touched upon above, the higher overall frequency of quotes in the comment sections of the *Guardian* might be related to the existence of the fairly convenient quote function and the fact that comment writers imitate each other's strategies.

using direct references to the letter or letter writer as discussed above (see 6.4.1.1); yet while in the letters, such references are usually used to open the follow-up and combined with a summary of the main argument of the letter reacted to, this need not be the case in the comments. Such references (and even the entire comment) can be fairly short and simply express agreement (450), and the reference to another commenter can also be found at the end or in the middle of the comment (as in (451) and (452) respectively).

(450) David Porter [USER] has said it all! [CMC T11-067 c6]

(451) […] In this age where a lot of parents are not being responsible for their children, perhaps Max Martins [USER] comment is the way forward! [CMC T10-055 c10]

(452) […] How the heck are we going to encourage new music/musicians when all they have is myspace and a public attitude like that of Mr. Manifold [USER]? […] [CMC T10-039 c5]

As these examples clearly show, considerable knowledge of the comment referred to in this manner is required in order to understand the reply. This knowledge needs to include not only what was said but also who said it. In (452), for instance, the attitude of the user referred to as 'Mr Manifold' is not described any further, which means that the readers need to figure out, first of all, that this is a reference to another user's comment and that this user is the one with the username 'Austin Manifold' before they can try to remember what the said user wrote and what his attitude could be. The strategy of referring to other users in the comments is thus more similar to the use of such references in multi-party debates than it is to references in letters to the editor, and it requires far more inferential work than the use of direct quotes. This may be one reason why such references to other users are fairly rare (only 18 occurrences in total); they seem to be more typical of the *Times* than the *Guardian* (12 vs. 6 occurrences).

All in all, the ties between the contributors are slightly stronger on the *Guardian* website, where the user reacted to is usually quoted or addressed directly and where the percentage of user contributions written in reaction to other contributors is also slightly higher overall (19.8% vs. 15.3% in the *Times*).

6.4.3 Assumptions revisited

As discussed above, letters to the editor are commonly conceived of as a means to 'talk back' to the media while comment sections on newspaper websites invite readers to 'join the discussion', presenting themselves as forums for interactive debates. On this basis, two assumptions to be tested were formulated above: (1) whereas letters to the editor are more likely to constitute a reaction to the media product, online comments are more likely to constitute a reaction to another reader's contribution. (2) Owing to the differences in the communicative situation, more explicit contextualisation strategies are used in letters to the editor than in online comments.

Both of these intuitive assumptions turned out to be mistaken or at least considerably flawed. As regards the first one, the analysis revealed the number of contributions following up on another reader's contribution to be greater in the corpus of letters than in that of comments. Since this is a fairly unexpected finding, possible reasons will be offered and discussed in a separate chapter below (see 6.4.4). The second assumption can be argued to be at least partly correct: all in all, explicit contextualisation strategies were found to play a greater role in the letters than in the comments. Nonetheless, two interesting findings came to light: first, while the ties between initiation and follow-up are far stronger in letters than comments when the reader's contribution constitutes a follow-up to the journalistic product, these ties tend to be lacking in witty, humorous letters written in reaction to previous letters, leading to a number of contributions that can only be understood and appreciated by regular followers of the letters page. Second, if commenters decide to post a reply to a previous comment, they usually signal this deviation from the norm by either addressing or quoting the previous commenter, thus adapting the structure of face-to-face debates to the communicative conditions of the comment section. This finding suggests that comment sections can indeed be used for interactive debate. The only question remaining is why they are not put to such use more often.

6.4.4 Interactivity hampered by the system?

The analysis above has shown that in the present data, the potential for increased reader-to-reader interaction offered by the affordances of the communicative situation in comment sections is far from being fully exploited. Although users are invited to 'join the debate', i.e. to enter a lively, interactive discussion, only 18% of the comments analysed show any signs of interactivity or contain indicators that what other users have contributed has been taken into consideration. The clear majority of user comments are responses to the media product, i.e. follow-ups initiated by the article below which they are posted rather than replies to other comments.

This finding is all the more surprising when compared to the interactional patterns found in the letters: even if the majority constitute a response to a newspaper article, the number of readers taking up and replying to another reader's contribution is still slightly higher in the corpus of letters than in the corpus of comments (i.e. 21% as opposed to 18%), although trigger and reply are separated in both space and time in the former but not necessarily in the latter.

Several possible reasons for this finding come to mind; yet while some seem more obvious or plausible than others, it is difficult to tell which are more probable. Critics might say, for instance, that the present study has fallen victim to methodological issues, arguing that inappropriate data has been chosen for analysis. After all, each letter published was chosen by the editors, who might favour letters reacting to previous ones over those reacting to the journalistic product to some extent, which would mean that the percentage of interactive letters *published* surpasses that of those *written*. Moreover, critics might contend that interactivity needs time to develop and that interactional patterns can only be analysed and compared if comment threads are considered in their entirety.

As the above has shown, these are limitations that have been recognised and considered carefully. Of course, only the editors know the difference between the reader responses they receive and those they publish; therefore, studies can only investigate the latter but not the former. Yet as long as this is made clear from the beginning, as has been done in the present analysis (see 4.2.2.2 and 4.4 above), this should not pose a problem. As regards the second objection raised above, it needs to be admitted that interactivity might increase once the thread is longer and the number of comments a user could react to is larger. However, one could also claim that the longer the thread, the less likely it is that users read not only the newspaper article but also every single comment posted in reply before adding their own one. It might indeed be the case that true dialogues evolve only after the twentieth comment, but the more comments there are, the more difficult it becomes for users to keep track of such interactive exchanges, as other comments are likely to intervene and thus blur the intertextual links. While it would certainly have been interesting to consider entire comment threads, this would have meant reducing the number of threads. However, the choice of thread greatly influences the findings, and limiting their number goes hand in hand with limiting generalisability. In order to be able to describe the generic features of online comments and to compare this genre to that of letters to the editor, it was considered far better to study the first twenty comments of 63 different, randomly chosen threads than to limit the analysis to a case study of a few selected threads.[427]

[427] Analysing the 63 threads in their entirety would have been beyond the scope of the present thesis. The alternative approach, i.e. selecting comments from the middle of each thread, was considered carefully; however, this idea needed to be abandoned. Especially on the *Times* website, many threads did not even count the required 20 comments (which is why the total number of threads analysed amounts to 63 instead of 50). Moreover, if only longer threads had been chosen and comments had been selected from the middle, all preceding comments would

Instead of guessing what could have been found if different data had been used, it certainly makes more sense to try to account for the findings on the basis of the empirical evidence gathered. The analysis of the contextualisation strategies above has shown that in the comments, the default assumption seems to be that the post constitutes a comment on the article above the line, since explicit contextualisation strategies are mainly used when this is not the case. It has also been shown that for indirect comments to be understood, they need to be fairly close to the trigger comment. In the letters to the editor, on the other hand, numerous indirect replies were found even though they are always separated from the trigger. The reasons offered for this intriguing difference was, on the one hand, that such indirect letters are easier to interpret than indirect comments because the number of letters published every day is extremely limited, thus making it easier to read and remember all of them. On the other hand, such indirect replies were considered as being used to create an in-group consisting of regular followers of the letters page and to distance that group from the out-group lacking the contextual knowledge required to understand such humorous indirect reactions.

When considered in combination, these observations seem to offer a reasonable and convincing account of the behaviour in the online comments: comment sections are far more noisy and fast-paced than letters pages. Not only are there substantially more comments to read, the users who contribute actively most probably do so on a more regular basis than readers who write letters to the editor. If it takes less time and less effort to write a comment than it does to write a letter to the editor, it could also be the case that users having contributed to the debate in the form of a comment are less likely to follow the unfolding debate as closely as those who have written a letter (or would have liked to write one but did not find the time). Yet even those comment writers who do not simply want to put in their two cents and then move on to the next topic face the problem that the sheer wealth of comments available necessarily hampers any evolving debate. They might scan through some comments and find an interesting one to which they would like to react, but if they are not fast enough, dozens or even hundreds of comments might have been posted in the meantime. Their reply would thus be separated from its trigger, and the chances that the initial comment writer finds the reply addressed to him/her in the stream of comments (or that other readers perceive initiation and follow-up as being related) would diminish with every new contribution added to the thread. It is thus pre-

have had to be read carefully as well in order to be able to detect indirect references to them in those comments included in the analysis. Selecting comments from the beginning of the threads was thus considered the most workable as well as the most reliable method.

cisely the factors promising to make the debate more interactive (i.e. less editorial control, faster response, open to more people) that end up limiting the interaction and thus hamper the debate.

This problem has of course also been recognised by the media producers. At the end of 2012, the *Guardian* restructured its comments section, allowing commenters to choose whether they want to post their reply below the article itself or directly below another user's comment, in which case the reply is indented. Instead of creating one long string of successive comments displayed in chronological order, this creates a major trunk of comments with several branches extending from it, thus making it easier for users to establish coherence and keep track of the comments written in reaction to their own contributions.[428] The use of this so-called *nesting system*, where replies to other users are grouped together, is illustrated by Figure 21 below, taken from the comment thread below an article in which the reader's editor Chris Elliott defends the changes to the comment section after they were greeted by a general outcry of indignation (cf. Elliott 2012).

Yet before throwing light on why many users objected to the new system, a comparison of the new structure to the way the comments were arranged when the present corpus was compiled will reveal that the findings of the present analysis are directly related to the novelties of the nesting system.

The first striking fact is that Elliott (2012: n.p.), when highlighting the benefit of the new architecture, uses the term *conversations*: "[r]eplies between posters are grouped together or 'nested' in the stream of comments, so they can be read in one place and users can navigate conversations more easily". This indicates not only that conversations between users are desired but also that they are difficult to follow if comments are simply displayed in chronological order, as was suggested above.

The screenshot below (see Figure 21) clearly shows that the nesting system indeed allows conversations to evolve, as the first two comments (posted by the users *AlunEvans57* and *duramater*) are each met with replies by another user (*StevHep* and *errrrr* respectively), to which the original commenters again react in the subsequent comment of the respective conversation.[429]

[428] However, the new system only provides one level of indentation, i.e. replies to a reply are added in a linear fashion to the branch extending from the major trunk of comments.

[429] In Figure 21 above, the threads are *collapsed*, i.e. only the first few reactions to each comment are displayed. If this option is chosen, readers are informed about how many more comments could be made visible by selecting the *Threads Expanded* option ('+Show 157 more replies').

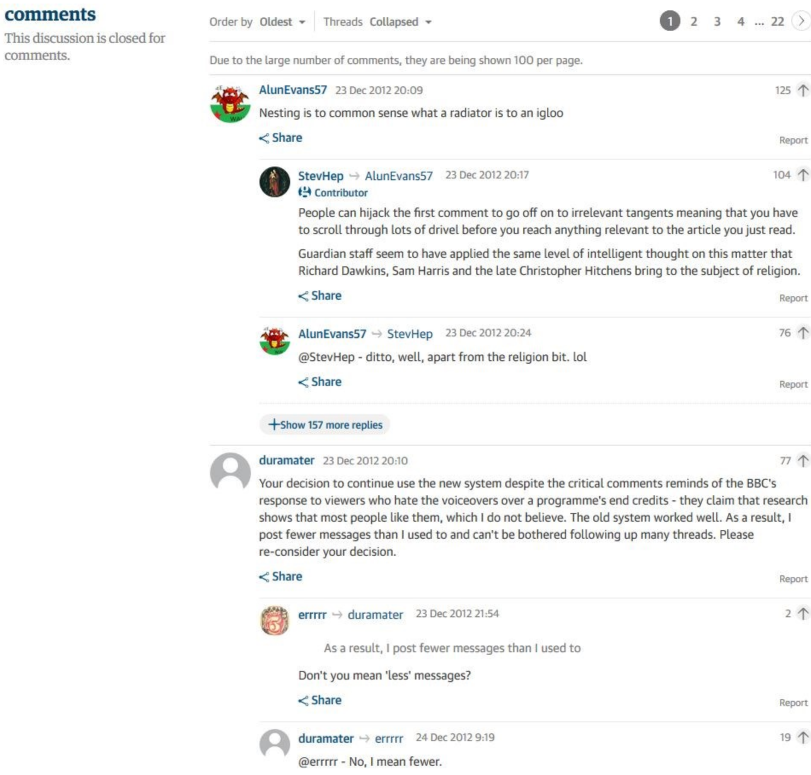

Figure 21 *Guardian* comment thread illustrating the nesting system

To illustrate the difference between this new nested structure and the unthreaded version, i.e. the structure analysed in the present study, Figure 22 below shows the same thread as displayed in Figure 21 above, yet in this case the option *Threads Unthreaded* was selected, i.e. the comments are simply arranged in chronological order.[430]

When these two ways of displaying user comments are compared, it soon becomes clear that in the unthreaded version, the two conversations commented on above are easily lost in the stream of comments. The first conversation (between *AlunEvans57* and *StevHep*) could possibly still be recognised as such by some users, as the comments written in reaction to

[430] At the time the thread was active, i.e. open for comments, this option did not exist yet, i.e. the comments were displayed in the threaded version with expanded threads to all users.

the first contribution are comments number 11 and 20 and thus displayed on the same page.[431]

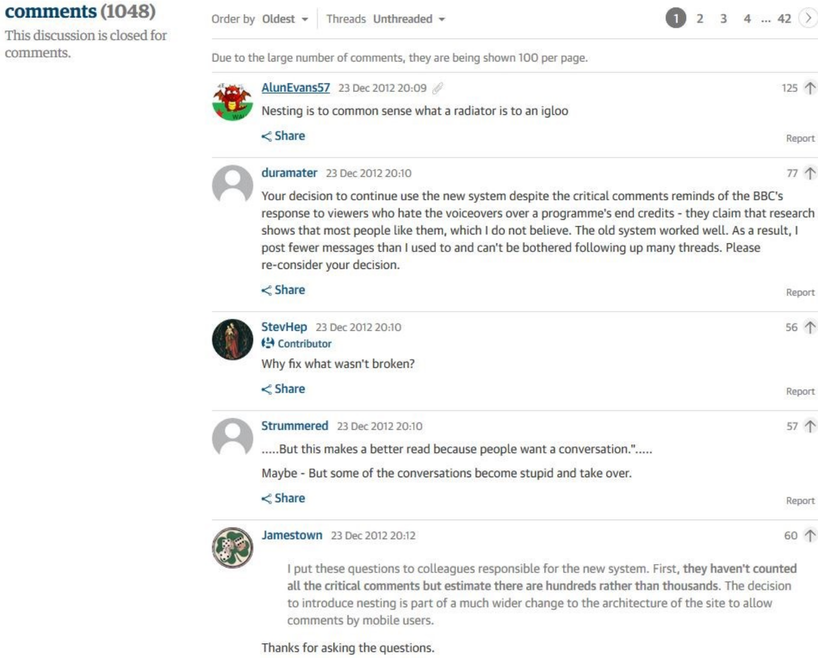

Figure 22 *Guardian* comment thread with unthreaded comments

The second conversation, however, is disrupted by numerous intervening comments. *Errrrr*'s reaction to *duramater*'s first comment (number 2 overall) is comment number 151 overall, and *duramater*'s reply is number 396 in a thread of 1048 comments displayed on 42 different pages, all posted within three days.[432] It is highly unlikely that *durameter* would have replied to *errrrr*'s comment at all, had the comments been displayed in the unthreaded layout. Even if he/she had spotted the comment, he/she might have considered the follow-up to be too far away from its initiation to be understood. This shows clearly that the new system constitutes an attempt to

[431] Usually only 25 comments are displayed on a single page. If more comments are posted, users have to navigate between pages to read all the comments.
[432] Despite the notification that "[d]ue to the large number of comments, they are being shown 100 per page" (see Figures above), only 25 are shown per page.

overcome some of the obstacles to interactivity identified in the analysis above.[433]

Yet despite the obvious advantages of the nesting system illustrated above, it was met with numerous complaints, as a glance at the comments included in Figure 21 and Figure 22 reveals. Among the many reasons discussed in the thread above (and elsewhere), the three following ones are named most often. First, if conversations between users are encouraged, as done by the nesting system, interesting comments addressed to the article will be lost in the flood of the so-called *conversations* that are likely to drift off topic sooner or later. Second, in order to see their comment displayed on the first page of the comment section instead of added to the end of the thread, users may develop the habit of placing their contribution as a reply to the very first comment, irrespective of whether it constitutes a true reply. In the comment by *StevHep* below, both concerns are expressed:

(453) People can hijack the first comment to go off on to irrelevant tangents meaning that you have to scroll through lots of drivel before you reach anything relevant to the article you just read […] [see Figure 21 above][434]

Third, the new structure makes it impossible to follow the discussion while it is still evolving: as new comments may be added constantly to any of the nested *conversations* on any of the comment pages instead of being located together at the end of the thread, they are very hard to find. To check whether new comments have been added, users are required to return to the individual *conversations*, which is complicated by the fact that these move pages if too many comments are added to one of the preceding *conversations*.

In the end, the *Guardian* back-paddled and decided against overhauling the architecture of the comment section completely. Instead, it opted for offering the choice between viewing the comments with *collapsed* or *expanded threads* (i.e. only the first few replies or all replies) or completely *unthreaded*, i.e. the way the comments were arranged when the present corpus was compiled.[435] While it is beyond the scope of the present analysis

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433 Interestingly, Figure 21 above reveals that even though coherence is automatically established via physical proximity, the users *AlunEvans57*, *errrrr* and *duramater* employ the contextualisation strategies discussed above (i.e. vocatives and quoting).

434 As if to illustrate the problem raised, this comment is posted as a reply to the very first comment. While similar complaints are voiced in both comments, this constitutes their only link. As a matter of fact, the user even appeals to other users to "place at least one comment in reply to this first comment to make the point" in a further reply to this first comment. His/her plea was not ignored: all in all, the first conversation consists of 160 comments (see Figure 21 above).

435 The user community was to some extent involved in this decision: first trials already started in February 2012 (cf. Belam 2012), and users were asked for their opinion in several comment

to discuss how this decision was received and how the comment section evolved afterwards, the changes in the system described above and the reactions provoked not only indicate that the data of the present study are an important and illuminating precursor to the current state of affairs but also that user preferences and usage habits differ considerably.[436]

Before moving on to the last category of letters to the editor to be discussed, i.e. self-initiated ones, a short remark about technological changes is in order. The steep increase in the use of hand-held devices (e.g. smartphones or tablets) to access newspaper websites has certainly acted as a catalyst in the development of comment sections as readers can now use these platforms to kill time while waiting or commuting. The first iPhone having been released only two years prior to the time of data collection, the majority of users studied in the present analysis probably typed their comment with the help of a keyboard, sitting in front of a computer screen. This important difference of course needs to be kept in mind if the goal is to portray and discuss the development of comment sections over the years. Yet whether new usage habits provoked by technological changes have already led (or will lead) to a true increase in interactivity, only time – and further research – will tell.

6.5 Special case: self-initiated letters to the editor

For the sake of completeness, one final category needs to be addressed briefly: self-initiated letters to the editor. As argued above, 83 of the letters of the present corpus (48 in the *Guardian* and 35 in the *Times*) are neither written in reaction to a particular newspaper article nor as a reply to another reader's letter. This means that in both sub-corpora, approximately 8% of the letters do not constitute follow-ups in the strict sense of the term, as there is no particular "prior communicative act" that "is accepted, challenged, or otherwise negotiated" (Fetzer et al. 2012: 4). However, the majority of these letters are still follow-ups in the wider sense of the term,

threads. In the beginning, switchable modes were not considered an option as it was feared that commenters using the threaded version would no longer feel the need to signal responsiveness (e.g. by using quotes or vocatives) and would thus create numerous comments that would be meaningless for all those users choosing to view them in the unthreaded way. However, the continuing strong protest against the new system seems to have convinced the *Guardian* to take this risk.

[436] The fact that the *Times* introduced a paywall to its online presence in June 2010 is partly responsible for the focus on the *Guardian* in the present chapter. While it is unfortunate that nothing can be said about the development of the comment section of the *Times*, at the time of data collection, the *Guardian*'s reply section was far more vibrant and lively than that of the *Times*, even though the latter was still freely accessible at that time. It is highly unlikely that the introduction of the paywall reversed this trend.

as they can be understood as contributions to a discussion that has been going on for some time either in the respective newspaper or in public discourse in general (or both). Even if they do not constitute a reply or a reaction to a particular news item or reader contribution, most of them do not raise an entirely new topic but rather adopt a novel perspective or draw attention to aspects of a matter that have not been covered. The general topic of the letter quoted in (454), for instance, has received extensive news coverage, yet instead of accepting, challenging or negotiating what was said about it so far, the reader uses the letters page to draw attention to a related problem.

(454) Sir, It is not just children's activities that might suffer under the new Independent Safeguarding Authority. We have been advised that volunteers who give lifts to elderly people to our Friendship Club will now be subject to form-filling and vetting. […] [NEWS T10-036]

In a similar vein, the reader recounting a personal anecdote in (455) can be considered as contributing to the never-ending debate about fossil fuels, although the letter does not constitute a follow-up to a particular article.

(455) My daughter, aged 10, is preparing for the school harvest festival. But this year there's a verse in one of the songs that's troubling her: "Deep beneath the ocean floor / Fuel and power have lain in store / Brought to us through dangerous toil / Thank you God for gas and oil." Grateful? Fossil fuels? She's furious! But at least now she knows whose fault it all is. [NEWS G10-080]

The topic of the first letter was among those that dominated the public debate at the time of data collection and that of the second still does so today; since the letters do not take up a particular argument of the ongoing debate but rather contribute to the topic in general, none of the contextualisation strategies discussed above are required to enable or facilitate understanding. All that is necessary is general knowledge about (then) current affairs.

While the letters above contribute to topical discussions, (456) and (457) below show that the letters page can also be used to remind readers of an anniversary or to draw their attention to facts they are either unlikely to know or likely to have forgotten.

(456) Sir, Today marks the 70th anniversary of the invasion of Poland and the start of the Second World War. Less well known is that Poland […] [NEWS T08-021]

(457) Today, on the eighth anniversary of the murder of over 3,000 people in the twin towers, let us not forget the other 9/11 that happened in 1973, in Chile: the overthrow of the elected government by the military, with US backing, which led to tens of thousands of Chileans being murdered, tortured or forced into exile. [NEWS G09-009a]

Unlike the majority of letters to the editor, these examples introduce new topics and thus influence the newspapers' agenda at least to a certain extent. In contrast to letters pages, comment sections on newspaper websites do not offer a platform for this type of reader contribution, as *below*-the-line comments, by definition, require an article *above* the line. Letters pages in newspapers are thus more versatile in the type of contribution they permit. They can be used to comment on the radio or TV programme (see the witty comment in (458) below), to make suggestions based on recent personal experiences (459) or to draw attention to a problem (460).

(458) Sir, This morning the Radio 4 Today programme was asking listeners what they were paranoid about.
Why do they want to know? [NEWS T07-037]

(459) Sir, Having just arrived by car in Austria and having to pay at the border a fee to obtain a motorway vignette I am reminded that it is high time Britain made a similar charge at the port of entry to all drivers […] [NEWS T09-016]

(460) We write to raise our concerns over the Metropolitan police's use of form 696 to collect information about, and in some cases restrict, live events across London. […] [NEWS G08-020]

The letter quoted in (460) above is signed by 24 people in their respective roles as journalists, artists, entrepreneurs, MPs or members of parties, using the letters page to campaign against the risk assessment procedure for events employed by the Metropolitan Police Service. Far more than online comments, letters to the editor thus constitute an important vehicle not only for promoting one's personal and political interests but also for self-advertising, as is also the case in (461), co-authored by several MPs and campaign directors, who use the letters page to exert considerable pressure on the government.

(461) Eighteen years ago today, the Polisario Front (the Western Saharan liberation movement) laid down their arms, ending a 16-year war with Morocco. […]
To mark this anniversary, a delegation of campaigners and MPs will today visit Downing Street to call on Britain to use her role within the UN security council to help enforce the terms of the ceasefire agreement and resolve the 34-year Western Sahara conflict. […] [NEWS G09-014]

Yet while such self-initiated letters are fairly often written from the perspective of a professional (33.7%) or authored by several people (13.3%), they can also be of a very personal nature, as (455) above and (462) below illustrate.

(462) Sir, On a recent holiday in the US we visited a ship dating from the Second World War, still seaworthy but open as a museum. We were startled to see unprotected open trapdoors in the deck, low beams, coils of rope lying

> around, ladders dropping to the bowels of the ship — an accident just waiting to happen. We saw no warning notices.
> It was wonderful. [NEWS T07-038]

In contrast to the letters used to exert pressure on public figures or institutions, such personal anecdotes usually offer a humorous perspective on a serious topic. What all the letters discussed above share, however, is that they do not constitute follow-ups to previous texts but rather serve to express what is on the respective readers' minds. Letter writers have thus the opportunity to influence the topics discussed on the letters page (provided that their self-initiated letters are chosen for publication). Commenters, in contrast, can only raise new topics if they 'hijack' an existing comment thread – an intriguing difference between the genres that will be revisited when discussing the selection criteria for letters to the editor (see 8.1 below).

While the comparison of the interactional patterns found in the two types of reader response already offered some glimpses at functional aspects, these will be explored in greater detail by turning the attention to the analysis of moves related to the concepts of identity and face.

7 Identity and face

As has been shown above, the sections for reader response in printed newspapers and on newspaper websites are highly popular platforms for the discussion of current topics and for providing feedback on the journalistic product. Despite differences in the communicative situation and hence also the speed of interaction, both newspapers and their websites provide a space where people may not only voice their opinion or simply vent their feelings but also challenge, support, question or simply negotiate what others – journalists and readers alike – have contributed. What makes reader response a particularly interesting object of investigation is that these people neither know nor see each other, the written posting or letter constituting the only channel the interlocutors have to communicate their stance, to position themselves and to express their identity. Whether they choose to assume the role of experts sharing their professional knowledge (see 7.4.2 below), decide to relate how they are personally affected by the topic (see 7.4.1 below) or prefer to adopt the role of critics holding the press to account (see 7.3 below), these identities can only be created via the written word. Yet even if the authors of letters or comments have – especially when viewed in contrast to face-to-face interaction – only very limited means to write themselves into being, readers automatically imagine the person behind the words on the screen or paper, using all the clues provided in these short texts to *find* the identity (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2008) that the interlocutors are *doing* (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2010: 20).

As touched upon above, the reply sections bring together people from various backgrounds, often with diverging views; disagreement and criticism can thus be expected to be the norm rather than the exception. Especially if the topic is of strong personal interest to the participants and emotional involvement is high, this may represent a challenge to rapport and face management. Yet criticising others is not only relational work, i.e. "the 'work' individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others" (Locher and Watts 2005: 9) but also identity work (cf. Locher 2008): if readers use their contributions for instance to criticise the authors of the articles commented on, this can be understood as challenging the identity that the persons criticised, i.e. the journalists, claim for themselves (e.g. by questioning their integrity or professional skills). At the same time, it creates a certain identity for those voicing the criticism, i.e. the readers (e.g. by positioning them as knowledgeable, witty or fierce critics). Follow-ups in general and the present data in particular are thus ideal for discourse-based research on linguistic means of identity construction, relational work and (im)politeness. The present chapter sets out to explore these aspects in detail and, above all, to unravel how they are intertwined, starting with a brief discussion of the conceptions and research underpinning the structure and focus of the subsequent analysis.

7.1 Past research and the present approach

In a book carrying the provocative title *Why we hate us*, Meyer (2008: 44) claims that "[c]hat rooms, blogs, and online comments are clogged with vitriol and hate-mongering". Even if written for an American audience, this seems to capture what most people feel: online discussions and contributions to comment sections are often associated with aggressive or uninhibited verbal behaviour, i.e. flaming. Given the way these new platforms for public debate are commonly perceived, it is hardly surprising that they have also attracted the attention of the academic community interested in matters of (im)politeness, disagreement and criticism (cf. e.g. Baym 1996, Kleinke 2007, Angouri and Tseliga 2010 and Kleinke and Bös 2015 for discussion forums as well as Luzón 2011 and Bolander 2012 and 2013 for blogs). Reader comments on newspaper websites have also been studied from this perspective. While Langlotz and Locher (2012) focus on disagreement and emotional stance, Neurauter-Kessels (2011) concentrates on the types of face threats directed at the journalist and Upadhyay (2010) combines aspects of disagreement and criticism with those of identity construction. However, in light of the attention devoted to such aspects in online comments, it seems astonishing that no studies have been found that investigate these aspects in letters to the editor. Since both the anonymity of the Internet and the spontaneity of the interaction are often held responsible for flaming and disinhibited behaviour (cf. e.g. McKenna and Green 2002), it appears highly promising to compare the two genres in this respect. After all, letters to the editor are not only the direct predecessor of online comments but also operate under different communicative conditions, making it impossible to attribute similar behaviour to reasons of anonymity and spontaneity.

While a comparison of the use of disagreement and criticism in letters to the editor and below-the-line comments is still lacking, these two forms of reader response have been compared in terms of the private or public nature of their content. In their diachronic case study comparing letters to the editor published in the *Times* in 1985 to comments posted on *Times Online* in 2008, Landert and Jucker (2011: 1422) find "the traditional letters to the editor as being characterized by non-private contents and the language of distance while the discussion sections of recent online newspapers are characterized by private contents and the language of immediacy". In particular, they claim that in contrast to authors of letters, who are more likely to adopt a professional role, "authors of online comments tend to write from a more subjective viewpoint" (2011: 1430), thus leading to an interesting blend of public and private spheres.

All in all, online comments – unlike letters to the editor – seem to be perceived primarily as a means to attack others or to comment from a personal perspective. In terms of identity construction, these observations are highly intriguing as they suggest that the identity aspects readers choose to foreground or the roles they choose to adopt (e.g. critic, expert, victim) depend on the genre and/or medium. The present study seeks to explore whether it is really the case that readers writing to the editor position themselves as experts, sharing their objective, professional knowledge while commenters on the Internet prefer to focus on private matters and take a more personal, subjective stance. Yet this is not its only focus. Follow-ups were defined above as "communicative acts […], in and through which a prior communicative act is accepted, challenged, or otherwise negotiated by third parties" (Fetzer et al. 2012: 4). From an identity perspective, this means that the readers not only construe their own identity in and via their contributions but also negotiate that of the person addressed or talked about (i.e. the journalist or another reader, depending on the type of follow-up, see chapter 6 above). The present corpora can thus be compared by investigating not only what kinds of identity the readers create for themselves (e.g. the knowledgeable reader, the witty commentator, the qualified expert) but also for the person criticised (e.g. the dishonest journalist, the ignorant commentator).

Taking these assertions and questions as a starting point, the present chapter not only aims to examine the intriguing interplay between disagreement and criticism on the one hand and identity construction on the other but, by comparing the behaviour in the two corpora, also seeks to throw light on, and account for, the differences and similarities between the two genres. With more and more media websites closing down their comments sections in reaction to aggressive and anti-social behaviour among contributors (Terbush 2013), the question of how people make use of the right to speak their minds in different media is certainly not only of relevance to those investigating communicative practices and media usage but also to those interested in social behaviour at large.

7.2 Theoretical framework

7.2.1 Identity construction

Adopting what is commonly referred to as a postmodernist view of identity (cf. Locher 2008: 509) and drawing on the framework proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005 and 2010), the present study considers identity not a set of fixed, predetermined social categories but a "discursive construct that emerges in interaction" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 587). This approach is based on the premise that "*[i]dentity is the social positioning of self and other*" (2005: 586; emphasis in the original) – a definition reminiscent of Davies and Harré's (1990: 47) concept of positioning as "the discursive production of a diversity of selves". Since the framework developed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005 and 2010) underpins the analysis of reader response to be presented below, it will be outlined briefly in the following.

Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) seminal framework is organised around five principles, the first one, i.e. the *emergence principle*, capturing the core essence of identity as a discursive product emerging in interaction. The second principle, the *positionality principle*, takes into account that different identity categories exist, encompassing rather broad ones (e.g. age, gender, social class), local and culture-specific ones (e.g. a certain type of teenager in a certain sociological context; cf. the example discussed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 592f.)) and the participant roles and stances adopted in a particular communicative event (e.g. a story teller, a vociferous critic, a sympathetic listener). How these different levels of identity may be constituted through language is described in the *indexicality principle*:

> Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including: (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and

> presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups (2005: 594).

These linguistic mechanisms for creating or indexing identity differ in how direct they are, ranging from quite straightforward to fairly indirect, the latter requiring more inferential work. The fourth principle, i.e. the *relationality principle*, is, according to the authors, "the heart of the model" as it calls to attention that identity is an "intersubjective accomplishment" (2005: 587), i.e. identities can only emerge in relation to other identities. From this follows the *partialness principle*, positing that identity is always in a state of flux and never complete: "[b]ecause identity is inherently relational, it will always be partial, produced through contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of self and other" (2005: 605). When discussing this last principle, the authors highlight that even though identities are considered to be constructed and negotiated in interaction, identity construction is not necessarily a conscious or deliberate process (cf. 2005: 606) – a fact nicely captured by conceptualising identity as emerging (see the *emergence principle* discussed above).

7.2.2 Politeness, impoliteness and relational work

Just as interactants construe and negotiate – be it deliberately or unconsciously – their own identity in relation to others and thus perform identity work, they also negotiate their relationships with each other in interaction and thus perform *relational work*. This concept was introduced by Locher and Watts (2005) to draw attention to the fact that many reflections on politeness, in particular the seminal theory advanced by Brown and Levinson (1987), place undue emphasis on the concept of face-threatening acts (FTAs) and their mitigation at the detriment of other types of interpersonal verbal behaviour (e.g. aggressive, abusive, politic, appropriate) not motivated by a desire to minimise FTAs.[437]

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model is based on Goffman's (1967: 5) notion of *face*, i.e. "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact", to which they add the distinction between what they term *positive* and *negative* face:

> *negative face*: the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others.

[437] The notion *relational work* predates the detailed discussion of the concept provided by Locher and Watts (2005), cf. e.g. Watts (1989).

> *positive face*: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62).

Interlocutors, they claim, are aware of their own and other people's face wants and generally cooperate to "maintain each other's face" (1987: 60). However, some speech acts automatically represent a threat to the addressee's positive (e.g. criticism) or negative (e.g. requests) face. In addition, what speakers say can also constitute a threat to their own face, for example when accepting an offer (negative face) or admitting a mistake (positive face). This is where mitigation comes in: "[i]n the context of the mutual vulnerability of face, any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat" (1987: 68). Brown and Levinson (1987) propose five super-strategies for realising FTAs (see Figure 23) and discuss numerous individual strategies for each.[438]

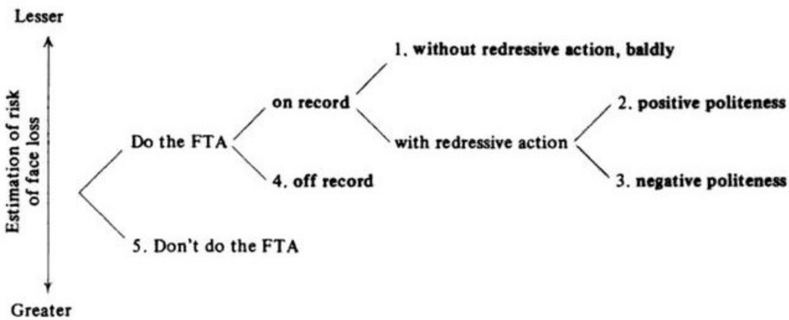

Figure 23 Strategies for performing FTAs (Brown and Levinson 1987: 60)

According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 74ff.), the choice of strategy depends on the *weightiness* of the FTA, which in turn depends on the three sociological variables P (the power the speaker has over the addressee), D (the social distance between speaker and addressee), and R (the ranking of the imposition in a certain culture): the greater the weightiness, i.e. the perceived risk of face loss, the more likely it is that a higher-numbered (and

[438] For the positive politeness strategy of claiming common ground, they name, for instance, *seek agreement* and *avoid disagreement* (cf. 1987: 112); for the negative politeness strategy of not presuming/assuming, they discuss, among others, the strategies of *questioning* and *hedging* (cf. 1987: 145).

hence more indirect) strategy of those presented in Figure 23 above will be chosen.

It is clearly beyond the scope of the present study to discuss the many strengths and also weaknesses of this approach. Yet in light of the goals of the present chapter, a few comments on its link to identity are in order.[439] Locher (2008: 515) draws attention to the fact that Brown and Levinson's (1987) "more static, bipartite view of face" cannot be equated with the notion of identity if the latter is not considered to be fixed. She therefore suggests "that it is preferable to return to the original Goffmanian sense of the term which makes a link between the two concepts possible" (2008: 518), arguing that the notion of *face* – and her own understanding of it as a mask (cf. 2004: 52) – "can be linked to an interactant's understanding of a particular identity that he or she wishes to propose in a particular situation" (2008: 514f.).[440] This proves to be a valuable suggestion: as the analysis of the move of criticising will show, criticism in reader response can be targeted at different aspects of face and hence also identity (e.g. the journalist's professional or personal identity, see 7.3.4 below). Distinguishing between these types of face-threats is certainly more helpful then simply speaking of threats to the journalists' positive face (i.e. their desire to be liked or approved of) and nicely illustrates how an act of impoliteness can be used to undermine or challenge the identity speakers or writers claim for themselves in certain speech events.[441] Moreover, Locher (2008: 518) argues that the "variables P, D, and R_x can be seen as too simple an explanation for the intricate social processes that take place when interactants engage in social practice and position self and other". While it is certainly correct that these variables cannot always explain *why* interactants say what they say, they can still be used to describe, on the basis of *what* is said, how the interactants position themselves with respect to these variables. The analysis below will show that although it is not possible to predict, on the basis of P, D and R, what mitigation strategies will be used when readers criticise the journalist (even though certain conventions exist), the way the criticism is performed reveals how the readers perceive the relationship (e.g. whether they perceive the distance to be great or small or whether they try to exert power over the journalist).

Another important factor complicating any discussion of politeness is that indirectness is often equated with politeness on the grounds that certain

[439] For detailed reviews see, amongst others, Eelen (2001) and Watts (2003).

[440] This suggestion was first made by Watts (cf. 2003: 25), who offers a detailed discussion of the notion of *face* in the different theories (cf. 2003: 101ff.).

[441] For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between face and identity see Spencer-Oatey (2007).

linguistic forms are argued to carry certain pragmatic functions (cf. Brown and Levinson's (1987) strategies discussed above). Yet as Locher and Watts (2005: 14ff.) have aptly illustrated, whether a certain utterance is perceived as polite, appropriate, somewhat over the top or even offensive depends largely on the individual interlocutors and the social context. Moreover, the interlocutors' understanding need not necessarily match the researcher's conceptualisation, thus resulting in a clash between what has become to be known as *first-order politeness* (or *politeness1*), i.e. a lay person's understanding, and *second-order politeness* (or *politeness2*), i.e. the theoretical conceptualisation. As Watts et al. (2005: 3), who first argued in favour of such a distinction in 1992 (cf. Watts et al. 1992a), put it:

> We take first-order politeness to correspond to the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of socio-cultural groups. It encompasses, in other words, commonsense notions of politeness. Second-order politeness, on the other hand, is a theoretical construct, a term within a theory of social behaviour and language use.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) approach briefly presented above is generally considered "the core second order approach to politeness" (Bousfield 2010b: 104). It was followed by what Culpeper (2011b: 396) calls a "second wave" of politeness research, rejecting the second-order approach (e.g. Eelen 2001 and Watts 2003). The controversy over these approaches, still existing today (cf. Haugh 2012), is in a way related to the issue of intentionality when it comes to investigating *im*politeness (cf. Culpeper 2008: 31ff.) – a phenomenon that has only recently attracted the same attention as politeness. In this case, the question poses itself whether a distinction should be drawn between intentional and unintentional face attacks as proposed by Culpeper (cf. 2005: 63), who uses the term *impoliteness* for the former and reserves the term *rudeness* for the latter.[442]

All this seems to boil down to the question of how the researcher selects and approaches the data. In its purest form, a first-order approach would imply focusing either on instances of talk in which the interactants discuss and evaluate the concept of (im)politeness in general, i.e. what Eelen (cf. 2001: 35) calls instances of *metapragmatic politeness1*, or on talk exchanges including "hearers' judgements (in actual interaction) of other people's interactional behaviour as 'polite' or 'impolite'", i.e. what Eelen (2001: 35) calls *classificatory politeness1*.[443] Finding instances of the

[442] In his later work, however, Culpeper (2011a: 51) reconsiders the role played by intentionality, admitting to be "not now convinced that (full) intentionality is an essential condition for impoliteness".

[443] The third category proposed by Eelen (2001: 35), i.e. *expressive politeness1*, "refers to politeness encoded in speech, to instances where the speaker aims at 'polite' behaviour: the use

former in reader response (or any other type of naturally-occurring discourse) is a matter of pure chance, and even instances of the latter may be fairly rare, as Haugh (2007: 312), a proponent of the so-called *interactional approach* to (im)politeness, has to admit:

> the interactional approach entails the analyst looking for evidence in the interaction that such (im)politeness evaluations have been made by the participants, either through explicit comments made by participants in the course of the interaction (less commonly), or through the reciprocation of concern evident in the adjacent placement of expressions of concern relevant to the norms invoked in that particular interaction (more commonly).

While his suggestion to consider not only explicit comments about a certain contribution but also more indirect references to the norms governing the communicative exchange is certainly helpful, this type of meta-comment is still not frequent enough in the present data to allow conclusions.[444] If (im)polite behaviour is not commented on or matters of (im)politeness are not made the topic of the ongoing interaction, one could still include the participants' perspectives by conducting surveys, distributing follow-up questionnaires or organising focus-group discussions to take place after the talk exchange.[445] Yet while it is possible, at least in some research contexts, to involve the interlocutors in the analysis and to ask them to assess or account for their own behaviour afterwards, Locher and Watts (2005: 17) decide against using this method in their sample analysis, arguing that it "is flawed precisely because they [the participants] are being asked to evaluate consciously along a 'polite-impolite' parameter which might not correspond to what they perceived at the time". In the present study, the question of involving the participants does not even pose itself: there is simply no way to get in touch with them, as is often the case when data sets are studied that were not produced for the purpose of linguistic analysis, especially in the context of CMC (see 3.3.2 above). In the majority of cases, there is thus no knowing whether certain comment or letter writers intended to offend with their critical remarks or whether these were perceived as impolite or rude by the addressees or any other reader at the time.

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of honorifics or terms of address in general, conventional formulaic expressions ('thank you', 'excuse me', …), different request formats, apologies, etc. …, i.e. the usual objects of investigation in most politeness research".

[444] As discussed above (see 6.2), in both corpora the number of contributions commenting on or taking up another reader's contribution is fairly small; unsurprisingly, the subset of those containing such meta-comments is even smaller.

[445] Such an approach is in line with the attempts to overcome the focus on logfiles in CMC research, as for instance in the approach of *discourse-centred online ethnography* proposed by Androutsopoulos (2008) briefly discussed above (see 3.3.1).

However, this does not mean that reader response does not lend itself to an investigation of (im)politeness. In her theory of rapport management, i.e. “the management (or mismanagement) of relations between people”, Spencer-Oatey (2005: 96) stresses that evaluations of politeness are always context-bound (cf. 2005: 97). According to her, interactants build their “dynamic judgements as to whether their rapport has been enhanced, maintained or damaged” on the basis of three factors: behavioral expectations, face sensitivities and interactional wants (2005: 96). Of these three aspects, the first one is crucial for the approach adopted in the present study. As Spencer-Oatey (2005: 97) argues, people’s behavioural expectations are “derived from their beliefs about behavior: what is prescribed, what is permitted and what is proscribed”, and they include behavioural conventions, norms and protocols as well as explicit and implicit role specifications (cf. 2005: 98f.). The idea that interlocutors judge each other’s behaviour on the basis of behavioural conventions and norms, i.e. according to what is commonly considered appropriate in a certain situation, is central not only to her but also various other approaches to (im)politeness, even if the terminology may differ. Mills (2005: 268) uses the concept of *communities of practice*, positing that

> [i]mpoliteness can be considered as any type of linguistic behaviour which is assessed as intending to threaten the hearer’s face or social identity, or as transgressing the hypothesized Community of Practice’s norms of appropriacy.

In a similar vein, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010) considers the norms pertaining to a particular *genre* (in her case news interviews) as having an influence on how the behaviour is perceived, while Locher and Watts (2005 and 2008) speak of *frames of expectations*, claiming that

> whether interactants perceive or intend a message to be polite, impolite or merely appropriate (among many other labels) depends *on judgements* that they make at the level of relational work *in situ,* i.e. during an ongoing interaction in a particular setting. These judgements are made on the basis of norms and expectations that individuals have constructed and acquired through categorising the experiences of similar past situations, or conclusions that one draws from other people’s experiences (2008: 78; emphasis in the original).

Viewed in this light, studying reader response is far less problematic than it might have seemed at first glance. First of all, the interaction is public, i.e. the researcher is as much part of the community of practice as is any other reader, even if both remain passive observers. Moreover, the communicative norms and conventions are made explicit in the *Community standards and participation guidelines* (The Guardian 2009) and can hence be accessed by the researcher. In addition, the genre approach adopted in the present analysis makes it possible to determine what is common or uncommon in the two genres: the 999 comments/letters serving as the backdrop against which each comment/letter is analysed can be considered a fairly good basis for constructing norms and expectations. This, in turn, allows at least tentative conclusions to be drawn as to whether a certain behaviour is considered appropriate or not, especially if it is not sanctioned by others.[446]

Thus, even if reader response in general and the present data in particular cannot be used for an analysis from a purely *politeness1* perspective, the approach adopted considers as many factors as possible (e.g. meta-comments, users' reactions, underlying norms, expectations and genre conventions) when assessing the behaviour witnessed. It was inspired to a considerable extent by Bousfield's (2008) study of impoliteness in interaction and the way in which he tackles the problem of not having access to the speakers' intentions. Drawing on the position adopted by Culpeper et al. (2003: 1552) that "[t]here is no claim, then, that one can reconstruct the actual intentions of speakers, but rather that 'plausible' intentions can be reconstructed, given adequate evidence", Bousfield (2008: 74) considers the following features to provide said evidence: "the discoursal roles of the participants, the context, the co-text, the activity type one is engaged in, previous events, affect between the interactants and, of course, the power, rights and obligations of the interactants".

Given the paucity of interaction in the present corpora (see 6.2 above), there is no other choice than studying the data from the researcher's perspective, i.e. that of an observer, who can thus only make claims about *potential* (im)politeness or face-threats based on the kind of evidence listed above. Yet as long as the researcher's interpretation is not assumed to be identical to that of all other participants, this approach is entirely legitimate – especially considering that the majority of participants are merely passive observers, just like the researcher.[447] As Haugh (2012: 127) argues: "[i]n the case of less interactional data such as letters or monologues, where responses are not readily evident, analysts may focus on establishing that such understandings [i.e. the understandings of speakers' and recipients' interpretations and evaluations of behaviour] are normatively plausible".

[446] As will be discussed in more detail below (see 7.3.4.1.6), if a letter to the editor containing severe criticism is published, this suggests that the editors do not consider the contribution inappropriate, thus throwing further light on the norms and expectations governing this particular genre.

[447] Even if it were possible to consider the participants' perspectives, this would not be without problems either. As Locher and Watts (2005: 16) highlight, individuals may differ in their judgements: "[i]t is quite conceivable that individual reactions may vary even when the social context in which the 'polite' utterance occurs is kept constant".

The analysis to be presented below is thus based on the advice provided by Locher (2006b: 263f.):

> [a]s researchers, all we should do is point out instances of relational work that may be open for an interpretation as polite. To do this, we first have to discover what is likely to be the norm of appropriateness in a given context against which such judgments are made. This will automatically entail studying relational work in all its shades.[448]

The present study is also in line with Locher and Watts (2005) in that the focus is not simply on the mitigation of FTAs or certain impoliteness strategies but on selected moves within the broader concept of *relational work*. Rather than being based on the dichotomy of polite and impolite behaviour (with impolite behaviour considered as breaching the norm), this framework distinguishes between *unmarked* and *marked* behaviour on the one hand and *politic* (i.e. appropriate) and *non-politic* (i.e. inappropriate) behaviour on the other, as illustrated by Figure 24 below.

According to Watts (2003: 144), *politic behaviour*, i.e. "that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction", is often perceived as neither polite nor impolite in the particular situation in which it is encountered; it is hence unmarked. It stands in contrast to non-politic (i.e. inappropriate) behaviour, which is negatively marked and comprises impoliteness/rudeness as well as over-politeness. However, linguistic behaviour can also be *positively* marked, and this is where Watts (2005: xxxix) positions politeness: "politeness is a marked part of politic behaviour".

[448] A more in-depth discussion of the ongoing debate about the first-order and second-order distinction in politeness research would unfortunately consume too much space. Haugh (2012: 114) provides a valuable critical overview and bemoans the fact that the said distinction has often been equated with the emic vs. etic/scientific distinction, i.e. the insider's view vs. the one of the outsider as this "masks a number of important distinctions that are too often glossed over by those who make claims to being either first or second order researchers". In a similar vein, Culpeper (2011b: 416) argues that some first-order studies are very similar to second-order ones in the discussion of examples: "[i]n the absence of participants deploying and debating explicit evaluations of (im)politeness in the discourse that has taken place, some data for politeness analyses are selected on the basis of claims by the researcher, supported by implicit evidence, that they involve politeness (or rather a weaker claim of 'potential politeness'), much in the same way as data analyses of naturally occurring conversation in studies of politeness2" (see also Culpeper 2008). Bousfield (2010b: 107) even challenges the politeness1 concept of lay users by illustrating with the help of various examples that lay users also "tend to have an idealised, socially constructed idea of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in a specific situation and within a given community of practice", much like the model person that Brown and Levinson (1987) take as the basis for their theory.

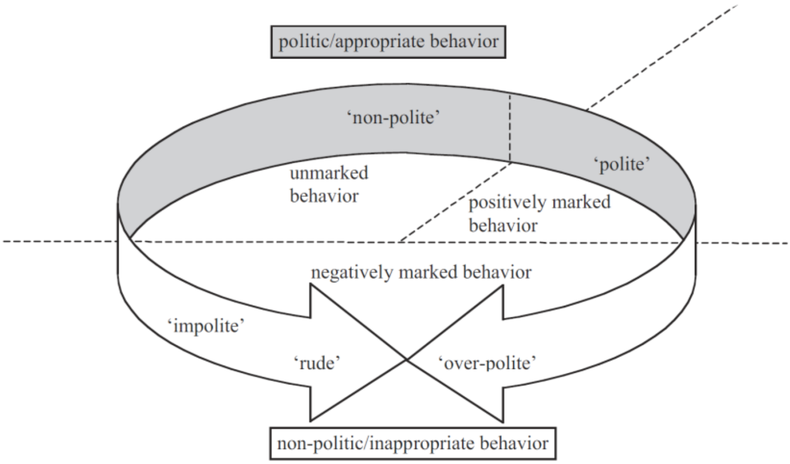

Figure 24 Relational work (Watts 2005: xliii; as cited in Locher 2006b: 257)

Locher (2006b: 255f.) highlights that while politic behaviour can, by definition, never be impolite,

> it may well be that there are cases of relational work that are perceived as politic/appropriate as well as polite. The reason for this is that polite behavior cannot be but appropriate since inappropriateness would turn this relational work into a case of intentional or unintentional over-politeness, which is often negatively marked.

The benefit of this framework is that behaviour not considered to be polite (see the term 'non-polite' in Figure 24 above) is not automatically equalled with impolite behaviour since it can be interpreted as being simply unmarked or politic. According to Watts (cf. 2003: 162), much of what is commonly considered polite is merely politic behaviour – a fact also highlighted by Locher (2006b: 256f.) when discussing the figure presented above:

> [w]hile it is important to point out that the size of the sections separated by the dotted lines are not based on any empirical evidence of the different types of behavior, it is suggested that the share of polite behavior (positively marked and appropriate/politic) is much smaller than previously conceptualized in the literature.

To illustrate the difference between a reply that is merely expectable and hence unmarked, and "[l]inguistic behaviour which is perceived to go beyond what is expectable, i.e. salient behaviour" (Watts 2003: 19), Culpeper (2011b: 419) uses one of Watts's examples of unmarked, politic behaviour (463) and constructs a polite version (464):

(463) A: Would you like some more coffee?
B: Yes, *please*.
(Watts 2003: 186; as cited in Culpeper 2011b: 419; emphasis in the original)

(464) A: Would you like some more coffee?
B: Yes, *please, that's very kind, coffee would be wonderful*.
(Culpeper 2011b: 419; emphasis in the original)

The reply in (463) is simply socially appropriate and would not raise an eyebrow in normal conversation, whereas (464) clearly exceeds what is required in that situation. However, it is probably considered positively marked in most contexts (i.e. polite) and hence still appropriate (as opposed to negatively marked over-politeness).

What is considered appropriate or unmarked depends on the community of practice and the particular speech situation. As mentioned when discussing Spencer-Oatey's (2005) concept of behavioural expectations above, interactants constantly construct, acquire and negotiate the norms of appropriateness pertaining to particular types of social encounters. Since these norms are always based on past experiences, they may be subject to change (cf. Locher 2006b: 253). When presenting the visualisation of his framework reproduced as Figure 24 above, Watts (2005: xIiii) is also keen to highlight that

> [t]he dotted line separating unmarked politic behaviour from positively marked politic behaviour that is open to interpretation as "polite" should not be taken to represent an absolute boundary between the two. It is rather a movable area in which one type of behaviour shades off into the other.[449] […] The points at which speakers perceive politic behaviour to be 'polite' may, and certainly do, vary considerably from speaker to speaker, from community of practice to community of practice and even from one situational context to another in the case of individual speakers.

All in all, the concept of politic behaviour and appropriateness can be considered a valuable contribution to (im)politeness theorising.[450] In light of

[449] This fact seems to have been overlooked by some. Culpeper (2011b: 419) for instance argues "that Watts's definitions […] suggest a hard line between politic behaviour and politeness: if it is not one, it is the other. This seems unrealistic; surely there is a scale between politic behaviour and politeness capturing degrees of difference between relatively 'normal' behaviours and situations, such as greetings and leave-takings in expected contexts, and those which are more creative".

[450] However, classifying polite behaviour as also politic/appropriate can be considered to weaken the approach. The framework would have been more convincing if *politic* and *appropriate* had not been equated, i.e. if *appropriate* had been the cover-term for politic (called

the fact that German has often been characterised as more direct than English (cf. e.g. House 2005), the different linguistic strategies used when performing speech acts like requests (e.g. when ordering a drink or buying bread) can now be accounted for on the basis of politic behaviour and norms of appropriateness. Rather than being a sign of the English being more polite or using more politeness strategies than the Germans, the differences point to culturally different norms of appropriateness or frames of expectations: what is perceived as unmarked, appropriate behaviour in one culture or community of practice is perceived as exceeding what is normal or called for in another.[451]

Most importantly, however, the present study answers the call for more research combining aspects of relational work with those of identity construction (cf. e.g. Locher 2006b): in addition to investigating criticism and positive feedback (see 7.3 below), the moves of personalisation (see 7.4.1 below) and what could be called professionalisation (i.e. expert claims, see 7.4.2 below) will be explored as a means of identity creation. These moves have been selected not only with the goal of exploring the intricate relationship between relational work and identity work in mind but also on the basis of how reader response in the digital age is commonly

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'non-polite' in Figure 24 above), i.e. unmarked behaviour, on the one hand, and polite, i.e. positively marked behaviour, on the other. Alternatively, one could have distinguished between *merely appropriate/politic* behaviour (what is called 'non-polite' in Figure 24 above) and *appropriate plus* (i.e. polite) behaviour. In fact, Watts (2003: 21; emphasis added) even argues that "[p]olite behaviour will therefore be behaviour *beyond* what is perceived to be appropriate to the ongoing social interaction" – a definition that seems to run counter to the visualisation and discussion provided in Watts (2005) and Locher (2006b). One might even suggest that this is how Watts was understood in the first place. When Culpeper (2011a: 16) argues "contrary to Watts, I think the distinction between politic behaviour and politeness is scalar (as does Leech 2007: 202-3)", he seems to be equating *politic* with *unmarked*, i.e. *non-polite* behaviour. Leech's (2007: 203) note "I do not wish to draw a line between marked behaviour called 'polite' or 'impolite' and routinized, normal behaviour called 'politic' (Watts et al. 1992b; Watts 2003: 4)" also indicates that he considers *polite* not to be a part of *politic*. Both Watts (cf. 2005: xxxix; see quotation above) and Locher (2006b: 257), however, are very explicit about this: "[b]oth polite as well as non-polite behavior appears as politic/appropriate behavior. Polite behavior, however, is seen as positively marked, while non-polite behavior is the unmarked norm".

[451] A personal anecdote illustrates this point quite nicely: when I was sharing a flat with one French and six English-speaking students in Brighton, the French student and her frequently visiting French friends repeatedly commented on the fact that the way the English flatmates interacted with each other (e.g. constantly saying *thank you* and *please*) appeared to them somewhat over the top, obsequious and at times downright insincere. They clearly perceived the politic, unmarked behaviour of the English students as negatively marked, i.e. over-polite (see Figure 24). Over time, however, they grew used to the norms of appropriateness shared by the English students and even partly adopted their behaviour when talking to them (sometimes accompanied by a humorous meta-comment on cultural differences).

perceived. These (mis)conceptions briefly introduced above (see chapter 2) will be discussed in greater detail in the individual sections below.

While the data and the research design make it possible to address matters of frequency and distribution, the main analysis of the intricate interplay between the discourse moves of disagreeing/criticising and identity construction is qualitative in nature and structured according to the major move performed. This means that for each move investigated, all instances of that move identified in the coding process described above (see 3.4) need to be first retrieved and then analysed in full detail to be able to compare the corpora. Yet even if the focus is on the individual moves performed, the comments and letters in their entirety, together with the broader interactional context (e.g. the entire thread of comments, the entire letters page, previous comments/letters, the initiation of the follow-up), always represent an important backdrop for understanding and analysing individual moves (cf. Bolander 2012: 1617). This crucial background knowledge is of course incorporated into the analysis and considered in the discussion whenever necessary.

7.3 Criticism and positive feedback

7.3.1 The discursive moves of criticism and disagreement

The sections provided for reader response are certainly not intended as spaces for achieving and displaying consensus and peaceful harmony but rather constitute public arenas where debate is not only accepted but even valued. Yet while readers are invited to speak their minds, there are certain restrictions as to what constitutes appropriate behaviour; letters to the editor may not be chosen for publication and online comments may be deleted in a post-moderation process if they do not abide by the community standards. The *Guardian* for instance clearly states on its website: "We welcome debate and dissent, but personal attacks (on authors, other users or any individual), persistent trolling and mindless abuse will not be tolerated" (The Guardian 2009). This raises questions as to what constitutes debate and dissent on the one hand and personal attacks on the other. Does criticising other individuals always constitute a personal attack or can it also be used for debating and thus be as welcome as dissent? Is it even possible to distinguish between criticism and disagreement?

The *OED* defines *criticism* as the "action of criticizing, or passing judgement upon the qualities or merits of anything; esp. the passing of unfavourable judgement; fault-finding, censure", whereas *disagreement* is defined as a "want of agreement or harmony" and a "difference of opinion;

dissent".[452] While the two acts often go hand in hand, it is certainly possible to disagree openly with somebody's opinion without criticising that person, i.e. without passing judgement. In Brown and Levinson's (cf. 1987: 66) politeness model, however, both *criticism* and *disagreement* are categorised as acts threatening the positive face of the hearer, i.e. his/her want to be liked, accepted or approved of by others. In a similar vein, Leech's (1983: 32) alternative model, developed on the basis of Grice's Cooperative Principle, contains the sub-maxims of *approbation* ("minimise dispraise of other") and *agreement* ("minimise disagreement between self and other"). In Culpeper's (1996: 357) impoliteness theory, "seek disagreement" is listed as a positive impoliteness strategy, and Bousfield (2008: 126f.), refining the model, adds the strategy "criticise – dispraise h [i.e. the hearer], some action or inaction by h, or some entity in which h has invested face". Of course, as has been stressed many times, no speech act can be considered inherently polite or impolite (but for a more detailed discussion see Culpeper 2010), and what might threaten the hearer's face in some contexts may neither be intended nor perceived as such in others. In fact, disagreement is not always oppositional or conflictual. First, it can also be the unmarked norm in certain communicative settings, e.g. in problem-solving meetings in a business context (cf. Angouri 2012), in debates in online discussion forums (cf. Angouri and Tseliga 2010) or in academic discourse (cf. Tannen 2002). Second, it can be the preferred instead of dispreferred second in terms of structural properties, e.g. in debates (cf. Gruber 2001: 1823) or in reaction to self-deprecating statements (cf. Pomerantz 1984; for a more detailed discussion see Kotthoff 1993). Third, it can be face-saving instead of face-threatening, e.g. disagreement used as compliment response in order to save one's own positive face by avoiding self-praise (cf. Golato 2005), or even be used to create a sociable, intimate atmosphere and signal solidarity and group membership (cf. e.g. Schiffrin 1984; for an overview of this practice in different cultures see Tannen 2002: 1652).

Given the peculiar communicative situation of both letters to the editor and online comments outlined above (see 4.1.2 and 4.2.2) as well as the opposing participant roles of the expert journalist on the one hand and the mass of anonymous lay commentators on the other, both (dis)agreement (when voicing one's opinion and thus positioning oneself with respect to the prior discourse) and criticism (when voicing one's opinion and when providing feedback on the prior discourse) are to be expected in reader response. In its most straightforward form, criticism is an explicit, negative evaluation of somebody or somebody's actions (see (465) below, where a

[452] "criticism, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 10 April 2017 and "disagreement, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 10 April 2017.

user's argumentative behaviour is judged 'ridiculous'), but it can also be performed indirectly, for instance by using irony or asking (rhetorical) questions (see (466) and (467) respectively, where a certain user's behaviour is criticised by implicitly referring to the unwritten rules for appropriate behaviour, e.g. reading the article before commenting).

(465) I also think the instant dismissal (eg by Buckster69 [USER] above) of the possibility that kids today maybe are working harder and doing better than kids 27 years ago is ridiculous. […] [CMC G06-011-12 c6]

(466) […] Congratulations thomas [USER] you have demolished an argument that nobody ever made. Look up the definition of straw man. [CMC T07-005 c3]

(467) Did Thomas [USER] read the above article? I very much doubt it as Michael Murray [USER] pointed out. […] [CMC T07-005 c5]

Disagreement, especially when addressed to a clearly identifiable participant or stretch of discourse, is often coupled with criticism (as in (468) and (469), where the commentators first disagree and then add an explicit negative judgement), and may even be considered to constitute criticism in and of itself. The clear juxtaposition of statements in (470), where a letter writer contradicts the claim of a non-profit organisation, is most likely perceived as an implicit form of criticism rather than a mere difference of opinion. In (471), the contradiction or correction is even followed by an apology and a justification, which also points to the fact that this disagreement is closely linked to criticism.

(468) […] But I disagree that it doesn't matter if Megrahi really was innocent or not. That's a strange thing to say. […] [CMC G07-083 c19]

(469) Rob [USER], Evolution is not a random process, and it is not in conflict with the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics or with statistics - if it was then it would not have been so universally accepted. The fact that you make such claims demonstrate that you don't know the first thing about it. [CMC T07-005 c11]

(470) Factory chickens should actually see their standards rise in many countries (Factory chickens to suffer under new EU rules, says RSPCA, 25 August). […] [NEWS G07-049]

(471) It's Blackheath, not Blackheath common. It is, indeed, common land, but is called Blackheath. Sorry to be a pedant, but everybody gets it wrong. […] [CMC G08-017 c1]

In contrast to using direct negation to express their disagreement (471), commentators can also do so by simply producing a counter-statement – one of the disagreement strategies described by Kleinke (2010). Although this strategy may also be used in letters (470), counter-statements are more likely to be found in comments, as the proximity of the comment and the text commented upon not only makes the contextualisation strategies commonly found in letters to the editor superfluous (see 6.3.1 above) but also provides enough information to interpret the counter-statement.[453] However, the major purpose of follow-ups being to voice one's opinion, every instance in which an opinion is expressed could be considered a counter-statement if it happens not to be in line with what any of the contributors, including the journalist, has stated before. Therefore, in the present study, only those instances in which direct negations and counter-statements can be clearly linked to an unambiguously identifiable stretch of discourse (e.g. because they are placed directly after a direct quote, because a certain user is addressed directly or because some other signal of responsiveness is used), are considered clear cases of disagreement, as in (470) above and (472) below, where the users unmistakably disagree with the journalists' evaluations.

(472) [QUOTE] That is not Brown's style. He condemns himself to an agonised deviousness whose sole virtue is honesty. [QUOTE]
No, whose sole virtue is *deviousness* thus it was ever so when it comes to Britain's interests [CMC G07-083 c12]

If commentators use such blatant forms of disagreement – even if accompanied by a mitigating strategy as the apology in (471) above – they go beyond disagreeing in order to position themselves in relation to others and attempt to correct the prior speaker; such conflictual disagreements are considered an implicit form of criticism.

As these preliminary examples have served to illustrate, disagreement and criticism often go hand in hand and may even merge, which might explain why these two moves have often been conflated in the literature. However, especially in communicative settings that are prone to dissent and even conflict, it is certainly beneficial to distinguish between the two. In the following, the focus will be on criticism, including disagreement only if it can be linked to an unambiguously identifiable stretch of discourse and hence be considered an attempt to correct the prior speaker, making it a conflictual disagreement and thus an implicit form of criticism.[454]

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[453] The counter-statement in (470) can only be identified as a clear disagreement because it is directly followed by the headline of the newspaper article (see the contextualisation strategy of placing information between brackets discussed in 6.3.1.2 above), which contains the statement with which the author of the letter disagrees.
[454] See also the approach adopted by Langlotz and Locher (2012: 1599), who follow Bolander (2012) and Baym (1996).

The central questions addressed are the following:

(a) Who is the target of the criticism and what aspect(s) is the criticism based on (e.g. reasoning, knowledge and skills, underlying or assumed character traits and values)?

(b) How is the criticism expressed (e.g. explicit judgement, irony, rhetorical questions, use of quoting and mitigating devices)?

(c) How is identity constructed in such critical comments and what aspects of the user's identity and that of the person criticised are foregrounded?

(d) In what respect does the behaviour differ between online comments and letters to the editor and what are the reasons for these differences?

However, the main goal does not lie in answering these questions individually but in uncovering the various links between these factors and questions by examining the functional interplay between them, which is why they will not be approached one by one but in combination.

Now that the concept of criticism as used in the present study has been defined and the research questions have been outlined, the following sections will present the results of the analysis by first discussing those of the corpus of comments before comparing them to those of the letters corpus.

7.3.2 Targets of criticism in online comments

Although online debates are renowned for their contentious or even hostile atmosphere, the discursive move of *criticism* is not quite as frequent and prevalent as one might expect. All in all, 638 individual occurrences of criticism were identified, and 521 of the 1,000 comments were found to contain one or more critical moves. While this means that a little more than half of the comments were critical in nature, it might surprise that 47.9% did not contain any criticism at all. Much more illuminating than overall numbers, however, is the picture that emerges after categorising the critical comments according to the target of the criticism, as shown in Figure 25 below.[455]

While four overall targets can be distinguished, these can be classified as belonging to two major categories: on the one hand, the criticism can be directed at individuals (N=299), i.e. the author of the newspaper article (N=125), a public figure clearly identified by name (N=94) or a previous

[455] As a comment may contain criticism directed at more than one target, some comments are represented in more than one of the columns of Figure 25.

comment writer, i.e. another user (N=80). On the other hand, criticism can be levelled at a certain group of people, as is the case in 306 comments (58.7% of all critical comments and 50.6% of all targets).

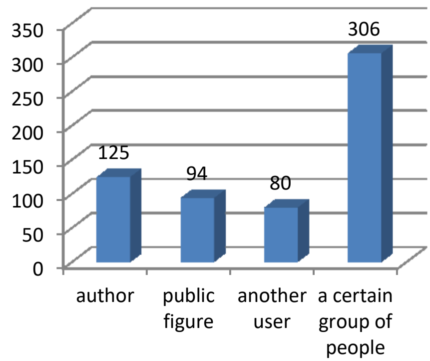

Figure 25 Target of the criticism in the comments (N=605)

The choice of such a vague label for this last category is intended to illustrate that this kind of target is fairly vague in itself as it includes individuals that are loosely grouped together based on their profession (e.g. 'bankers', 'doctors'), nationality (e.g. 'the US', 'the Scottish'), a character trait or some other personal attribute (e.g. 'the foolish and uninformed', 'a grotesquely overpaid elite'), some sort of behaviour, shared experience or attitude (e.g. 'those who cheat on benefits', 'climate activists', 'those who advocate suicide') or any other common denominator (e.g. 'the public', 'these people', 'the hierarchy climbing, kicking down middle class'). However, there is one group in this conglomeration of diverse targets that stands out from the rest as it is attacked in nearly half of the cases (N=143): the group labelled *politicians, the government, parties*. This code was assigned to all instances of criticism directed not at individual political figures but at more or less well-defined groups of political players, e.g. 'politicians', 'MPs', 'the government' or 'the Tories'.

So far, two conclusions can be drawn: not only is it slightly more common to criticise groups of people instead of attacking a person individually, there is also a clear tendency to criticise political groups, and this is usually done in a fairly vague and generalising manner, using rather broad terms like 'the powers that be' or the ones cited above. If an individual is attacked, it is usually the author of the newspaper article (N=125), whereas public figures (N=94) and other users (N=80) are made the target less frequently. While this supports the conclusion drawn in chapter 6 above, i.e. that leaving a comment on a newspaper website is used more often to *re*act to the journalistic product than to *inter*act with other users, it also means that the figures above need to be re-evaluated. If, as the analysis of the interactional patterns has shown, only 180 comments constitute a reaction to another user's comment and other users are criticised in 80 comments, this entails that in nearly half (i.e. 44.4%) of the comments written in reaction to other users, this reaction is hostile in nature.

7.3.3 Targets of criticism in letters to the editor

With 746 overall occurrences in 585 critical letters, criticism is, all in all, slightly more frequent in the letters than in the comments (638 occurrences in 521 critical comments). Figure 26 below summarises the findings for the letters according to target and, at the same time, offers a comparison to those for the comments already presented in Figure 25 above.[456]

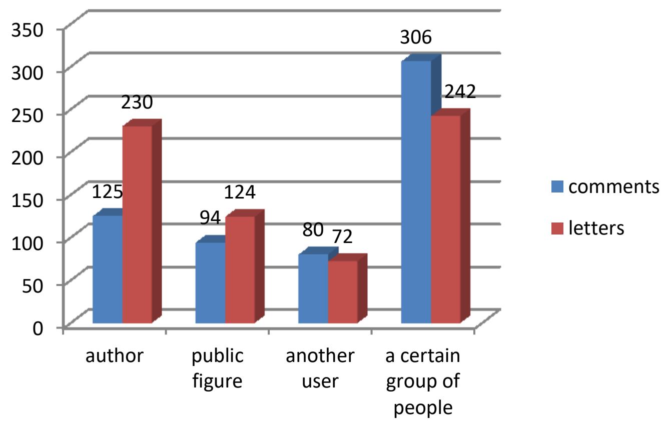

Figure 26 Target of the criticism in the comments (N=605) and the letters (N=668)

While especially authors, but also public figures, are criticised substantially more often in the letters, the opposite holds true for groups of people. The most striking difference between the corpora thus lies in the fact that in the majority of critical letters, the criticism is targeted at clearly identified individuals, whereas groups of people are made the target in only 242 letters (i.e. 41.4% of all critical letters and 36.2% of all targets). This difference is best illustrated by juxtaposing the targets and their distribution in the two

[456] Again, more than one target may be criticised in a single letter, which means that the same letter may be represented in several of the red columns of Figure 26.

corpora in percentages instead of absolute numbers, as done in Figure 27 below.

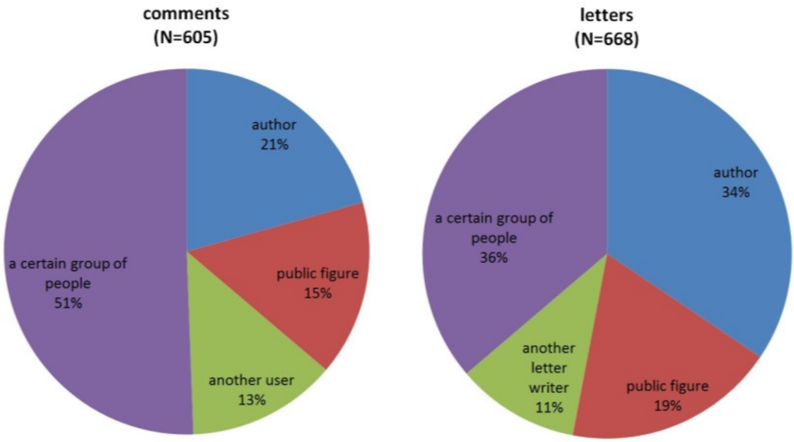

Figure 27 Targets of criticism in relation to overall number of critical comments/letters[457]

Whereas slightly more than half of the targets in the critical comments (i.e. 51%) belong to the rather vague category of *a certain group of people*, this is only the case in 36% of the targets in the letters, where it is more common to attack clearly identified individuals instead, in particular the author of the article. This preference is already quite clear when only the critical comments are examined (as in the figures above), yet it becomes even more pronounced when the genres are considered in their entirety. As has been shown above, letters to the editor can also be self-initiated (see 6.5) or written in reaction to a prior letter to the editor (see 6.4.1). These letters cannot possibly include criticism directed at the author, which, in turn, means that one third, i.e. 32.7%, of all 704 letters to the editor representing a reaction to a newspaper article criticise the author. Of the 820 online comments representing a reaction to the article above the line, only 15.2% criticise the author. This finding suggests that while one of the core purposes of the letters to the editor is to criticise the author of the article reacted to, this function is by far less prominent in the comments, where less than one sixth of the contributions contain criticism directed at the author.

[457] As in the figures above, comments criticising more than one target are counted once for each individual target.

The difference between overall numbers and numbers in relation to the type of reaction also holds true for the criticism directed at other contributors. Although the overall number of critical reactions to other user contributions seems to be almost identical in the corpora (80 in the comments vs. 72 in the letters, see Figure 26 above), one must not forget that the number of contributions directed at other users was found to be slightly higher in the letters, with 213 letters but only 180 comments reacting to previous user contributions (see chapter 6 above). This means that regardless of the similarity in overall numbers, there is a notable difference between the behaviour in the two types of reader response: while an impressive 44.4% of the comments directed at other users are critical in nature, this is only the case in 33.8% of the letters responding to previous reader contributions, where such reactions are quite often used for collaborative or humorous purposes, as in the case of the strings of letters discussed above (see 6.4.1.3).

So far, criticism has been shown to be slightly more frequent in the letters, both in terms of number of occurrences and number of contributions. While the author as a target for the criticism plays a central role in this corpus, the online comments, on the other hand, are used more often to criticise groups of people, above all fairly loosely defined political groups. The investigation of the contributions written in reaction to other user contributions has shown that substantially more contributors criticise their fellow readers in the comments than in the letters. In the following sections, two of these targets will be investigated more closely by turning the attention to the individual aspects criticised and to how the criticism is performed.

7.3.4 Aspects criticised and forms of criticism

Since the goal is to unravel the interplay between criticism and identity construction, the present discussion will focus on those targets of criticism that are part of the larger communicative situation, i.e. the authors of the newspaper articles and other readers. While it would certainly be interesting to investigate how the act of criticising groups of people may be used to form so-called in-groups and out-groups and hence to show one's alignment or disalignment, these groups, just like public figures, are different from the other targets in that they do not play an active role in the discourse under discussion. They may well read the newspaper articles or reader response, but in the following analysis of the relationship between criticism and identity construction, only those people who also produce text at some stage will be considered.[458]

The criticism directed at the author of the newspaper article or another reader can focus on various aspects and sometimes even combinations of aspects (e.g. users can claim or imply that the article or contribution lacks balance or contains inaccurate information), and it can be expressed via a diverse set of strategies (e.g. explicit judgements, irony or rhetorical questions). Some of these aspects and strategies have been described in previous studies (e.g. Kleinke 2010, Neurauter-Kessels 2011 and Johansson 2015), and the present analysis will draw on these findings but also propose a new, comprehensive set of categories based on the evidence provided by the present corpora. As the studies mentioned above investigate online data only, the following discussion will, in each case, first present the findings for the online corpus before contrasting them to those for the corpus of letters.

7.3.4.1 Criticising the journalist

In her analysis of impolite reader response, Neurauter-Kessels (2011) identifies nine different ways of attacking a journalist's face. While some of these categories could also be found in the present data, others needed to be added to the set (most notably that of *attitude/character*) or combined as they tended to occur in combination or could not be clearly separated.

In the 125 comments in which the author is the target of the criticism, four major and three minor aspects can be distinguished. Their distribution is illustrated in Figure 28 below.[459]

Although the number of contributions criticising the journalist is almost twice as large in the corpus of letters (i.e. 230), only one additional category of criticism, i.e. that of missing information, was identified in the written corpus (see Figure 29 below).

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[458] Public figures may also contribute to the discourse as columnists or authors of letters to the editor. The present data contain, among others, reactions to an opinion piece about illegal file sharing by the English singer Lilly Allen published in the *Times*, numerous replies to an opinion piece about profit-making in journalism by James Murdoch published in the *Guardian* and several letters to the editor written by politicians, e.g. one written to the *Guardian* by Peter Mendelson, at the time Secretary of state for business, innovation and skills [NEWS G07-075]. In such cases, the public figures were considered in the roles they play in the interaction, i.e. as authors of newspaper articles and writers of letters to the editor.

[459] Since it is not infrequent to criticise more than one aspect within the same comment, the total number of instances amounts to 156.

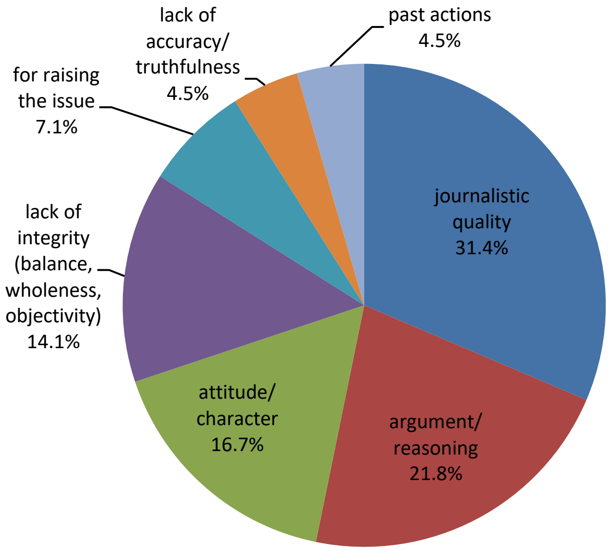

Figure 28 Aspects criticised when targeting the author in the online comments (N=156)

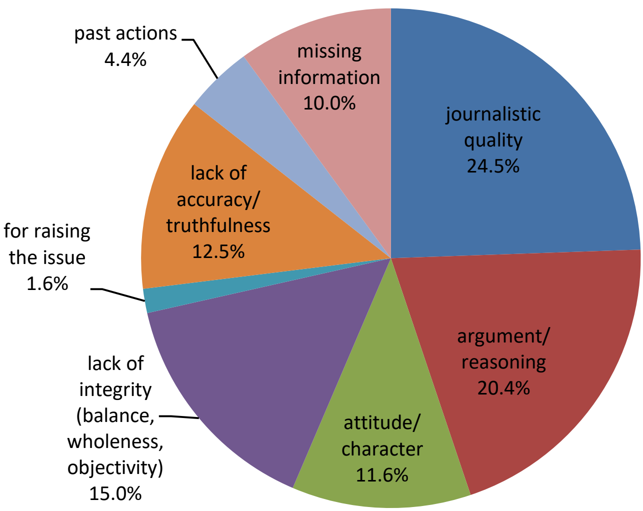

Figure 29 Aspects criticised when targeting the author in the letters to the editor (N=319)

A preliminary glance at these pies seems to suggest that the similarities between the two corpora outweigh the differences by far. Yet before a conclusive comparison can be drawn, the individual categories of criticism need to be addressed in more detail. The analysis of the most frequent aspect in both corpora, i.e. the journalistic quality, will also include a discussion of the different ways of identifying the target of the criticism.

7.3.4.1.1 Journalistic quality and identifying the target

7.3.4.1.1.1 Online comments

In almost one third of the cases in which the author is criticised in the comments (i.e. 31.4%), the aspect under criticism is the journalistic quality of the newspaper article and hence the core aspect of the author's macro identity as a journalist, i.e. his/her professional skills. These skills include, among others, using the right terminology (see (473) and (479) below), having the required knowledge and expertise to comment (474), basing one's article on well-researched facts (see (474), (475) and (481) below) and having the analytical skills to produce a coherent (476), meaningful (475) and convincing (477) argument.

(473) Can't the Guardian get anything right when talking about tax?
The headline screams "tax avoidance" and then goes on to describe pretty blatant tax evasion. […] [CMC G07-067 c14]

(474) Evolution is Fact? Clearly whoever penned the title has not read any of the many serious works by serious scientists that show that evolution is anything but. […] [CMC T07-005 c3]

(475) Frankly, this article itself seems to be a patchwork of gossip, which rather undermines its overt message. But so what? That message is a rather glib truism; […] [CMC G06-060 c7]

(476) Where's the response to the release of Megrahi that coheres? This set of observations by Simon Jenkins [AUTHOR] doesn't cohere. It's as fractured as everyone elses response. […] [CMC G07-083 c19]

(477) Sir, you have ignored the root problem. […] [CMC T08-059 c8]

Even if the journalist is only named or directly addressed in (476) and (477) respectively, all of the five comments above represent a threat to the respective journalist's positive face and professional identity, as talking about 'the Guardian', 'the headline', 'this article' and 'whoever penned the title' serves to clearly identify the target.

While Neurauter-Kessels (cf. 2011: 205ff.) claims that talking about the author in the third person is face-threatening because it is an example of the impoliteness strategy that Bousfield (cf. 2008: 101f.), drawing on Culpeper (1996), calls *snub*, it is argued here that this is the standard way of referring to the journalist when commenting online. Since leaving a comment need not be conceptualised as 'talking back' to the media and hence a dialogic form of communication – and with only 96 comments in total (i.e. 9.6%) directly addressing the journalist, the present data strongly suggest that this is the case – talking about the journalist is not a snub *per se* but simply illustrative of the fact that the users do not necessarily perceive the journalist to be part of the group of active interlocutors and passive readers.[460] Thus, while 37.1% of the users directly address the journalists when criticising them, the 24.1% of the critical comments written in the third person are more representative of the communicative strategies used in online comments in general. That it is best not to consider talking about the author in the third person as a face threat *per se* is also strongly supported by the finding that positive feedback, i.e. the move opposing that of criticism (see 7.3.5 below), is usually also performed in this way:

(478) A lovely, timely and needed article by Libby Purves [AUTHOR]. […] [CMC T08-032 c5]

However, there are some cases in which the commenters talk about the journalist while directly addressing a third party, the author being the (in)direct object (or affected participant) of a directive speech act, i.e. the third party is asked to do something to the author:

(479) […] Message to Guardian editor; please explain to this lady [AUTHOR] the difference between deficit and debt. [CMC G11-001 c5]

(480) Someone please teach this fellow [AUTHOR] the apparently lost art of precis. [CMC G09-061-62 c13]

In such cases, the concept of snubbing seems more appropriate, yet it needs to be added that the impolite move of talking to the editor/other addressees about the authors as if they were not present is boosted by the use of very general terms of reference. By referring to them as 'this lady' and 'this fellow', the comment writers deprive the respective authors of their

[460] While there is at least one comment thread in the present data where the original author even contributes to the discussion by writing five posts (comments 5, 12, 64, 72 and 74 in a thread of 101 comments; comments 21 to 101 not included in the present corpus), this behaviour is fairly exceptional and can be attributed to the fact that the article in question is a very personal opinion piece about the author's weight loss experiences. Although nothing can be said about how many of the journalists of the present corpus follow or at least have a cursory glance at the discussions below their articles, the findings of research into participatory journalism suggest that this is not common practice (cf. Domingo 2011, Heinonen 2011, Reich 2011 and Ruiz et al. 2011).

individual, personal identities (by avoiding their names) on the one hand and their professional identities (by avoiding terms such as *author, journalist*, *columnist* or *correspondent*, i.e. terms that are used very frequently for this purpose in letters to the editor) on the other. While the latter way of referring to the author is identical to using ‘this lady/fellow’ in terms of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) indexicality principle (i.e. *labelling* is used), the two strategies differ markedly in terms of the positionality principle: instead of using a fairly specific category identifying the respective individual by reference to his/her profession, the commenters in the examples above reduce the authors to their gender. Notwithstanding that ‘lady’ and ‘fellow’ are friendly terms, in the above cases such general terms clearly enhance the condescending effect of asking the editor, i.e. the author’s superior, or just anybody to teach the author the skills he/she seems to be lacking. Such examples thus reveal how users may try to exercise power over the journalists by casting them in the role of the least powerful player.

While such snubs and the direct references and forms of address illustrated above are certainly damaging to the journalist’s positive face, less direct references are not necessarily also less face-threatening. In (481), there is no reference to the author at all, yet the content leaves no doubt as to who is the target of the criticism:

(481) It makes for “exciting” copy to compare other countries with the UK in their cuts, but it is poor journalism and badly researched. Marie Antoinette never even made that remark about cake. I hear the Daily Mail doesn’t care for research - perhaps they are hiring there. [CMC G10-056-59 c13]

By claiming that the article does not live up to the core principles every journalist should strive to uphold (i.e. well-researched, good journalism), the comment writer unmistakably attacks the author of the article and not only holds him/her responsible for its lack of journalistic quality but even suggests he/she is unfit to work for the *Guardian*.

Yet this comment, reproduced here in its entirety, is not only interesting with regard to how the target of the criticism is identified, it also illustrates how several distinct strategies to discredit the author can be used in combination. First, the commenter produces an explicit negative evaluation of the journalistic product (‘poor journalism and badly researched’) before refuting one of the facts mentioned in the article (i.e. Marie Antoinette’s remark about cake), hence implying that the author has made a mistake. While these two moves can already be considered to be threatening the positive face of the journalist, the last sentence, implying that the author’s skills do not measure up to the broadsheet newspaper the *Guardian* but would better fit the tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mail*, can no longer be regarded as constructive criticism, as it is masked as a suggestion or even a piece of advice.

In Searle's (cf. 1969: 67) speech act theory, one of the preparatory conditions for advice is that the speaker believes that the action advised will benefit the hearer. In the example above, however, it would only have a beneficial effect for the comment writer (i.e. he/she would no longer have to read such 'poor journalism') and thus be in *his/her* best interest and not in that of the author. While Brown and Levinson (cf. 1987: 66) consider giving advice an act that intrinsically threatens the hearer's negative face, the effect of the face threat is boosted by the insincerity of the advice and the fact that the adviser assumes a position of authority over the recipient of the advice by claiming to know what is best for him/her, a behaviour that is especially problematic in non-institutionalised contexts (cf. Locher 2006a: 37ff.). According to MacGeorge et al. (2008), for advice to be effective, the recipient should not only need and want the advice but also perceive the adviser as having the required expertise and confidence and as being close to him/her. While the comment writer does not seem to lack confidence, the other criteria are not met, which strengthens the patronising effect of the fake advice and hence also the criticism.

All in all, the combination of different strategies for criticising the author's journalistic abilities turns this comment into one that is likely to be perceived as particularly offensive although the journalist is neither addressed, nor named or explicitly referred to.

7.3.4.1.1.2 Letters to the editor

While criticising the journalistic quality of the article is – at least when viewed in comparison to the other aspects – not quite as frequent in the letters as in the comments, it is still the most frequently criticised aspect (24.5%). As in the comments discussed above, the journalists may be criticised on the basis that their articles fail to cohere (482) or convince (see (483) and (484) below) or for using the wrong terminology (485).

(482) […] But after thoroughly documenting the failure of the public sector to make malaria drugs available in its clinics, she [AUTHOR] concludes her piece by inexplicably attacking the private sector, whose efficiency she praised five paragraphs earlier […] [NEWS G07-034]

(483) Sir, Your arguments against releasing al-Megrahi (Leader, August 21) fail to convince. […] [NEWS T07-010_2]

(484) Sir, I was somewhat disappointed to read "Going cheap — Decent MPs cost decent money" (leader, Sept 9). The logic quite escapes me, as it would appear that the MPs' expenses scandal has been quickly forgotten. […] [NEWS T09-057_1]

(485) […] All right, all right, I know Ariane Sherine [AUTHOR] intends the piece as light relief, but how much humour can one extract from a misuse of the common name "seagull" when, as Moss [AUTHOR OF ANOTHER ARTICLE REFERRED TO] points out, "technically there is no such thing"? [NEWS G07-013]

However, having the required knowledge and expertise to be able to provide a sound analysis of the situation seems to be the most important factor:

(486) While I welcome Jonathan Freedland's [AUTHOR] determination to sideline the banking sector, his remedy – the exchange of savings and loans via Zopa at interest rates in the region of 8% – is based on a profound misunderstanding of bank credit […] [NEWS G06-088]

(487) Peter Preston [AUTHOR] and the BBC are utterly mistaken if they believe that democratic representation dictates open access to the public media for parties like the British National party (Silence is purposeless, 7 September). Defining the situation, as Preston does, as a choice between open debate and ignoring fascist propagandising indicates a basic misunderstanding of the achievement of power in mass societies. […] [NEWS G09-033]

Especially the expression that the author 'misses the point' and other, related phrases are fairly common and illustrate nicely how the author's analytical skills may be criticised via such explicit negative evaluations. By elaborating on the points missed, the letter writers position themselves as well-informed and insightful contributors, who can provide not only a more complete but also better picture of the situation and are hence justified in attacking the journalist's professional identity.

(488) Polly Toynbee [AUTHOR] (Comment, 29 August) misses the underlying objective of the Tories' "Broken Britain" narrative. […] [NEWS G08-079]

(489) Your report on diplomas (Top universities sceptical about accepting applicants who take diplomas, 25 August) misses a few crucial points. […] [NEWS G07-042]

(490) The news that Adair Turner and the FSA will no longer stand in the way of Tobin-style taxes on the City is to be welcomed (City watchdog backs tax on 'socially useless' banks, 27 August). However, the focus in the coverage of this issue on the excesses of capital(ists) rather misses the point – as does the FSA. […] [NEWS G07-076]

As these examples illustrate, there are several different ways of referring to the journalist or article and hence identifying the target of the criticism. As shown above, users contributing online can either directly address the authors or talk about them in the third person (with and without mentioning names). In the letters, however, the picture is slightly more complicated. First of all, the journalist can be named and referred to in the third person (see (485) to (488) above) and second, the article can be identified and talked about without reference to its author (see (484) and (490) above). Both of these forms of identification can be used in letters without any direct address (see (485) to (488) above) as well as in letters directly addressing the editor (see (484) above and (491) below).

(491) Your reporter Robert Booth [AUTHOR], after a systematic trawl of development circles, unearthed a private letter written by the Prince of Wales four years ago and ignored by the recipient. […] [NEWS G06-052]

However, the interpretation of second person pronouns in letters to the editor is far more problematic than in online comments, where the only difficulty lies in deciding, with the help of the context, whether *you* refers to the author, another reader or people in general. Given the history of the genre and the fact that all letters published in the *Times* invariably start with 'Sir,…', a structure no longer used in the *Guardian*, one could be led to believe that letters to the editor are – as the name suggests – always directly addressed to the editor and thus that second person pronouns always refer to the editor and not the author.[461] However, while some letters clearly address the editor by talking about the author in the third person, as illustrated, among others, by (353) on p. 302, (373) on p. 309 and (405) on p. 323, some uses of second person pronouns and determiners are ambiguous (see (489) above, where 'your' could refer to both the editor and the author), and some letter writers even seem to use 'Sir,…' or 'you/r' to address the author (see (349) on p. 300 or (483) above). After all, the arguments that 'fail to convince' in (483) cannot be the editor's but must be the author's. Just how confusing such forms of address can get is best illustrated by (350) above, reproduced as (492) below for ease of reference:

(492) Sir, In your excellent piece by General Guthrie [AUTHOR] you cite, in a list of much-delayed defence projects, the Nimrod MR4 as an example of delay in the MoD. […] [NEWS T07-056.1]

In this case, the author, i.e. General Guthrie, is referred to in the third person, but 'Sir' and the second person pronouns 'you' and 'your' are used in the same sentence to refer to the same person, at least in semantic terms (citing is something an author does, not an editor). These examples seem to suggest that the use of 'Sir,…' and 'you/your' are mere conventions, not meant to address anybody in particular but rather the newspaper in general. Given that the editor is responsible for the content of the newspaper, it is of course possible to address him/her as a metonymic representation of the

[461] According to Cosslett (2016), the *Guardian* started omitting the addressee ('Sir' or 'Sirs') when publishing its letters in 1988.

entire newspaper and to interpret the 'you' and 'your' in (492) above as standing for the *Times*.[462]

In any case, the use of the honorific and especially the second person pronoun is sometimes ambiguous in this genre. This may have led to the fact that letter writers occasionally add a vocative to clearly identify the person addressed, as in (493) to (495) below.

(493) […] So, Vince Cable [AUTHOR] (The rich must be reined in, 17 August), there is something intrinsically wrong with […] [NEWS G06-048]

(494) Martin Kettle [AUTHOR] makes a salutary point (A land lost to Labour, 16 September) when he says "a political earthquake is about to hit Wales, with the Tories set to become the dominant party". The polling he relies upon is a little old, and I query his maths: but his central point stands. […]
A final word to Mr Kettle: never write off an underdog. […] [NEWS G10-069]

(495) Tony Blair [AUTHOR] (Engage with the faithful, 7 September) trots out the usual self-indulgent nonsense of "the faithful", that religion makes people do good. There is not a shred of evidence for this. "Religions know a lot about wellbeing," intones the reverend Blair. No, Tony, it is people that know a lot about wellbeing. The grave danger in weaving religion into this, or anything

[462] This interpretation is supported by the fact that there is no variation in the use of 'Sir,…' in the sub-corpora. The honorific seems to be consistently edited in in the case of the *Times* and, just as consistently, edited out in the *Guardian* and hence not the choice of the letter writers. Yet while the argument that it is the newspaper in general that is addressed, and not the editor, would explain the rather curious use of forms of address in (492) above, the case of the British weekly newspaper the *Economist* speaks against this interpretation. Just like the *Times*, the *Economist* used to start each letter to the editor with 'SIR – …'. Interestingly, this house rule was dropped at the beginning of 2015, when Zanny Minton Beddoes was appointed the first female editor-in-chief. In June 2015, she participated in the AMA (short for "Ask Me Anything") subreddit of the online bulletin board Reddit, where one user asked her whether "the decision to get rid of the honorific 'Sir' in the letters section" had been hers and added that "[t]he Letters section just seems to be missing something without an honorific". Her reply was "Yes, it was my decision. 'Sir' was obviously not accurate. And 'Madam' sounded far too old-fashioned to me. You are not the only person who misses the honorific, by the way." (; last accessed January 27, 2017). While this shows that the use of 'Sir' is perceived as highly conventionalised, it also reveals that the honorific is understood – at least by some – as specifically addressing the editor and not just the newspaper in general. This view is supported by Cosslett (2016: n.p.), who complains that even a year after the appointment of Katharine Viner as the *Guardian*'s editor in chief in 2015, "a surprising number [of readers] either remain oblivious or continue the 'Sir' tradition regardless", which, according to her, "no longer makes any sense". Interestingly, letters published in the *Times* only a couple of years before the present corpora were compiled still included a closing. While 'Sir, …' was used invariably, these closings varied – 'Yours sincerely' and 'Yours faithfully' being most frequent, but individual usage, such as 'Yours truly', 'Regards' or 'Perplexedly yours' also being possible (these observations are based on the letters published in Thomson 2002 and Thomson 2003). In comparison to those letters, the letters in the present corpus look far less like true letters, i.e. letters written to an individual, but rather like the result of conventionalised forms.

> else, is that we end up with a megalomaniac, driven by his faith and his righteousness, bombing hell out of thousands of innocent civilians in Iraq. [NEWS G09-024]

Especially the last letter, quoted in its entirety, exhibits an interesting structure: the letter writer first identifies the author of the opinion piece reacted to by naming him (‘Tony Blair’) and referring to him mockingly as ‘reverend Blair’, before directly addressing him using his first name.[463] This strategy not only serves to clearly identify the addressee of the disagreement, it also lends further weight to the criticism: in the explicit, negative evaluation of the author, he is talked about in the third person, whereas the disagreement is directly addressed to him – the use of his first name adding to the force of the threat.

In spite of the ambiguity caused by some uses of ‘Sir’ and ‘you/your’ in letters to the editor, a comparison of the communicative strategies chosen when criticising the author in the two corpora promises to be insightful. Given the invariant use of the opening ‘Sir,…’ in the *Times*, its presence was not considered enough to qualify for the strategy of directly addressing the author or editor, and only those letters which also contain a reference to the second person were counted as instances of ‘talking back to the newspaper’.

All in all, this strategy is used less frequently in the letters than in the comments, as only 25.2% of all letters but 37.1% of all comments criticising the author directly address the target of criticism. What is more, in more than half of the cases identified in the corpus of letters, this direct address has the structure of *possessive determiner + journalistic product*, e.g. ‘your article/report/editorial’ (see (496) and (497) below). This means that only 11.7% are cases comparable to those found in the comments (see (498) and (499) below), which makes the difference between the two corpora even more pronounced.

(496) Your editorial welcoming action to force tax havens to loosen the bonds of secrecy (21 August) omitted one important point: many of the world’s leading tax havens fall under the British crown. […] [NEWS G07-067]

(497) Your article (Big BP discovery refuels debate over ‘peak oil’, 3 September) gets it wrong. […] [NEWS G09-015]

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463 The word ‘megalomaniac’ and the third person possessive determiner ‘his’ in the remainder of the letter can of course also be understood as referring to Blair. Yet since in this case, a direct reference to Blair would probably have been too great a face threat, the letter writer chooses to present the criticism as a general statement instead and leaves it up to the reader to work out the connection. This highly derogatory letter thus illustrates nicely not only how different forms of address but also different strategies of criticism (explicit evaluation, disagreement, implicature) can be combined.

(498) […] But you are wide of the mark in seeking to portray him [THE PRINCE OF WALES] as some sort of behind-the-scenes dictator. Walk past St Paul's today and you will see […] [NEWS G06-056]

(499) Israel is not offering any significant freeze on settlements (Obama on brink of deal for Middle East peace talks, 26 August). It has merely offered not to start new building projects for six months. […] And how on earth can you promote a new Middle East agreement that is only between the US and Israel? Therein lies the root of the problem […] [NEWS G07-070]

Even though the author or editor is directly addressed via the use of the possessive determiner in (496) and (497), this form of address mainly serves to identify the newspaper article reacted to (see 6.3.1 above for a discussion of different contextualisation strategies) and not to enter into a dialogue with the journalist or newspaper. This, in contrast, is the case in (498) and (499), where the author is not only criticised (via an explicit negative evaluation and a disagreement respectively) but also told to do something and asked a question – moves that have already been discussed in the analysis of the corpus of online comments (see 7.3.4.1.1.1 above).

In addition to this difference in interactive strategies, (496) to (499) above serve to illustrate another, related contrast. In the first two examples, the letter writers concentrate on the journalistic products and only attack their authors indirectly. The agents of the actions criticised ('omit' and 'get wrong') are not people, i.e. the text producers, but inanimate products; it is the article that 'gets it wrong' and not its author. In (498) and (499), on the other hand, the agents are the authors, who are thus held directly responsible for their actions. This influences the perceived severity of the face threat, which is felt to be greater in the latter case.

This phenomenon is of course neither new nor unique to letters to the editor but has been widely documented in the research literature, albeit under varying names and concepts. The use of such metonymic representations can be considered an impersonalisation strategy, which Brown and Levinson (cf. 1987: 190) discuss as a negative politeness strategy. While Luukka and Markkanen (cf. 1997: 169) consider impersonalisation a subcategory of hedging, they agree that it serves to minimise the impact of face threats. In their analysis of complaints and requests, House and Kasper (cf. 1981: 168ff.) call such structures *agent avoiders* and show how they may be used to downgrade the complaint – or, as in the present case, the criticism. Investigating judicial discourse, Kurzon (cf. 2001: 81) also documents such impersonal forms of criticism in appellate court opinions and, in line with the others, argues that they are intended to tone down disagreement and criticism.

Given that 31 of the critical letters addressing the author or editor are of the *your* + *product* type, such impersonalised attacks, where the journalistic product is made not only the subject of the sentence but also the agent of the action criticised, are far from rare. In the corpus of online comments, on the other hand, it could only be identified once:

(500) […] The article fails to mention that China is the world's biggest commodities importer, but that doesn't help the developed countries so it has been conveniently overlooked here. […] [CMC T11-013 c4][464]

In this case, agent avoidance appears together with another impersonalisation strategy, i.e. the use of the passive voice, in a fairly long comment, but – in contrast to the examples of letters discussed so far – the determiner used is not a possessive one ('the' as opposed to 'your' article). This suggests that the strategy of (human) agent avoidance can also be found in reader contributions without references to the second person, as illustrated by (501).

(501) Reading the front page article about executive pay (Executive pay keeps rising, Guardian survey finds, 14 September), I couldn't help feeling that it missed the point somewhat. […] [NEWS G10-032]

The contrast between referring to the article, i.e. the product, and referring to its author, i.e. the producer, is best demonstrated by comparing (501) above to (502) below. While the author is criticised in both cases for having 'missed the point', the letter writer in (501) uses not only the strategy of agent avoidance but also further forms of hedging or downgrading ('I couldn't help' and 'somewhat') to soften the impact of the face threat and thus the attack on the journalist's professional identity.[465] In (502), in contrast, the target of the criticism is named and thus held responsible, and mitigation is absent, making the face threat more severe.

(502) Sir, Daniel Finklestein [AUTHOR] misses the point when he says it was right for Sam Wanamaker to be considered for internment ("They were right to keep an eye on Red Sam", Opinion, Sept 2). […] [NEWS T08-064]

[464] Example (473) on p. 380 above could also have been included here, yet as the verb *scream* is a typical collocate of the noun *headline* and not usually combined with lexical items representing the author, this use was considered a special case.

[465] House and Kasper (1981) would probably call the reference to the first person ('I couldn't …') a *scope-stater*, as the writer stresses the fact that what follows is just a subjective opinion, and 'somewhat' an *understater*, both – just like *agent avoiders* – belonging to the category of *downgraders*. With the expression 'I couldn't help feeling', the writer even tries to justify his/her feelings by implying that they could not have been avoided and that there are good reasons for them, which can also be considered a form of mitigation.

Irrespective of whether the strategy of agent avoidance is used or not, the overall strategy of talking about the article or author in the third person instead of addressing the newspaper is the most frequent form of criticising the author: it is used in 100 letters to the editor, i.e. 43.5% of all letters with that target (compared to only 24.0% in the comments).[466]

These findings strongly support the argument presented above that talking about the author should not be considered a snub *per se*. In the letters to the editor, the predecessor of online comments in terms of genre history, this is clearly the standard way of criticising the author. Direct addresses to the author or editor can also be found, but only 11.7% of the critical letters can be considered truly dialogic, as in 13.5% the direct address follows the *your* + *product* pattern and hence mainly serves to identify the article that triggered the letter. In the comments, on the other hand, users directly address the authors far more frequently when criticising them (39.2%); references in the third person are used in only 24.0%.[467] Interestingly, the strategy of directly addressing the author is quite rare in the overall corpus of online comments and comparatively frequent in those comments criticising the author: of the 96 comments in total addressing the journalist, almost half (i.e. 49) are critical in nature. While the use of 'you/your' or appellative structures to directly address the author or editor is, all in all, more frequent in the letters (173 letters), the reverse holds true for the use of these structures when criticising the author: only 33.5% of the direct addresses are found in critical contributions, where it is more common to refer to the author or article in the third person.

However, these findings must be interpreted with caution. Tempting though it may be to draw this conclusion, the strategy chosen for identifying the target of criticism is no clear indicator of the perceived severity of the face threat and hence the level of impoliteness. As has been shown above, (a) even indirect references to the author can be severely damaging to his/her face (481), (b) references in the third instead of second person are not necessarily snubs and can, in the case of the strategy of agent avoidance, even be used to soften the face threat (501) and (c) direct addresses, while acknowledging the author as interlocutor, can also be rather condescending (495). Despite differing preferences for identifying the target of criticism in the two genres, these can neither be considered the cause nor the effect of

[466] In an additional seven letters, the editor is directly addressed with 'you/your' while talking about the author – a strategy already discussed for online comments (see (479) on p. 381 above) and illustrated by (491) above.

[467] In addition to the strategies discussed above, a reader contribution may also criticise the author without containing any explicit terms of address (20.0% of the critical letters and 25.6% of the critical comments) or with the help of a combination of strategies (8.3% of the letters and 11.2% of the comments).

one genre being more aggressive than the other. To a certain degree, the differences can also be traced back to the communicative situation: the conventions for establishing coherence between the letter to the editor and its initiation described above (see 6.3.1) certainly favour referring to the author or article in the third person or using the *your + product* construction, as this allows the letter writer to name the author and/or article and hence clearly identify the trigger. Given that this is not necessary in the comments, readers commenting online are less limited in their choices. While the majority of users do not seem to perceive the journalists as forming part of the interaction online, a considerable number nevertheless choose to address them directly when attacking their face. It will be interesting to see whether, over the years and decades, the preferences in online comments will change and new conventions will develop, causing letters to the editor and online comments to drift further apart in this respect. The reverse could also happen, and letters to the editor might change to look more like online comments instead.

7.3.4.1.2 Challenging argument/reasoning

7.3.4.1.2.1 Online comments

With 21.8%, the aspect that ranks second in the comments is the author's reasoning, i.e. the argument(s) presented and the conclusions drawn. While reasoning, presenting arguments and drawing conclusions also count among the skills of a good journalist, this type of criticism differs from the first one in that the focus lies on the argument itself and not on how it is presented or the skills, knowledge and effort required to present it well. In the examples below, the users challenge the arguments advanced by the journalists by disagreeing and correcting the authors (see (503) and (504)) and by asking rhetorical questions (see (504) and (505)). Even though the authors are directly addressed in all three comments, the criticism focuses not so much on their abilities and hence their professional identity but rather on the topic discussed, which makes it more likely, or at least possible, that the comments are perceived as constructive contributions, nurturing and advancing the debate – an interpretation not possible in the examples discussed above.

(503) A CT scan is not without hazard. The rate of usage you describe is not necessarily in the patient's best interests. […] [CMC T06-018.1 c2]

(504) Bill Emmott [AUTHOR],
You say, "Oil is not running out." Unless our planet's crust is synthesising at least five _cubic kilometres_ of new oil a year (i.e. 30 Gbbl/year, the current

rate of extraction), then it is most certainly running out. Are you a proponent of “abiotic oil”? [CMC T07-022 c10]

(505) […] Why is the question of guilt irrelevant, Simon [AUTHOR]? Because the families must have a scapegoat - because US justice must be respected or you’ll get an angry phone call from Hilary Clinton?
Not very strong reasons, now, are they. […] [CMC G07-083 c19]

By assuming the position of an opponent in the debate, the users clearly challenge the author’s argument and line of reasoning. While this behaviour – unlike attacks on the journalist – is welcomed in the community standards, it is still a form of criticism, as challenging the journalists’ arguments or reasoning means indirectly challenging their authority and competence. Thus, even if the users do not pass an explicit judgement, the implication is clear. The severity of the threat, however, depends on the strategy employed: while the use of hedging (‘not necessarily’) in (503) as a form of mitigation softens the impact of the disagreement, the user challenging the author’s line of reasoning (i.e. that the question of guilt is irrelevant) in (505) increases the threat by imitating an interactive speech situation in which he/she adopts a fairly condescending tone. The comment writer not only addresses the journalist by his first name but also uses a conducive tag question (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 811), which clearly invites not only the addressee, i.e. the author of the article, but also the ‘overhearing audience’, i.e. all potential readers, to agree with the assertion that the reasons are ‘not very strong’.[468] This greatly strengthens the effect of the face threat performed by the negative evaluation, although the reasons are not even those of the author but those put into his mouth by the commenter.[469]

While the examples above exhibit many moves characteristic of debates (e.g. directly addressing the opponent, asking questions, referring to or even quoting what the opponent has said, refuting it and producing counter-arguments), the journalist’s argument can also be challenged in a more succinct and even blunt way, as in (506) below. In this case, the poster simply disputes the author’s evaluation by not only negating the argument but also producing a counter-argument mimicking the structure of the

[468] Even though it is not altogether unusual to use the author’s first name, this form of address is more common in comments providing positive feedback.
[469] Bousfield (2008: 247) discusses a similar use of conducive tag questions by focusing on the example of a Sergeant who provides a negative assessment of his addressee (‘you’re a bit of a space cadet’) followed by a negative tag (‘aren’t you’), thus forcing the recruit addressed “to self-damage by agreeing with the impolite assessment” (‘yes sir’). Even if the communicative situation and the participant roles are different in the present case, the strategy is the same and the effect comparable.

original argument. The same strategy is used in (507), which is a comment posted in response to an article entitled “The spirit of Thomas Paine could yet inspire Cameron” (Marquand 2009). Yet in this second case, the comment writer explicitly agrees with the journalist by not only producing the interjection ‘aye’ but also by using the coordinating conjunction ‘and’ to introduce an assertion with the same underlying structure as the headline of the article.

(506) [QUOTE] That is not Brown’s style. He condemns himself to an agonised deviousness whose sole virtue is honesty. [QUOTE]
No, whose sole virtue is *deviousness* thus it was ever so when it comes to Britain’s interests [CMC G07-083 c12]

(507) Aye. And the spirit of John Lennon could inspire Katy Perry [CMC G09-061-62 c3]

However, the agreement in (507), flouting Grice’s (1975) maxims of relation and quality, is an ironic affirmative along the lines of the phrase ‘and pigs might fly’. Echoing the author’s headline in this way raises the implicature that the likelihood of David Cameron being inspired by Thomas Paine is just as high – or rather low – as that of Katy Perry (an American singer) being inspired by John Lennon.[470] Through the use of such sniping, ironic remarks, the comment writers not only challenge the respective author’s argument but also construe their own identity by positioning themselves as witty commentators. In contrast to those users that assume the role of an opponent in the debate, they do not produce a lengthy argument or support their position with reasoning but resort to such pithy comments instead. In both cases, the users seem to try to live up to the expectations of the newspaper, which – at least in the case of the *Guardian* – actively constructs an image of the witty *Guardian* reader in its participation guidelines by using the key word *intelligence* five times (e.g. “the Guardian website is the place on the net where you will always find lively, entertaining and, above all, intelligent discussions”) and explicitly asking its readers to “[d]emonstrate and share the intelligence, wisdom and humour we know you possess” (The Guardian 2009).[471] In challenging the author’s

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[470] Moreover, it puts David Cameron on the same level as Katy Perry: just as the latter cannot hold a candle to the legendary John Lennon, the former is presented as having nothing in common with Thomas Paine.

[471] Interviews with journalists from various newspapers and countries allow Reich (2011) to shed some light on journalists’ attitudes towards user comments. While the *Guardian* editors were ambivalent about their value, an editor of the Canadian newspaper *Globe and Mail* drew attention to the fact that readers commenting online may even represent a threat to the newspaper’s reputation: “[v]ery few of them make intelligent comments or have intelligent things to say […] it essentially makes you look like your readers are idiots, to be quite honest”

argument or reasoning, the commenters – despite criticising the newspaper – can thus be argued to attempt to demonstrate that they possess the qualities expected of them and hence fit the image constructed for them.

7.3.4.1.2.2 Letters to the editor

The percentage of letters criticising the authors by challenging their argument(s) and reasoning is very similar to that found in the comments: 20.4% (as against 21.8%). As has been pointed out above, the focus in such challenges does not lie on the authors' journalistic skills and their explicit or implicit evaluation but on their arguments and reasoning and hence the issues at stake:

(508) Contrary to Geoffrey Wheatcroft's [AUTHOR] opinion (Comment, 19 August), surely the art of a literary biographer is to place all the jigsaw pieces of a person's life and work on the table and to see if, and how, they might fit together? The appreciation of a novel is not reliant on knowing about the author, but […] [NEWS G06-060]

(509) […] Harris [AUTHOR] thinks the government's plans to tackle digital piracy are wide of the mark. He is concerned that the threat of temporary suspension of online accounts is a step to far. It is a tough measure but, as a last resort for persistent offenders, the only way to create a level playing field […] [NEWS G07-112]

(510) Sir, Your leading article ("Word perfect", Aug 31) states that "The words available to Shakespeare sufficed to write Hamlet, didn't they?" Apparently not. In *Mother Tongue* Bill Bryson points out that of Shakespeare's vocabulary of 17,677 words, some 1,700 were his own invention (including, for example, leapfrog, monumental, obscene and pedant). Hamlet speaks of "this most excellent canopy, the air, look you", the adjective being another Shakespeare invention. [NEWS T08-026]

Even though the author or article is clearly identified in all three examples above, the respective letter writers do not pass explicit judgements but rather refute the arguments and assume opposing points of view, which, in turn, undermines the journalists' authority and competence. While this may be the only critical move performed, as in (510) above, especially in longer reader contributions, such argumentation may also be coupled with an explicit judgement of the journalist's skills and hence represent a combination of the two aspects discussed so far. The comment cited in (484) above, reproduced in full as (511) below, is a case in point. After evaluating the 'disappointing' journalistic product and its 'logic', the letter

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(quoted in Reich 2011: 103). The *Guardian* Community standards and participation guidelines are thus not only a good indicator of how the perfect reader should behave but also serve to construct the identity of that ideal reader.

writer challenges the author's line of reasoning by asking – and twice also answering – rhetorical questions and hence assuming the position of an opponent in the debate:

(511) Sir, I was somewhat disappointed to read "Going cheap — Decent MPs cost decent money" (leader, Sept 9). The logic quite escapes me, as it would appear that the MPs' expenses scandal has been quickly forgotten. If huge and uncontrolled expenses failed to provide quality MPs, why should increasing their salary?
Would we have better doctors or train drivers if we paid them more? No, in a system […] Will an increase in MPs' salaries persuade less efficient MPs to stand aside for the most able candidates, thus raising the quality of the House? No.
The article seems to imply that all potential MPs are driven by a desire for vast rewards and that, magically, raising the potential rewards will increase the quality. I rather feel that the only "quality" such a rise will engender is avarice.
May I suggest that […] [NEWS T09-057_1]

These combinations can also be found in some of the longer below-the-line comments; as a matter of fact, (476) and (505) above are both taken from the same comment. However, such combinations are more frequent in the letters, where, as in (511) above, the move of criticising the journalistic quality is often used to open the letter, thus serving as an introduction to the longer move of challenging the argument and debating. In the comments, on the other hand, criticism of the journalistic quality may also be found on its own, as (480) above has served to illustrate.

In addition to such fairly long contributions, in which the author's argument is dismantled piece by piece and countered with reasoned debate, the above-described, more succinct strategy of attacking the author's evaluation by negating it and producing a counter-argument that mirrors the structure of the original argument can also be found in the letters:

(512) "Spare a bit of sympathy for the speed of her fall" (In praise of… Hazel Blears, 17 September)? No, spare a thought for the innocent victims of New Labour spin, financial mismanagement, exorbitant expenses in parliament and excessive bonuses in the City. Spare a thought for the 20% of under-25s who are without a job under a Labour government. [NEWS G10-079]

As in (506) above, the letter writer challenges the author's plea to "spare a bit of sympathy" for the Labour politician Hazel Blears, who resigned in 2009 following the expenses scandal, by twice using a similar structure to shift the focus to the – in his/her eyes – true victims. While the main criticism is, without doubt, addressed to the Labour party, the structure of the letter serves to highlight the conflict between the point of view of the journalist and that of the letter writer. Turning the plea into an intonation question by adding a question mark and juxtaposing it with the letter writer's own pleas is hence a way of criticising the author for arriving at the conclusion that the readers should have sympathy with the politician(s).

The comparison of the first two categories of criticism has revealed that the similarities between the two corpora are far greater than the differences, which, so far, are a matter of degree and not of kind. It remains to be seen whether this also holds true for the remaining categories.

7.3.4.1.3 Attitude/character

7.3.4.1.3.1 Online comments

While evaluating the journalistic quality negatively or challenging the author's reasoning means criticising the journalist and his/her *professional* identity, another aspect criticised fairly frequently in the comments (i.e. 16.7% of the cases) is the journalist's attitude or character and hence his/her *personal* identity. As in the categories above, this form of criticism can be performed via different strategies, such as explicit negative evaluations (e.g. calling the author 'a smug irritating censorious git'; see (513) below), indirect evaluations (e.g. saying that the author's attitude 'is quite telling'; see (514) below), reproaches (e.g. accusing the author of 'projecting [his/her] own cynical mistrust where it doesn't apply' or of 'lik[ing] to belittle the Scots given any chance'; see (515) below) and mock agreement (e.g. 'of course this couldn't be […] it *has* to be…'; see (515) below).

(513) […] [QUOTE] I say this as a lifelong anti-fag man who lectures smokers in my office like a temperance pledger standing at the door of a pub. [QUOTE]
That's funny because I'd always had the impression you were a smug irritating censorious git, thanks for confirming this for the removal of all doubt. The problem is Mark [AUTHOR], you are celebrity obsessed, everything to you revolves around these media creations and public figures and long to be one too but you're still a nobody, the majority couldn't care less and these 'role models' are no such thing. [...] [CMC G11-018 c7]

(514) [QUOTE] And allowing the BNP's malignant leader a seat on a David Dimbleby panel as the pubs close some wintry Thursday is the least of our democratic dilemmas. [QUOTE]
The fact you think it is a dilemma to allow a man representing a million voters to have a say on publicly funded broadcasting is quite telling. [CMC G09-033-34 c4]

(515) […] Essentially you're projecting your own cynical mistrust where it doesn't apply. […] But then we all know you like to belittle the Scots given any chance, so of course this couldn't be a principled Scottish decision alone...oh no, it *has* to be part of a dodgy conspiracy. […] [CMC G07-083 c14]

Attacking the authors in this way is clearly threatening their respective positive face – irrespective of whether the threat just consists of a snide or wry remark or even bald, on-record insults. While attacking the author's professional identity by criticising his/her skills could be argued to be part of the feedback process for which reader response is intended, criticism targeting the personal identity of the author is more likely to be perceived as a personal attack rather than constructive criticism or a valuable contribution to the debate. Especially in (513) and (515), the criticism clearly moves beyond the article below which the comments were posted and attacks the person behind it by basing the criticism on prior knowledge of the author ('I'd always had the impression you were …' and 'we all know you like to ...'). Thus, instead of criticising the role and stance assumed by the author in that particular communicative situation (cf. Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) positionality principle), the users construe broader, more stable identity categories for the authors and thus position themselves as people who have known the journalists for some time and who are hence not only in a position to judge them but also entitled to speak in the name of the entire community (cf. Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) relationality principle and the concept of authentication).

7.3.4.1.3.2 Letters to the editor

Criticising the character or attitude of the journalist is less frequent in the letters, where this category only makes up 11.6% (as opposed to 16.7%) of all aspects criticised and, consequently, is only the fourth (as opposed to third) most frequently criticised aspect. The first possible reason for this difference that comes to mind is the fact that not every letter written to the newspaper is published and that letters attacking the journalist's personal, as opposed to professional, identity might not be chosen for publication for this very reason. After all, the likelihood of a letter to the editor accusing the author of being 'a smug irritating censorious git' being selected for publication seems rather low.

However, the difference between the corpora is not that large and, as stated above, online comments may also be deleted if they attack the journalist. Instead of jumping to conclusions, it is thus helpful to take a closer look at those letters in which the author's character or attitude is attacked. While the author is openly accused of being 'unfair' and 'complacent' in (516) and (517) respectively, this criticism does not take the form of an insult. In (517), it is even softened by being coupled with positive feedback ('otherwise excellent comment piece') and the strategy of agent avoidance introduced above. Instead of claiming in a straightforward manner that the author is complacent, the letter writer chooses to criticise the comment piece for 'betray[ing] a shocking degree of complacency in arguing that' although only people, not products, can be complacent and argue.

(516) Ariane Sherine [AUTHOR] is unfair. The reason the seagulls are feeding on landfill sites is because we've taken all the fish out of the sea and put them there. May I recommend membership of the Marine Conservation Society as the (admittedly long-term) solution to her problem? [NEWS G07-014]

(517) Wendy Piatt's [AUTHOR] otherwise excellent comment piece (The clearing crunch, 20 August) about the dilemma faced by tens of thousands of students scrambling for a university place betrays a shocking degree of complacency in arguing that no students have been deterred from higher education due to debt. […] [NEWS G07-002]

While these examples suggest that letters criticising the authors for their attitude or character tend to make use of mitigating devices, the following examples illustrate that this is not always the case and that the wording can also be quite harsh (e.g. 'defamatory nonsense') in this genre.

(518) […] Patronisingly, you write that it is in the interests of all who "believe in science" (sic) that moderate religion should prevail over theocratic extremists. […] [NEWS T07-021_3]

(519) Benny Morris [AUTHOR] (Impossible ambition, 11 September) is right to judge the gulf between Israelis and Palestinians unbridgeable, when Israelis like him continue to promote such apparent disregard for truth. The most pernicious of his numerous historical distortions is the alleged […] [NEWS G10-005]

(520) Your story with the sensational headline "Human Rights Watch investigator accused of collecting Nazi memorabilia" (10 September) repeats defamatory nonsense unworthy of this newspaper. […] [NEWS G09-081]

What is striking, though, is that the authors criticised for their attitude or character are fairly often not journalists but public figures (e.g. politicians, historians) who have published an opinion piece in the newspaper, as in (517) and (519) above and (521) and (522) below.

(521) Sir, Matthew Parris's [AUTHOR] rant ("She lived for just 24 years, but child nun brings hope to millions", profile, Sept 17) against the arrival of the relics of St Thérèse in this country exhibits all the intolerance and lack of proportion that we have come to expect from contemporary secularism. […] [NEWS T10-045]

(522) […] Before Mr Cameron [DAVID CAMERON, AUTHOR] lectures others about the qualities required for leadership, he might remind himself of the need better to make judgments on facts, not on unwarranted assertions from which he seeks to distance himself even as he makes them. [NEWS T08-029]

Not only public figures, but authors of opinion pieces in general, are more likely to be criticised for their personality and attitude than authors of news stories; however, given the differences in content and purpose between these two types of text, this finding is hardly surprising. Far more interestingly, the examples above also illustrate the different strategies used in this category of criticism. On the one hand, the author's attitude or character may be described with negatively-valued adjectives, nouns or adverbs (e.g. 'unfair', 'a shocking degree of complacency', 'intolerance', 'patronisingly'), which is a fairly direct form of criticism. On the other hand, unfavourable descriptions of the author's behaviour or the resulting product ('sensational headline', 'promote such apparent disregard for truth', 'his numerous historical distortions', 'repeats defamatory nonsense unworthy of', 'rant', 'lectures others', 'seeks to distance himself even as he makes them') may be used to invite the inference that this behaviour can be attributed to the author's attitude and personality. Yet even though such an inferential step is required, this type of criticism is not necessarily less harsh, and all of the examples above – whether they contain explicit evaluations or reproaches – represent clear threats to the author's face.

The above has shown that even in letters to the editor, the attitude and character of the author may be criticised although these aspects are part of his/her personal, instead of professional, identity. However, there are two striking differences in the use of this category of criticism between the corpora.

First, while the online corpus also contains some comments clearly insulting the authors, calling them 'a smug irritating censorious git', a 'drama queen', 'hypocrites' or a 'fifth columnist', such name-calling cannot be found in the letters. Reader contributions ridiculing and mocking the author were also considered clearly insulting, and these, too, can only be found in the online corpus. The comment cited in full in (523) below is such a case. It is a reaction to an opinion piece written in defence of MPs at the time of the UK parliamentary expenses scandal, its sub-headline containing the warning "Aspiring MPs beware: the hours are terrible, you will rarely see your families and the pay will not even cover your costs" (Senior 2009). The comment writer reacts to this article by directly addressing the journalist:

(523) Oh dear ! I am afraid your silver spoon is rather showing through . Of course you'll need to buy two houses darling ! Of course you'll need a nanny ! Of course we should all be grateful that you would give us your valuable time . Madam , you have just bracketed yourself alongside that preening idiot Duncan [ALAN DUNCAN, POLITICIAN] . You , it seems clear are exactly the type we DONT want in parliament thankyou . [CMC T06-030.2 c12]

In this case, the name-calling ('preening idiot') is directed not at the journalist but at the politician Alan Duncan, i.e. a public figure.[472] The journalist, in contrast, is not directly insulted in this way but rather ridiculed via the use of mock agreement – a strategy already introduced when discussing (515) above.[473] The exclamation 'Of course …!' is used three times in a row to indirectly disagree with the journalist and, above all, underline how ridiculous the user considers her reasoning. Coupled with the ironic uses of the vocative 'darling' and the 'thank you' close as well as the polite form of address 'Madam', this usage lends further weight to the explicit criticism expressed in the first and last sentences.[474] While (523) above represents a very severe face threat, it needs to be added that both name-calling and the use of ridicule are fairly rare in the online comments as well. Even if it were assumed that all 21 comments deleted by a *Guardian* moderator contained such insults, the percentage would still be extremely low.

The second, far more subtle difference between the corpora lies in the fact that some comments criticising the attitude or character of the author only use the newspaper article as a pretence to attack the author more generally, as illustrated in (513) and (515) above, where the criticism is based upon prior knowledge of the author ('I'd always had the impression you were …' and 'we all know you like to ...'). In the letters, in contrast, the criticism tends to be linked more clearly to the newspaper article in question. Even if the author in (516) above is accused of being 'unfair', this judgement is based on her attitude towards seabirds expressed in this particular article and not on a more general character trait. In terms of the positionality principle outlined above (see 7.2.1), the focus is thus on the author's stance or role in a particular communicative event instead of broader identity categories. The same holds true for the other examples discussed above: the adverb 'patronisingly' and the adjective 'complacent'

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472 The newspaper article and the events at that time strongly suggest that the politician attacked is Alan Duncan and not any other politician with that surname.

473 Yet while it is a public figure outside the communicative situation and not the journalist who is called an idiot, the statement that the journalist has 'bracketed [her]self against that preening idiot Duncan' likens the former to the latter and can, therefore, also be understood as broadening the scope of the insult to include the journalist.

474 According to Hobbs (cf. 2003: 252), the so-called *thank you close* is a politeness strategy very commonly used for closing a conversation. In the present case, however, 'thank you' does not only signal the end of the comment but also underlines the refusal expressed in the sentence directly preceding it. It is hence an example of the third usage of *thank you* listed in the *Macmillan Dictionary Online*: "used at the end of a sentence for telling someone firmly that you do not want something" (http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/thank-you_1; last accessed January 27, 2017).

are linked to the journalists' texts and not their personalities as such.[475] Yet while this tendency can be discerned, letters to the editor may still contain a more general judgement of the author's character if the author is a well-known public figure. This is the case in the criticism directed at David Marquand (524), who regularly contributes to the *Guardian*, or James Murdoch (525), whose opinion piece "Put an end to this dumping of free news" (Murdoch 2009) published in the *Guardian* caused a veritable uproar among readers. All nine letters published in reaction to this article, which is by far the highest number of letters published in reaction to a single article in the present corpus, argue strongly against Murdoch, some also basing the disagreement and criticism not only on his reasoning in this particular article but on knowledge of the person as such (e.g. the implication that Murdoch is two-faced and dishonest, triggered in (525) below).

(524) One needs a political satellite navigation system to keep track of David Marquand's [AUTHOR] twists and turns (The spirit of Thomas Paine could yet inspire Cameron, Comment, 9 September). For 11 years, […] [NEWS G09-061]

(525) […] Murdoch [AUTHOR] makes the case for what he describes as "genuine independence in news media", when what he really wants are favourable conditions for billionaire media tycoons free from regulation. […] Mr Murdoch may be right on one thing – there is a "serious and imminent threat" to independent news provision. But he needs to look closer to home for the culprit. [NEWS G08-002]

As these examples illustrate, such more general criticism is usually directed at authors who are public figures and/or very frequent contributors of opinion pieces. Interestingly, this also holds for the comments discussed above. In (513) and (515), the respective attack on the author's character is directed at Mark Lawson, a *Guardian* columnist and radio broadcaster on BBC Radio 4, and Simon Jenkins, a columnist for the *Guardian* and London's *Evening Standard* and a past editor of the *Times.* One of the authors attacked most severely in the present data is the well-known singer Lily Allen, whose opinion piece on the dangers of illegal file sharing caused much derision among the contributors to the comment section in the *Times*, where the atmosphere usually tends to be less charged. She is not only accused of being arrogant (attitude/character) but also mocked for lacking the experience and knowledge required to comment (journalistic quality), as

[475] The mixed label *attitude/character* was chosen for this category of criticism to highlight that – in line with the positionality principle – what is attacked need not be the more or less fixed character traits that surface in human interaction but may also be the attitudes adopted by the journalist in specific situations.

in (526) below, where one user ridicules her performance as an author by suggesting she pursue a career in stand-up comedy instead.

(526) Lily Allen [AUTHOR] talking like she knows better than Ed O'Brien or Nick Mason [MUSICIANS] gave me the best chuckle I had in weeks. Thank you Lily. If your next album bombs, you can always try stand up. […] [CMC T10-039 c18]

The comparison of the corpora has revealed that in both genres, authors may be criticised for their attitude/character via a number of different strategies, ranging from explicit judgements to unfavourable descriptions of their behaviour indirectly attributed to their attitude or character. While name-calling and ridicule directed at the author could only be found in the comments, their occurrence in this corpus is still extremely rare. More general unfavourable judgements of the authors' characters or attitudes, based not just on the evidence provided by their articles but on prior knowledge of them, could be found in both corpora, but is, especially in the letters, usually limited to well-known columnists and other public figures acting as authors. Just like the public figures that do not take part in the communicative situation (see Figure 26 above), these can be attacked quite harshly in both corpora.

In terms of identity construction, this means that authors who do not belong to the group of public figures are judged, above all, on the basis of their journalistic abilities and their arguments. If authors are criticised for their attitude and character, this judgement is usually closely linked to the journalistic product in question and hence the position assumed in this particular case. Thus, even though a person's attitude and character are part of his/her personal, instead of professional, identity, being considered a good journalist seems to involve more than just professional know-how and good reasoning; the authors also have the moral obligation not to be 'unfair', 'patronising' or 'complacent' in their articles. The next aspect to be addressed in more detail, i.e. the journalist's integrity, is also closely linked to this concept of moral obligation

7.3.4.1.4 Lack of integrity (balance, completeness, objectivity)

7.3.4.1.4.1 Online comments

In 14.1% of the cases in which the author is criticised in the comments, the commenters call the author's integrity into question by claiming that the article lacks balance, completeness and/or objectivity. It is important to point out that in these cases, the commenters do not simply add what they see as missing piece of information in order to further the discussion.

Rather, they accuse the author of having omitted this piece of information on purpose (e.g. by stating that something 'has been conveniently overlooked here'; see (527) below), thus implying that the journalist is biased or prefers to turn a blind eye to facts that do not suit his/her argument. In doing so, they attack the journalist's professional identity and position themselves as educated readers who have the necessary background knowledge and skill to expose such persuasive techniques:

(527) The article fails to mention that China is the world's biggest commodities importer, but that doesn't help the developed countries so it has been conveniently overlooked here. […] [CMC T11-013 c13]

(528) […] Often interesting and insightful, Jenkins [AUTHOR] sweeps the whole issue of Megrahi's guilt under the carpet in a move that would impress a stage hypnotist: […] For Simon Jenkins to ask us to do so is preposterous. And he hides this preposterous assertion in the middle of a set of statements full of such certitude that we can't help but go along with him. [CMC G07-083 c19]

The examples above illustrate nicely not only how the journalists are criticised for lacking the integrity to present the readers with a balanced, objective and complete picture but also how the commenters cast themselves in the role of knowledgeable and responsible readers, holding the press to account. This is particularly interesting considering that integrity is one of the core values and principles laid down in the Editor's Code of Practice, under which the two newspapers work and to which all journalists have to subscribe (cf. also Neurauter-Kessels 2011). *The Guardian's Editorial Code* (2007), for instance, explicitly states that "[t]he Guardian values its reputation for independence and integrity" and that "[t]he most important currency of the Guardian is trust". Since the readers above suggest that the authors cannot be trusted, they accuse them of breaching the most fundamental principle of journalism. From the authors' point of view, this should be the severest type of face threat and hence also the most serious attack on their professional identity.

7.3.4.1.4.2 Letters to the editor

When it comes to bemoaning that the article in question lacks balance, completeness or objectivity, the written corpus resembles the online corpus quite closely, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Of the letters criticising the journalist, 15.0% (compared to 14.1%) address the aspect of integrity, and (529) to (531) below are very similar to this type of contribution in the online corpus.

(529) Your article *Johnson ups carbon footprint by courtesy flight to New York*, 15 September) [SIC] unfairly overlooked the benefits that Boris Johnson's tour

will bring to London and its firms. […] Rather, you caricatured him as being "against" video conferencing. […] [NEWS G10-066]

(530) […] Charting a course through the population debate is difficult enough without the noise and one-sided reporting that is obsessed with immigration to the exclusion of environmental concerns. […] [NEWS T08-011_1]

(531) […] Anyone reading the coverage of Mr Phillips's remarks [CHAIRMAN OF THE EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION; QUOTED IN THE NEWSPAPER ARTICLE] could be forgiven for thinking that women in the same job as men, with the same level of experience, are routinely paid less. […] [NEWS T09-029]

As in the comment quoted in (527) above, the authors are accused of having 'unfairly overlooked' aspects of the story, of producing 'noise and one-sided reporting […] obsessed with immigration to the exclusion' of other aspects and of presenting the facts in a way that serves to make their point, irrespective of whether this leads to misunderstandings or not. Despite these similarities, this type of criticism tends to be less explicit in the letters. The strategy of agent avoidance, found only once in the online corpus (527), is fairly frequent in the letters (529), which show the general tendency to be less accusatory. In (530) above, for instance, the criticism is stated as a general truth without direct reference to the article or author. If read in combination with the newspaper article, however, the accusation of 'one-sided reporting' can only be understood as, if not exclusively at least mainly, targeting this particular article. In (531), a different strategy is used: the focus is shifted from the author, who is not even mentioned, to the audience, who 'could be forgiven' for drawing the wrong conclusions after having read 'the coverage'. In (532) and (533) below, on the other hand, the authors are named and accused of painting an incomplete picture or neglecting to mention a fact of vital importance. However, the accusation that this is done on purpose is not made explicit (as in the comments quoted in (527) and (528) above) even though the criticism that the authors fail to act according to the responsibility assigned to them can hardly be missed.

(532) Sir, Adam LeBor [AUTHOR] writes of the anniversary of the 1989 revolution (Comment, Aug 19) and comments on the changes since then in "the home of Magna Carta" and also in Eastern Europe. But the picture he draws is not complete. In most of those countries […] [NEWS T06-056]

(533) Sir, Frances Gibb's [AUTHOR] article ("Stop giving ex-wives these undeserved millions, urges expert in family law", Sept 14) neglects to mention that multimillion-pound awards are rare. Most divorcing couples can barely afford two homes after separation and both are obliged to continue working. […] [NEWS T10-024.1]

In the comments, in contrast, readers are far less hesitant to accuse the author openly of being biased (see (534), (535) and (537) below) or of 'trying to avoid giving a clear answer' (536):

(534) Mr Frum [AUTHOR] has not been upfront about a possible interest in this matter as he was a former economics speech writer for the Bush administration.
In the interest of balance, therefore, I shall declare my interest: my sister and mother are both nurses in the NHS.
He also fails to make clear […] [CMC T06-018.1 c10]

(535) [QUOTE] Labour will not reverse this; only the Tories **might**. [QUOTE; EMPHASIS ADDED BY THE COMMENT WRITER]
Are you sure the LibDems won't? They are usually pretty hot on civil liberties (better then Lab/Con anyway), and I don't see any quote from the LibDems to confirm their position - have you even asked them about it?
Also the last paragraph says the conservatives MIGHT reverse it, not that they will. This piece seems like shameless attempt at political capitalisation on a current topic. [CMC G10-086 c4]

As (534) and (535) above illustrate, such criticism may be performed in the form of explicit accusations ('has not been upfront about a possible interest in this matter', 'shameless attempt at political capitalisation') or by addressing the authors directly and calling them to account ('are you sure …?', 'have you even asked them …?'). In (536) below, the accusation that the author evades a certain question is even made twice, and in (537), the author is asked openly whether he/she was bribed to write what he/she wrote.[476]

(536) [...] But the author appears to be tap-dancing around the issue of whether or not the school has selected from the same group of students or whether it has managed to accept a very small, select group of very bright kids. The author appears to be trying to avoid giving a clear answer. [CMC G07-101 c1]

(537) […] [QUOTE] Intellectually and morally, Brown is a towering figure [QUOTE]
My God, you got paid for this? [CMC G09-061-62 c9]

Again, as the discussion of the examples above has been intended to show, there are some differences between the two corpora but these are a matter of degree and not kind. In both the letters and comments, the author's integrity is called into question in about 15% of the contributions criticising the journalist. While readers commenting online do not hesitate to accuse the journalists openly by making explicit judgements or calling them to account

[476] Even though one could of course argue that the question quoted in (537) is used, above all, to ridicule the politician Gordon Brown by suggesting that such favourable judgements of his personality can only be made by people paid to do so, it still represents a severe attack on the journalist's integrity by not only hinting, but openly asking, whether he/she accepted a bribe.

by directly addressing them, the writers of letters to the editor express their criticism in less explicit ways (e.g. by making general statements, not mentioning the author or only commenting on the failure and not the intent). In terms of identity construction, such criticism presents a clear threat to the journalist's professional identity, as integrity is one of the core values of this profession. The readers, on the other hand, position themselves as well-informed, insightful and alert members of the public who perform the important role of holding the press to account.

The aspects discussed so far are not only the four most frequent ones but together make up 84.0% (comments) and 71.5% (letters) of all aspects criticised in journalists. Despite differences in absolute numbers, their distribution in the two corpora was found to be surprisingly similar, as summarised by Figure 30 below.

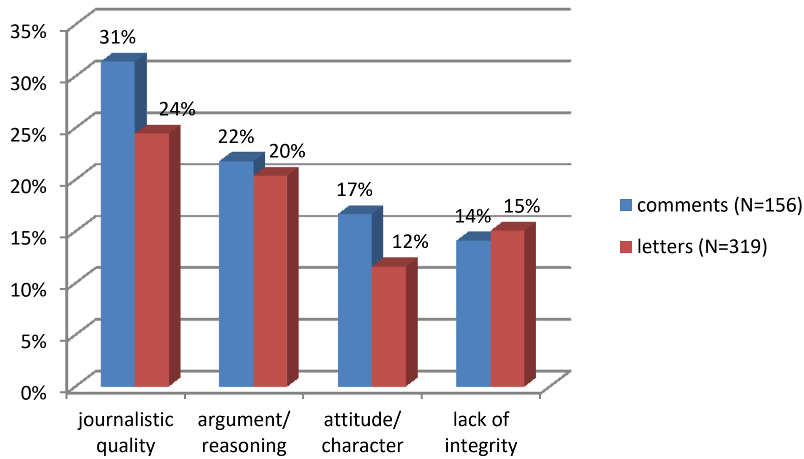

Figure 30 The four most frequent aspects of criticism when targeting the journalist

This is different in the four remaining, minor aspects, which will therefore be discussed together in the following.

7.3.4.1.5 Minor aspects

As illustrated by Figure 31 below, apart from criticising the journalists for their *past actions*, the two genres differ in the remaining, minor aspects of criticism, with one aspect (i.e. *missing information*) only being present in the corpus of letters.

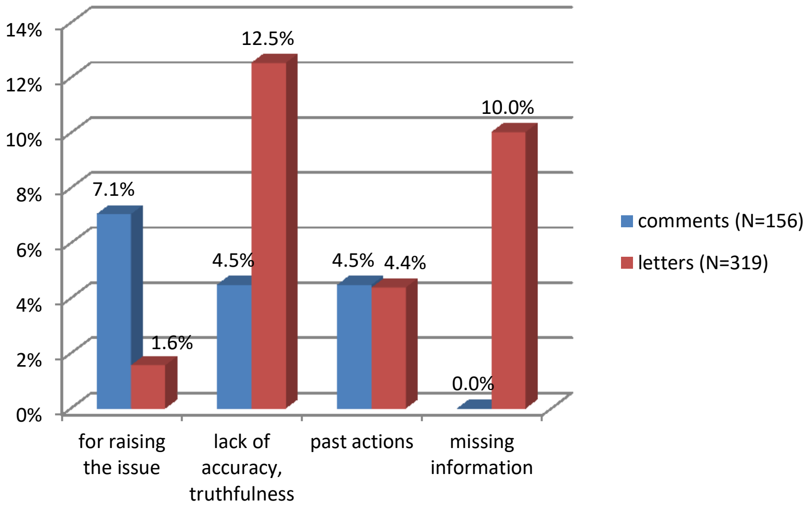

Figure 31 The four minor aspects of criticism when targeting the journalist

In 7.1% of the critical comments, the journalist (or even the entire newspaper) is criticised for having raised the issue in the first place. In (538), the frustration resulting from reading the article is made fairly obvious with the help of the performative predication or emote (Virtanen 2013: 161) 'groan', which is even prosodically respelt to strengthen the effect. The commenter in (539), in contrast, uses the more subtle strategies of irony and feigned interest to mock the journalist's choice of topic.

(538) Groooooaaann. Yet another divisive victim article about education in the UK. […] [CMC T08-032 c14]

(539) I don't feel we've had enough coverage of 10:10 around here lately. It sounds great, what is it? […] [CMC G09-051 c6]

In such comments, the users criticise the author's judgement of newsworthiness and balance; at the same time, they position themselves as constant and regular – as opposed to sporadic – readers of the newspaper.

This form of criticism is less frequent, though not totally absent, in the letters. In (540), one reader criticises the *Guardian* – and the media in general – for devoting too much attention to one political event at the detriment of other topics, and the reader quoted in (541) openly expresses his/her anger about the fact that the *Guardian* published an opinion piece authored by its controversial rival James Murdoch.

(540) While this country is faced by massive problems – eg financial turmoil and climate change – the obsession of the media with the Megrahi case is ridiculous (Report, 2 September). […] [NEWS G08-076]

(541) It is infuriating that you give free space for James Murdoch [AUTHOR] to promote his family's vile assault on integrity and public accountability. Can you imagine an attack by Alan Rusbridger on News International being given prominence in the Murdoch press? […] [NEWS G08-007]

The strategies used may differ (what could be called 'performative moaning' and irony on the one hand and explicit judgements on the other), yet in both corpora, the readers make their dissatisfaction with the newspaper pretty clear.

Claims that the article lacks *accuracy* or *truthfulness* are far more frequent in the letters (12.5% as opposed to 4.5% in the comments), which are often written to correct a factual mistake in the article:

(542) Reporting the acquittal of former Zambian president Frederick Chiluba of corruption charges (Report, 18 August), your correspondent cites anti-corruption campaigners having "billed the prosecution as the first of an African leader for corruption in his own country". This is incorrect. […] [NEWS G07-018]

(543) Sir, I believe that the Samuel Fletcher of Manchester is possibly the oldest RNLI lifeboat still extant, not The James Stevens No 14 (report, Sept 8). […] [NEWS T09-066_1]

This kind of criticism is fairly rare in the comments: in (544) below, the user feels the need to point out that a certain crop was developed at an institute different from the one claimed by the author, yet this is not his/her main reason for writing the comment, and the correction is merely a side note, added to the end of the comment and introduced by 'by the way'.

(544) […] By the way Hobbit [NAME OF A CROP] was a PBI variety, I used to be a Licenced Crop Inspector. [CMC T10-025 c14]

Interestingly, this user supports his/her correction by claiming expert status in the field – a move that is, just like that of recounting personal experiences, also frequently used when debating in order to lend more weight to one's arguments (see 7.4.2 below).

The difference in frequency between the genres can be partly attributed to the fact that a substantial part, i.e. 42.5%, of the letters pointing out wrong information are not only written by an expert in the field but by the person or organisation the trigger article was about. Letters to the editor containing such corrections and clarifications are very likely to be published, as giving a voice to those who feel to have been misrepresented by the newspaper may avoid having to face libel charges. In (545) below, taken from a letter counting an impressive 245 words, a professor first passes an explicit negative judgement ('ill-judged and ill-informed') before explaining in great detail the difference between what he had written and how it was presented in the newspaper article.

(545) I won't comment on the whole of the article by Seumas Milne [AUTHOR] (This rewriting of history is spreading Europe's poison, 10 September), which strikes me as ill-judged and ill-informed, but I do object to being quoted out of context. In my piece on the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact for the BBC World Service website I wrote that "For the Jews […] But this is not to argue, as Milne suggests I do by omitting the first part of the quoted sentence, that Stalin shared in the responsibility for the Holocaust in general.
It is infuriating to have my views misrepresented on such a sensitive issue and at a time when the Russian government has made legal threats against historians who do not share its views on the history of the second world war. For the record, I have never equated communism with nazism – it is a false and unhelpful equation and I have said so many times in public and in print. Nor do I hold any sympathy for the "nationalist right in eastern Europe" that Milne has condemned in his article. [NEWS G09-071]

For such important corrections and clarifications, the letters page in printed newspapers is, without any doubt, still the official medium. As discussed above (see 6.3.2.1.2), such reactions by the person or organisation in question are a special category of letters to the editor without equivalent in the comments, which partly explains the difference in frequency of this move type.

Yet even without such counter-statements, correcting the newspaper seems to be more important in letters to the editor than comments. The authors of such letters position themselves as attentive and knowledgeable readers; by publishing these contributions, the newspapers, in return, demonstrate that they are not afraid to admit mistakes, thus creating the image of a respectable and self-confident medium.

The next aspect, i.e. *missing information*, is directly linked to that of lacking accuracy and truthfulness. In this case, instead of arguing that the information provided by the newspaper is *wrong*, the readers add information that has not, but – in their eyes – should have, been provided.

(546) Sir, You are quite right to lead the long overdue celebration of the work of the 10,000 Ultra codebreakers at Bletchley. However, that still leaves uncelebrated one much smaller category of people involved in Ultra: the staff officers in the field, who regularly […] [NEWS T09-031_1]

(547) How did the piece on successful sporting mothers (She made it look easy, but for most it's a different story, 15 September) leave out Fanny Blankers-Koen, the greatest female athlete of all time? […] [NEWS G10-043]

The primary purpose of this move is not to disagree with the authors, correct them or accuse them of having omitted this piece of information on purpose but rather to position the reader as someone being able to help others to get the full picture. Even though the letters may vary in how evident they make it that providing the full picture is the journalist's job, this criticism is always present. In (546) above, it remains fairly implicit, conveyed primarily by the adverb *however* following the initial agreement ('You are quite right to …'). The reader in (547), on the other hand, is far less indirect, as asking *how* it could happen that a certain female athlete was not mentioned in the article amounts to complaining that it *did* happen. In (548) below, the reader even makes his/her disappointment explicit:

(548) Sir, It was disappointing to see that your otherwise excellent article ("999: Please can somebody help me? It's an emergency", times2, Sept 9) failed to acknowledge the vital role of Her Majesty's Coastguard (part of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency), which is an integral part of the 999 emergency telephone system. […] [NEWS T09-071_1]

This strategy of criticising the author by *adding* facts could not be found in the online corpus, where the move of *correcting* facts already played only a negligible role. That adding and correcting facts are standard moves in letters to the editor, however, is also illustrated by the fact that adding supposedly missing information is often used for humorous effect. In the three brief letters below, all quoted in their entirety, the readers use the claim that the author 'omits' information or 'neglects to mention' something only as a pretence to produce a joke or witty remark, e.g. by playing with similar-sounding words ('inglourious' vs. 'in glorious'; see (549) below), referring to the lyrics of the famous Beatles song "A day in the life" (550) or inventing names for car models based on Yorkshire expressions (551).

(549) Your review of Inglourious Basterds (Film & Music, 21 August) omits to mention if the film was shot in glorious Technicolor. [NEWS G07-028][477]

(550) In your editorial (Leaders, 26 August) praising the Albert Hall, you neglected to mention that the Beatles told us how many holes it takes to fill the Albert Hall – 4,000. [NEWS G07-087]

(551) I note (Report, September 16) that the new VW electric car, the E-up, launched at Frankfurt. However you neglected to mention the new Ba-gum, and the excellent open-top version, the Baht-at. [NEWS G10-063][478]

[477] The curious spelling 'Inglourious Basterds' is the original spelling of the film title.
[478] The existing name *E-up* is interpreted as standing for *what's up* and, following this pattern, the fictional names *Ba-gum* (*by God*) and *Baht-at* (*without hat*; for a convertible) are created.

As these examples nicely illustrate, the information claimed to be missing is either irrelevant or invented; the letter writers clearly do not intend to criticise the journalists but use moves and linguistic structures typical of letters to the editor (e.g. 'you omit/neglect to mention …') to link their joke to the respective newspaper article and, most importantly, to delay the punchline. The beginning of each letter reads like a standard letter to the editor adding missing information. Only towards the end of these comparatively short letters does the reader recognise that they are, in fact, not part of the critical but the humorous class of letters. The fact that the expectations initially triggered in the reader are not met adds greatly to the humorous effect. This, however, is only possible because the letter writers play with conventionalised forms and functions of the genre that are immediately recognisable.

Contributions criticising authors for their past actions are fairly infrequent in both genres (4.5% in the comments and 4.4% in the letters). In both corpora, such contributions could only be found if the authors are well-known public figures (e.g. James Murdoch or the singer Lily Allen) or if they reveal information about their actions in the articles, thus offering a basis for the attack:

(552) […] It seemed clear throughout the piece that Chunn [AUTHOR] was often aware that her children's needs were not always met. If the career downsizing is of her own choosing, rather than talk about the possibility of working "like a fiend" in the future, or indeed writing this piece in the first place, her time would be better spent making up for lost time with her already grown children. […] [NEWS G06-104]

In a number of cases, it is the newspaper in general that is made the target:

(553) If the parents objected to the picture of their dying son being published it shouldn't be published. Afterall it's being printed more or less to draw attention to the advertisments in the newspaper rather than an attempt at "immortality" or some other lofty purpose. [CMC T10-005 c7]

(554) er... the Guardian Group have offshore tax havens themselves.
Hypocrites [CMC G07-067 c17]

The comment in (553) above criticises the newspaper for publishing a photograph showing a dying US Marine during an ambush in Afghanistan and thus focuses on the media product and the issue at hand. In contrast, accusing the newspaper of having offshore tax havens in a comment on an article about tax evasion or reprimanding the author for her career and family choices is similar to the move of criticising the journalist's character in that the focus is no longer on the journalistic product or the topic at stake but rather the person(s) behind it. However, in both genres, this kind of criticism is very rare.

7.3.4.1.6 Concluding remarks

So far, the analysis has shown that criticising the author of the trigger article is far more frequent in the letters than in the comments, where criticism in general is not uncommon but substantially more often targeted at groups of people outside the communicative situation. Thus, while one of the core functions of letters to the editor seems to be to provide specific feedback on the journalistic product, the focus in online comments tends to be on the topic under discussion rather than its presentation in the media. However, such criticism can also be found in the comments, and despite the differences in overall frequency, the aspects criticised when targeting the journalist are roughly the same – the major difference being one additional category of criticism found in the letters. While this might evoke the impression that letters to the editor, by 'talking back' to the media and providing feedback, offer less potential for open debate, it needs to be added that the move of criticising the journalist commonly serves to open the letters and position the letter writers before they explore the subject matter in greater detail and hence contribute to the topical debate. In this genre, negative evaluations of the authors or their products never occur on their own – which may well be the case in the comment sections, where some contributions have the sole purpose of expressing the users' dissatisfaction with the newspaper.

The higher percentage of letters criticising the journalist may seem surprising considering that the choice of letters to be published lies with the newspapers. The seemingly paradoxical situation that newspapers are attacked less frequently when not restricting reader feedback is, of course, an important indicator of the identity work performed by the media. Even if it is not known whether the newspapers *receive* more letters that are critical of them than they receive comments of that type, the fact that they do not hesitate to *publish* those letters reveals how they try to create the image of an open-minded, liberal and self-confident medium that has no need to shy away from criticism or stifle critical reflection. This is especially noticeable in the case of the *Guardian*, which not only has a slightly higher percentage of critical letters than the *Times* (25.5% vs. 19.3%), but also explicitly "welcome[s] debate and dissent" as well as "acknowledge[s] criticism of the articles we publish" in its *Community standards and participation guidelines* (2009).

The analysis has shown that criticism targeting the author of the newspaper article can focus on different aspects and hence foreground different parts of the journalist's identity. When criticising the authors for the journalistic quality of their article or questioning their argument, reasoning and integrity, their professional identity is attacked. Yet in addition to such criticism focusing on the values and principles laid down in the Editor's Code of Practice under which the two newspapers work and to which all journalists have to subscribe (cf. also Neurauter-Kessels 2011), especially the corpus of below-the-line comments also contains a substantial number of contributions in which it is not the professional but the personal identity of the journalist that comes under attack. Despite the differences between the genres discussed in detail above, the two corpora also have much in common: the four most frequent aspects of criticism, which together make up 84.0% (comments) and 71.5% (letters) of all aspects criticised in journalists, were found in a remarkably similar distribution.

Given these similarities, a final look at the way the criticism is performed is promising. Interestingly, the use of mitigation strategies to soften the impact of the criticism (e.g. hedges, coupling criticism with positive feedback, presenting the negative evaluation as merely reflecting a personal opinion; cf. e.g. Hyland 2000, Leech 2014 and Diani 2015) is surprisingly rare in both corpora. While mitigation is still employed more often in the letters than the comments (26% of the letters but only 14% of the comments targeting the author make use of such strategies), this finding stands in stark contrast to that of Hyland's (2000: 55) study of academic book reviews, where each review contained at least one mitigated criticism and 65% of all critical speech acts were found to be mitigated. This suggests that the social interaction in reader response is governed by norms and expectations that are different from those of book reviews although the two genres share the core function of providing feedback and commenting on a text written by a professional in the field.[479] These norms and expectations have evolved as the genre of letters to the editor has developed over time and are constantly shaped by the choices of those who write as well as those who publish them. The similarities between the corpora described above indicate that the communicative practices of letters to the editor have been adopted in, as well as adapted to, the new form of reader response in online comment sections. At least in the present data, a substantial part of the behaviour in online comments that might strike one as bordering on the offensive seems to be considered perfectly appropriate in letters to the editor – otherwise, these letters would not have been chosen for publication.

[479] The most striking difference between the genres is, of course, that academic book reviews are written by and for people belonging to the same scientific community as the author of the book reviewed. This peer-to-peer communicative setting automatically calls for more consideration of other people's face wants than is necessary in reader response.

The *norms of appropriacy* (Mills 2005: 268), *behavioural expectations* (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 97) or *frames of expectations* (Locher and Watts 2008: 78) of the two genres thus share a strong common basis (see 7.2.2 above).

In sum, the present findings indicate that holding the press to account is an important feature of both below-the-line comments and letters to the editor. The differences between the genres are, above all, a matter of numbers and degree rather than kind: while there is substantially more criticism levelled at the journalists in the letters, the comments tend to be slightly harsher (e.g. by mocking the author) and less indirect. However, there are many overlaps, and letters to the editor can also be quite stern. This is particularly noteworthy as it speaks against attributing the behaviour of people commenting online to reasons of anonymity and spontaneity, as has often been done. Rather, the present findings suggest that fairly sharp and outspoken criticism directed at the journalist is a characteristic and accepted – maybe even valued – feature of letters to the editor. Viewed in this light, the behaviour in online comments hardly seems out of the ordinary.

7.3.4.2 Criticising other readers

Although the primary target of criticism is the journalist in both genres, other users may also be attacked, as is the case in 80 comments and 72 letters. The following sections will focus on these contributions in turn, trying to uncover not only the similarities and differences between the two genres but also whether the criticism directed at other readers differs from that directed at the journalist. This is achieved by first comparing the comments criticising other users to those criticising the journalist before turning the attention to the letters to the editor.

7.3.4.2.1 Online comments

The comments may be far from fully exploiting the interactive potential of the Internet (see chapter 6 above), yet this does not mean that earlier contributions are always ignored. At least some readers react to what other users have written instead of just commenting on the article or topic. Fairly frequently, however, these reactions contain criticism or negative feedback; as briefly touched upon above (see 7.3.3), 44.4% of the comments reacting to other readers' comments contain criticism directed at that user.

A comparison of the aspects criticised in other users to those criticised when targeting the author of the newspaper article yields the astonishing finding that the majority of them are the same. Their distribution differs slightly, and some aspects criticised in journalists could not be found in the comments targeting other readers, but, as illustrated by Figure 32 below, it was only necessary to add one new aspect to the list: *behaviour as a comment writer* (5.2%).[480]

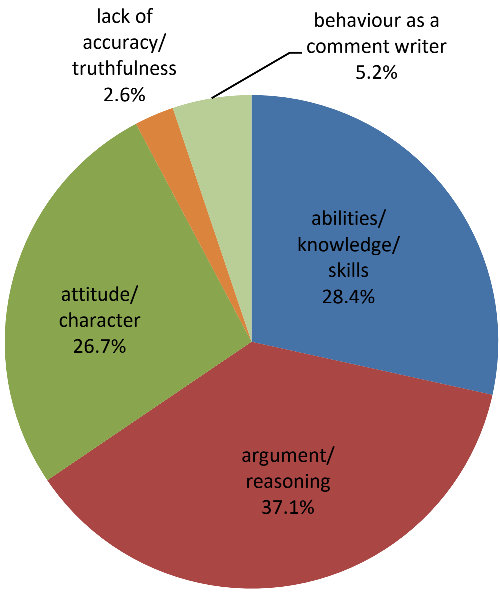

Figure 32 Aspects criticised when targeting other comment writers (N=116)

In more than one third of all occurrences (i.e. 37.1%), the argument or reasoning of other users is challenged (see (555) and (556) below), while their abilities, knowledge and skills are questioned in 28.4% (see (557) and (558) below) and their attitude or character is criticised in 26.7% (see (559) and (560) below).[481]

(555) Tonka Tom [USER]
[QUOTE FROM USER TONKA TOM] If they have chosen the UK over other countries then they should have no complaints about our rules. They chose us. [QUOTE FROM USER TONKA TOM] […]
"They chose us" is not an excuse for a legal process in this country that fails children in unjust ways. [CMC G08-074-75 c3]

[480] Since more than one aspect and also more than one user may be criticised in the same comment, the total number of aspects criticised when targeting other users amounts to 116.
[481] The aspect *abilities/knowledge/skills* is called *journalistic quality* when the target is the author.

(556) John Ledbury [USER]: I agree with removing schools from politicians. A child's formal education lasts a minimum of 11 years - that is a span of at least 3 elected governments who are all to prone to meddle damagingly for short term results. However, research shows that girlsv prosper more in single sex schools whilst boys prosper more in mixed schools - so that bit of your argument doesn't hold up. [CMC T08-032 c17]

(557) [QUOTE FROM USER SCOTT FREIBERG OMITTED] I fear that Mr. Freiberg has failed to grasp that it is the private operations that are failing, not the NHS ones. [CMC T11-045 c13]

(558) Andrew Brown [USER] - if that is really what you think then you have some major gaps in your education. Evolution is the best supported scientific theory around - no credible scientist doubts it. This is exactly the kind of nonsensical attitude that Professor Dawkins's book is aiming at. I'd advise you to read it. [CMC T07-005 c8]

(559) @Rob Duncan [USER]
Like every religious person I've ever met, you claim to KNOW something you cannot possibly know. I don't know if there's a god and neither do you; for a person obviously lacking in real knowledge, your arrogance is astounding! [CMC T07-005 c20]

(560) Hmm. IanKemmish [USER] sounds like the run of the mill " teachers have it easy ", " big salaries " , " protected pensions" etc., Sun reader. Being this spiteful and envious isn't good for your health! […] [CMC G08-094 c18]

Yet while a comparison with the criticism targeted at the journalists (see Figure 28 above) seems to suggest that when other users are criticised the focus is more on the topic at stake than on their skills or attitude and character, this picture begins to crumble on closer inspection. Not only are the aspects more frequently found in combination than when the target is the journalist; the move of challenging the reasoning of other comment writers also hardly occurs on its own (as it did in the examples discussed above). In the vast majority of cases, such challenges are followed by or combined with moves criticising the user's knowledge (561) or attitude (562). This directs the focus to the person behind the initial argument – a strategy used to discredit previous commenters and to undermine their argument at the same time.

(561) […] [QUOTE FROM OTHER COMMENT] *we are a soft touch, and they* [ASYLUM SEEKERS] *know it.* [QUOTE FROM OTHER COMMENT]
We have some of the most draconian immigration laws in Europe. You seriously do not know of what you speak. [CMC G08-074-75 c14]

(562) Trevor Dennington [USER] pompously refers to 'we in the wealth creating sector'.
That'll be the wealth creating sector whose unbridled greed and incompetence has virtually bankrupted the country. [CMC T07-055 c15]

Another more obvious but also less surprising aspect in which the two targets differ is that other users are not criticised for lacking integrity and producing comments that lack balance – after all, they can hardly be held accountable for not painting a complete picture in such short comments. While comment writers may, just like journalists, also be corrected and criticised for a lack of accuracy (2.6%), the fourth most frequent aspect to be criticised (i.e. 5.2%) in other users is their behaviour as a comment writer. Such comments may directly address a certain user (see (563) and (564) below) or be rather vague (565). They are particularly interesting as they reveal some of the unwritten rules of appropriate behaviour in comment sections (e.g. reading the article before commenting).

(563) Did Thomas [USER] read the above article? I very much doubt it as Michael Murray [USER] pointed out. […] [CMC T07-005 c5]

(564) […] MoM [ABBREVIATION FOR THE USERNAME MOVEANYMOUNTAIN]: you have clearly missed the point: do a little reading if you can get away from your screen. […] [CMC G09-023 c5][482]

(565) Well well, here we are again. lots of moans and complaints from everyone. Very few solutions to the problem.Ban advertising alcohol? Double the tax? I think not. […] [CMC T09-042 c20]

Apart from these differences, the similarities between the two targets are astounding. Even though the readers contributing below the line are lay people, the data reveal that having the required knowledge and skills to produce a valuable contribution to the discussion, i.e. factors that are part of the aspect *journalistic quality* and the journalist's professional identity discussed above, is perceived as a prerequisite to becoming an accepted active participant in the interaction. Thus, although the debate in the comments section is public and open to all, not all kinds of contributions are welcome, and users are commonly discredited on the grounds of not only their attitude but also their ability – just as the professional journalists are. Yet while both targets are judged more or less on the same criteria, the crucial difference lies in the fact that the journalists are paid for what they produce, i.e. their skills and knowledge are part of their professional identity. While comment writers may well feel deeply offended when

[482] Interestingly, the user cited in (564) criticises *MoveAnyMountain* for spending too much time in front of the screen. This is one of the rare indicators that some comment writers know each other or are at least aware of the fact that some users contribute frequently. At the end of 2009, *MoveAnyMountain* was elected "commenter of the year 2009" by the *Guardian* and invited "to write an article above the line" on a topic suggested by other commenters (; last accessed January 30, 2017). This is one of the strategies the *Guardian* uses to create a sense of online community among its users and to acknowledge their effort.

reading critical comments addressed to them, the only face at stake is that linked to their username and their virtual identity, and the criticism is highly unlikely to have any effect on their lives outside the debate section. Criticising journalists in front of their own audience – which is, after all, comprised of their clients – is thus far more face-damaging than criticising anonymous users who enjoy writing comments in their spare time.

When it comes to identifying the target of the criticism and the interactive strategies used, the differences between the targets are more pronounced. While it is not unusual to talk about the authors in the third person when criticising them (24.1%) – even though direct addresses are more frequent (37.1%) – there is a strong preference to directly address the user criticised: in 50 of the 80 comments criticising other users (i.e. 62.5%), this strategy is chosen over references in the third person (7.5%).[483] This clearly illustrates that while the author may not be perceived to be a participant in the interaction and hence also be talked about instead of directly addressed, this is not the case when it comes to other comment writers. In terms of the strategies used to criticise, the similarities again outweigh the differences. All of the strategies identified in the comments criticising the author – e.g. explicit judgement (564), disagreement (555), irony (see (466) quoted on p. 371 above), rhetorical questions (563), implicature (562) – could also be found in those targeting other users, and even though their distribution differs slightly, these differences are not pronounced enough to draw any conclusions. The use of mitigation strategies (e.g. hedges, coupling criticism with positive feedback) to soften the impact of the criticism is also rare in both cases; such strategies are used in only 13.6% of the comments targeting the author and 16.3% of those targeting another user. These findings stand in stark contrast to the preference for hedging criticism in book reviews found by Hyland (2000) mentioned above and the preference for mitigating disagreement in dinner table conversations found by Locher (2004: 145), which seems to suggest that in online comment sections, there is not only less consideration for face but also less need to protect oneself from retaliation (cf. Diani 2015: 173), no matter whether the target is the author or another user. In critical reader response, getting one's point across and casting oneself in the role one would like to have (e.g. the knowledgeable and attentive reader, the expert,

[483] As a number of other strategies are used to identify the target of the criticism, e.g. quoting the journalist or comment writer (567), the percentages mentioned above do not amount to 100. For direct addresses see, among others, (555), (556), (558), (559) and (561) above, for references in the third person see (557) and (562). The comment quoted as (560) above is a combination of both strategies.

the witty commentator) seems more important to the interlocutors than showing consideration for other people's face wants.

Before turning to the letters, one final characteristic of criticism directed at other users needs to be addressed: fairly often, the initiations of such critical follow-ups are critical themselves, i.e. criticism is frequently met with criticism. This is best illustrated by taking a closer look at some examples of such pairs of criticism and counter-criticism. In the comment reproduced as (566) below, posted in response to an article entitled "Climate Camp activists launch direct action on City of London" (Walker 2009), the user unmistakeably criticises the activists the article is about by revealing that he/she is bored by their behaviour, which he/she evaluates negatively. This evaluation is quoted in a later comment (567), followed by not only a defence of the people criticised (i.e. the climate activists) but also a counter-attack. This counter-attack, however, is far more implicit than the initial criticism: the critic uses a conditional clause to suggest a relationship of consequence between his/her interpretation of the commenter's position ('if you think …') and the consequence that a dire future lies ahead ('we're all in a lot more trouble than I thought').[484] Yet even though this criticism is less explicit, it is still quite harsh – an effect at least partly achieved by opposing the individual to a large group of people, i.e. by using a *you vs. us* structure.

(566) Yawn.... more tiresome "look at me" indulgent nonsense.
What will those wacky guys and girls come up with next? [CMC G08-017 c5]

(567) [QUOTE FROM OTHER COMMENT] "Yawn.... more tiresome "look at me" indulgent nonsense." [QUOTE FROM OTHER COMMENT]
Big Brother is self indulgent look at me nonsense. These people are exercising their democratic right to protest about signigicant issues that are not being addressed by the state.
If you think being an agent of democracy is indulgent nonsense, we're all in a lot more trouble than I thought. [CMC G08-017 c9]

While the commenter in (566) above does not show any consideration for other people's face wants, the user in (568) below at least shows some awareness that his/her description of his/her neighbours' daughter as 'thick'

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[484] Reader response in general often ends on a negative note; with 82 overall occurrences, the move *dire future ahead* is slightly more frequent than *expressing hope for the future* (74 occurrences). However, the move called *saying: this needs to be done in the future* is far more common than these two moves combined (314 occurrences), which suggests that instead of simply being pessimistic or optimistic, readers most often suggest a plan of action. This finding supports Richardson (2008: 65), who, studying the letters pages of three British newspapers in 2006, comes to the conclusion that "the vast majority of letters to the editor are argumentative, designed to convince an audience of the acceptability of a point of view and to provoke them into an immediate or future course of action".

might be perceived as inappropriate by some readers, immediately adding 'apologises for being blunt'. Only three minutes later, he/she posts a further comment correcting a typographical mistake (or rather adding a missing word) found in his/her initial comment, followed by a jocular remark further threatening his/her own face by admitting that it is obvious that he/she was not the excellent student talked about in his/her comment.[485]

(568) Whenever I return to the UK, which isnt too often, I am struck by the falling educational standard of the young. Yet all the indicators (no and grade of A Levels and Degrees) point in the opposite direction. Something is going on that doesnt add up!
This has been confirmed by one of my neighbours kids being awarded a 1st in Psychology or something similar and the best word that I can use to describe her is - thick (apologies for being blunt). When I was at Uni (London) there was only 1st out of 96 (not including the first year cull of about a third). […]
[CMC G06-011-12 c9]

(569) Typo
should read - one 1st
Needless to say it wasn't me! [CMC G06-011-12 c10]

Despite these attempts at mitigating the face threat by admitting mistakes and drawing attention to the positive qualities of being outspoken, considerate and honest, this user is severely attacked shortly later (570). Interestingly, it is precisely the argument of the initial comment that is used against the critic (i.e. being 'thick'). However, the severity of the face threat is enhanced substantially by combining different strategies: in addition to the explicit negative evaluation ('lack of knowledge of punctuation'), the user also expresses his/her annoyance about the critic's behaviour ('your bleating on') and challenges the latter ('Though of course *you* had a grade A in English at A-level, right?'). The commenter adopts a fairly condescending tone, imitating spoken interaction: he/she uses suspension dots to indicate a pause and delay the punchline, adds the discourse marker *well* for the same purpose and repeatedly uses italics for emphasis. The comment is not only directly addressed to the initial critic but also invites him/her to react and agree: the interrogative parenthetical 'don't you think?' has the function of "seeking confirmation that the anchor proposition is true" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 896) – the anchor proposition in this case being that the critic's behaviour is stupid – just like the reduced 'right?' in the last sentence does.

(570) @tidemarc
[QUOTE FROM USER TIDEMARC] Typo
should read - one 1st

[485] Also see the concept of pre-emptive moves described in 7.3.4.2.3 below.

> Needless to say it wasn't me! [QUOTE FROM USER TIDEMARC]
> Add to the typo your complete lack of knowledge of punctuation. Somewhat makes your bleating on about your neighbours' daughter being 'thick' kind of... well, *thick*, don't you think?
> Though of course *you* had a grade A in English at A-level, right? [CMC G06-011-12 c13]

As these examples have shown, by criticising others, contributors expose themselves to the danger of being attacked themselves, irrespective of the target of their own criticism. The stronger the initial attack, the stronger the counter-attack is likely to be. This finding sets the criticism in the comments in a different light: even if almost half of the reactions to other users are critical in nature, many represent counter-attacks, trying to beat the initial critics with their own weapons. Most importantly, these attacks are not simply a matter of retaliation, as the person/people attacked in the initiation need not be the user launching the counter-attack in his/her follow-up. Such comments could thus also be understood as intents to teach the initial critic a lesson by attacking him/her in return for his/her inappropriate behaviour. Whether this is the best means to make the debate less offensive is, of course, a completely different matter.

7.3.4.2.2 Letters to the editor

As outlined above, letters written in reaction to other letters to the editor may also be critical in nature. Figure 33 below gives an overview of the aspects criticised; these findings can now be compared, on the one hand, to letters criticising the journalist (see Figure 29 above) and, on the other hand, to comments criticising other comment writers (see Figure 32 above).

A comparison of the letters criticising the journalist to those criticising other readers reveals several striking similarities: the aspects *journalistic quality* (called *abilities/knowledge/skills* when other readers are targeted), *argument/reasoning* and *attitude/character*, which together make up 56.5% of the aspects criticised in the journalist (see Figure 29 above), represent 60.8% of the aspects when the target is another letter writer. Thus, just like professional journalists, other letter writers may be criticised for drawing the wrong conclusions (571) or not identifying the true cause of a problem (572).

(571) Dr Eamonn Butler [LETTER WRITER] is right to note that around a sixth of the electorate is effectively disenfranchised by having MPs who are ministers and therefore beholden to the government rather than their constituents (Letters, 15 August) but he does not draw the necessary conclusion. […] [NEWS G06-006]

(572) Sir, Dr Mark Scibor-Rylski [LETTER WRITER] (letter, Aug 26) is correct in his analysis of the problems facing early-stage companies seeking venture capital but he is, I am afraid, entirely mistaken as to the cause. […] [NEWS T07-054]

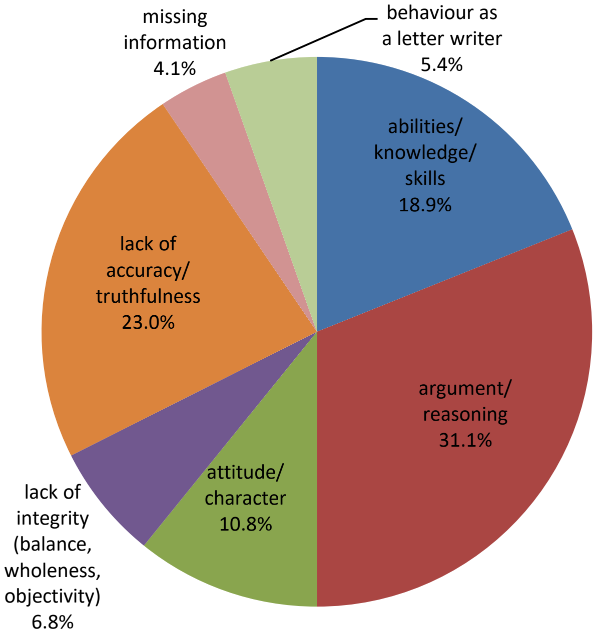

Figure 33 Aspects criticised when targeting other letter writers (N=74)

Letter writers are not only criticised on the same grounds as professional journalists but also in very similar ways; the two examples make use of several of the strategies to down-tone the criticism described above, e.g. first agreeing ('is right to note', 'is correct') before criticising and hedging ('I am afraid'); nevertheless, the criticism is clearly explicit ('does not draw the necessary conclusion', 'is […] entirely mistaken'). This is different in (573), which, despite not explicitly stating that the reader's analysis is considered unsound, strongly invites this interpretation.[486]

[486] After all, when people claim that they would love to see somebody do something, they imply that they think that this person is not up to the task. In combination with the overtly tentative disagreement in the second sentence ('Perhaps … after all.'), this creates the impression that the letter writer considers Ann Pettifor, who claims expert status by adding 'Fellow, New Economics Foundation' to her signature [NEWS G06-088], not to be in a position to judge the current banking situation.

(573) I would love to hear Ann Pettifor's [LETTER WRITER] analysis of what happens when there is a "run" on a bank. Perhaps the depositors (and equity providers) are important after all. [NEWS G06-106]

However, such criticism is not quite as frequent as challenging the argument and/or reasoning of other readers – just as it was found to be the case in the comments. As stated above, such criticism focuses more on the topic at stake than on the letter writer's knowledge and ability, and the examples below illustrate nicely the strategies used for debating (e.g. asking questions, refuting what the opponent has said and producing counter-arguments) introduced above (see 7.3.4.1.2).

(574) Since when can a report be regarded as "fruitless" (Letters, 18 October) simply because it is rejected by a party it finds guilty? […] [NEWS G10-110]

(575) UK airports don't back the European emissions trading scheme because it's a free ride (Letters, 21 August), and "cap" is not a misnomer. […] [NEWS G08-019]

Unlike in the comments discussed above, however, these challenges may also occur on their own and are not necessarily accompanied by moves criticising the letter writer's ability or character. In this respect, letters targeting other letter writers are more similar to letters targeting the journalist than to comments addressed to either target.[487]

A further similarity between the two targets is that they are both criticised fairly frequently for a lack of accuracy and truthfulness: 12.5% of the letters targeting the author and even 23.0% of those targeting another letter writer are of this type. In the comments, this was found to be the case far less often (4.5% when the target is the author and 2.6% when another user). Correcting information provided in other letters to the editor seems to be even more important than correcting information provided by journalists. Some letter writers seem to enjoy bickering about dates and historical facts (compare (576) and (577) below, which correct the same letter with contradicting claims); others use the letters page for counter-statements (578).[488]

(576) Sir, Bill Pearson [LETTER WRITER] (letter, Aug 26) makes a good point, but the oldest complete Georgian theatre is in Richmond, Yorkshire, not in Ripon. [NEWS T07-052_1]

[487] In the examples above, the letter writers are not even mentioned, which directs the focus to the argument instead of the person advancing the argument.

[488] Interestingly, Bill Pearson, the letter writer corrected in (576) and (577) above, already uses his letter to correct an article about Georgian theatres [NEWS T07-027]. The contradicting letters are thus a correction of the correction.

(577) Sir, England's oldest Georgian theatre is the Theatre Royal, Bristol, which opened in 1766. [NEWS T07-052_2]

(578) Sir, Tim Reilly [LETTER WRITER], the secretary of the Braveheart Programme (Aug 21), says that the Army does not have any sickness absence management figures. I have just finished updating the Army's Sickness Absence Management Information System, a task I have been doing since 2007 when I helped to design it. [NEWS T07-019]

Again, the degree of similarity between the two targets is quite astounding. Yet this is not the only move in which critical letters differ from the comments irrespective of the target of criticism: the aspect *missing information*, not found in the comments, is a criticism present in letters targeting the journalist (10.0%) as well as letters targeting other letter writers (4.1%), even if the numbers are fairly small.

In terms of the strategy chosen to address the target, the texts are also clearly divided by genre: as presented above, in the comments criticising the journalist, it is not unusual to address the target directly (37.1%); in those criticising other users, this is clearly the preferred strategy (62.5%). In contrast, only 11.7% of the letters criticising the journalist are of this dialogic type, even if 25.2% contain direct forms of address (see the discussion in 7.3.4.1.1.2 above). This tendency is also present in the letters criticising a previous letter writer: in the vast majority of cases (97.2%), these are talked about in the third person instead of addressed directly (see the examples above), even if asked a question or told to do something:

(579) Sir, Toby Mullins [LETTER WRITER] (letter, Sept 1) suggests that a parent might wish to know which school is best for a child of average ability. Does he actually know any parents who think that their child falls into that category? [NEWS T08-025]

(580) Sir, Peter Jacques [LETTER WRITER] is understandably delighted that his GP in France gives him as much time as is necessary (letter, Aug 15).
Could Mr Jacques provide me with some tips, perhaps in telepathy, regarding how I should reorganise my appointment system to achieve this? […] [NEWS T06-022]

There are only three exceptions to this general rule. In the first case, a vocative is used (581) and in the second and third ones, the letter writer first uses third person references only to switch to a direct form of address in the last sentence (582).

(581) Perhaps, Andrew Belsey [LETTER WRITER] (Letters, 19 September), the reason we don't hold the car-driving toad against AA Milne is that Toad and his antics were invented by Kenneth Grahame, though Milne dramatised the Toad stories. […] [NEWS G11-009]

(582) Sir, If Iain Thornber [LETTER WRITER] (letter, Sept 17) lived a little closer to Hampshire I would be delighted to invite him to spend a day with me in my surgery so he can see for himself what we GPs are being paid for. If Mr Thornber also works 50 hours-plus a week, is responsible for the health of 2,000 patients, counselling the sad, sympathising with the bereaved, guiding the unsure, reassuring the anxious, diagnosing illness and caring for the chronic sick while at the same time managing a small business with a turnover of £3 million and employing around 25 staff, then I salute him. If not, I suggest he puts his pen firmly back in his pocket.
If he could make himself available next Monday at, say, 8am to 10.30pm, or next Friday, 7.30am to 6pm, then he wouldn't miss too much.
Shall I see you Friday next at 7.30, Mr Thornber? [NEWS T10-057]

These examples illustrate how rare direct forms of address are and that many of the letter writers criticised are, in fact, people who have themselves used their letters to criticise others. Counter-attacks can thus not only be found in the comments (see 7.3.4.2.1 above) but also in the letters. As illustrated by (576) and (577) discussed above, the person criticised initially may be the journalist. This is also the case in (581): in his letter, the reader Andrew Belsey criticises the author of a book review for pointing out errors in a novel by claiming that

(583) […] That's what fiction is all about – you make things up. After all, how many people have ever met an actual car-driving toad, but do we hold that against AA Milne? [NEWS G10-101]

The letter writer reacting to that letter not only criticises Belsey indirectly for confusing the author with the person dramatising the novel (see (581) above) but does so by answering the second part of the question posed in the trigger letter, which may explain the use of the direct form of address. The same holds true in the second case (see (582) above), only that this time, the initial letter writer uses his very short letter for a severe attack on GPs:

(584) Sir, If a family doctor's remit does not include administering swine flu and other jabs (report, Sept 15), what on earth are they being paid such high salaries for? [NEWS T10-031]

This emphasised question is answered by a GP, i.e. a representative of the group of people attacked, whose self-defence is combined with an invitation (repeated several times) to spend a day with him in his surgery, thus suggesting that the letter writer's indignation is unfounded and would evaporate in the process (see (582) above). The repeated references to the letter writer, the invitations and the suggestion to 'put[s] his pen firmly back in his pocket' all serve to express the GP's critical assessment of the initial letter writer, whom he considers to lack the experience and knowledge necessary to join the discussion and, above all, criticise others. This is given additional emphasis by switching to a direct form of address including a vocative in the very last sentence, which represents a clear challenge ('Shall I see you Friday next at 7.30, Mr Thornber?').

The fact that letters written to criticise other letter writers are often instances of answering criticism with criticism may be one of the reasons for the finding that the use of mitigation is substantially lower (i.e. 9%) than when the target is the journalist (26%). In fact, mitigation in these letters is even less frequent than in the comments, irrespective of the target of criticism (14% targeting the author and 16% targeting other users). Outspoken, unmitigated criticism, as illustrated by (585) below, is thus not unusual when letter writers react to other reader contributions.

(585) Sir, Mr Roger Williams's [LETTER WRITER] letter ("What US support?", Sept 15) is riddled with inaccuracy. […] [NEWS T10-022]

However, in order to detect and fully understand the criticism in letters targeting other letter writers, it is often necessary to remember this initial letter quite clearly. This becomes evident when taking another look at (581) and (582) discussed above but will be illustrated here with the help of another, even more striking example, as it captures quite nicely several of the peculiarities of such letters. In the letter reproduced as (586) below, David Lipsey, a Labour politician and member of the House of Lords, criticises George Monbiot, a journalist known for his environmental activism, on the basis of his opinion piece about Ian Plimer, a climate change critic, by writing that:

(586) I read George Monbiot's [AUTHOR] fact-free diatribe against the climate-change sceptic Professor Ian Plimer (This professor of denial can't even answer his own questions on climate change, 15 September). Then I read some more of Plimer's carefully scientific and immaculately referenced study, Heaven and Earth, and I understood why Monbiot is wriggling like a baby on his nappy to find some excuse not to debate with Plimer. [NEWS G10-061]

This letter in itself is quite interesting, as the move of relating personal experiences (see 7.4.1.1 below) is used here only as a pretence to criticise the journalist. The claim that he first read Monbiot's newspaper article, then picked up Plimer's book again and then understood 'why Monbiot is wriggling like a baby on his nappy' is a clever ruse which allows the letter writer to compare the two public figures on the basis of their texts and hence convince the other readers of Monbiot's inferiority without needing to specify what exactly makes him inferior. Even more interestingly, however, this strategy is mimicked by another letter writer, who, in turn, uses it to attack the initial letter writer:

(587) I read David Lipsey's [LETTER WRITER] letter (17 September) about the correspondence between George Monbiot and Ian Plimer, and I thought that if he considers Plimer's book to be carefully scientific and immaculately referenced, and if he is a representative sample of his peers, he provides the best argument I have seen for a long time for the abolition of the House of Lords. [NEWS G10-099]

Not only does this letter writer start his letter in exactly the same way, he also avoids naming the traits that disqualify Lipsey, just like Lipsey fails to do in the case of Monbiot. Instead of accusing Lipsey of lacking knowledge, intelligence or judgement, he leaves it up to the reader to work out this conclusion. Yet this does not make the letter any less offensive; after all, suggesting that Lipsey's incompetence would even justify abolishing the House of Lords is quite a severe face threat.

The intertextual links between the texts, which add further weight to the face threat, however, are only noticeable to those who follow the letters section carefully. In general, the contextualisation strategies employed to make it easier for readers to understand letters to the editor by calling back to mind or briefly summarising the newspaper article reacted to (see 6.3.1 above) are used far more often when reacting to an article than a letter. It seems that given the small number of letters published each day (especially when compared to the number of newspaper articles), the readers are expected to remember them and thus be able to detect and understand such intertextual references. Just like the indirect reactions discussed above (see 6.4.1.3), such allusions can also be understood as creating an in-group identity consisting only of regular followers of the letters page.

In sum, the analysis shows that (a) letters criticising other letter writers are often instances of answering criticism with criticism, (b) the attacks are in the majority of cases unmitigated and (c) in order to be able to understand these letters fully, readers need to be regular and close followers of the letters page.

7.3.4.2.3 Concluding remarks

The above has revealed that the criticism directed at other readers is very similar to that levelled at journalists, both in terms of the aspects criticised and the strategies used. For the readers commenting, it seems to be of little relevance whether the text they criticise was written by a professional journalist or a fellow reader. In both cases, the respective authors need to have certain qualities and behave in a certain way if they do not want to become the target of fairly outspoken criticism. After all, both assume an active role in public discourse and thus have to accept the responsibilities that come with this opportunity. However, it has been argued that while questioning the journalists' core competencies in front of their own audiences leaves them and their professional identity fairly exposed, attacks on letter or comment writers are not likely to have the same impact, and especially readers commenting online only risk losing their "virtual face".[489]

All in all, the differences between the genres were found to be greater than the differences between the targets. What the genres share is that fairly often, such contributions are reactions to reader contributions that are critical in nature, defending the person criticised and/or counter-attacking the initial critic. Interestingly, the use of mitigation was lowest in the letters criticising other letter writers. The argument advanced above (see 7.3.4.2.1) that in online debate sections, the goal of getting one's point across may override considerations for face does not only seem to hold for this genre but also apply to letters to the editor. This speaks against holding the anonymity of the Internet and the spontaneity of the interaction responsible for impolite moves (cf. McKenna and Green 2002: 119, who name deindividuation and its disinhibition effect as a source of flaming). After all, letters to the editor are neither anonymous nor produced in such an ad-hoc fashion as online comments. That open criticism is a characteristic feature of reader response is also suggested by the existence of a so-called *pre-emptive move*, i.e. an attempt to pre-empt possible criticism via different strategies. Especially in the comments, users have been found to point out their own faults and shortcomings (588), to apologise for their behaviour (589) and to anticipate the counter-arguments (590) as well as reactions (591) of other readers, hence taking the wind out of their opponents' sails.

(588) Cif [COMMENT IS FREE] etiquette might require me to check all my sources (and read all the comments), but I am short of time and will rely on my memory. […] [CMC G06-060 c15]

(589) […] Sorry for this very harsh statement, but it happens to be fact under this government. [CMC T07-055 c18]

(590) [...] I know what you're all going to respond – you're going to say that it's immoral to arrange your affairs so you don't pay the tax. [...] [CMC G07-067 c20]

(591) […] I'll toss this grenade into the pot and suggest that - given that traditionally men previously did the main income-earning - you could blame feminism?... (Runs for cover!) [CMC G10-001-4 c20]

[489] Letter writers occupy an intermediate position in this respect: if they write to the editor in the role of private individuals, the risk they face is higher than in the case of anonymous online commenters yet not as high as that faced by letter writers who are public figures or speak in the name of an organisation (see also 7.4 below).

These examples not only reveal some of the unwritten rules of behaviour in such debate sections but also illustrate that many participants in the discussion are aware of the fact that they may also become the target of criticism, especially if they use their contribution to criticise others. Commenters know that they run the risk of having their contributions turned against themselves; this is also clearly apparent in the last example to be discussed. In a comment thread about the supposedly declining standards in education, a user first criticises others for lacking orthography and grammar skills and illustrates this claim by quoting a sentence containing a grammar mistake. Once having posted the comment, however, he/she becomes aware of the acute danger of being made the target him/herself and therefore feels inclined to pre-empt possible criticism by adding the tongue-in-cheek notification:

(592) no prizes to anybody spotting my typo, by the way. [CMC G06-011-012 c19]

This nicely captures the core essence of reader response, where criticism and fault-finding are often used as strategies to score a point in the public debate.[490]

7.3.4.3 Concluding remarks on criticism and identity construction

All in all, criticism has been shown to be an important tool for identity construction in reader response. In addition to being a form of stance taking, as the readers evaluate, show their disalignment and position themselves in the ongoing interaction (cf. DuBois 2007), it is also a means to construe an identity for the targets of the criticism by foregrounding particular aspects of their professional or personal identities. This form of identity construction may even move from the local, temporary level of the interaction (e.g. criticising somebody for drawing the wrong conclusions or not having read the article) to large-scale categories of identity (e.g. criticising others for lacking skills and integrity or for their attitude and character) and thus covers different aspects of Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) positionality principle.

[490] Interestingly, in the thread of comments drawn on in the conclusion (see 9.2), numerous references are made to the 'spelling police', 'grammar fascists' or even 'grammar nazis' who 'bring people up on poor grammar' [CMC G-BTL c123]. One of the commenters defending such comments argues: '[…] If we can't fix the opinion at least we can try to fix the sloppy way in which some comments are worded (maybe, then, they'd be taken [more] seriously) […]' before pointing out several mistakes made in a previous comment. The comment is ended with a self-critical tongue-in-cheek aside: '[…] [And now I'll have to re-read my own comment a few times to make sure that I don't make any language mistakes ...]' [CMC G-BTL c136].

Yet through criticising others, the readers not only attempt to construe a certain identity for the person criticised, they also create an identity for themselves, for instance that of an opponent in the debate, that of a shrewd observer or a witty, articulate commentator. While follow-ups in which the readers reveal personal information or even relate personal experiences abound in the corpora (as will be discussed in detail in 7.4.1 below), these moves are hardly found in contributions criticising the journalist or fellow contributors. Thus, attacks on others are usually performed from the safe position of anonymity; yet even if no concrete personal information is revealed, the contributing readers still clearly assume a specific role in the interaction and use language to cast themselves in a certain light. After all, criticising others allows readers to position themselves as knowledgeable, intelligent, responsible and alert representatives of the public – it is thus no wonder that it plays such an important role in reader response.

7.3.5 Positive feedback on the journalistic product

Since much attention has been devoted to the move of criticising others and the journalist in particular, it seems not only fair but also highly intriguing to take a look at the other side of the coin, i.e. to investigate those contributions that provide positive feedback.

All in all, 57 comments and 76 letters contain positive feedback on the journalistic product – a finding that underlines once more the importance of criticism in both genres: there are twice as many comments (i.e. 125) and even three times as many letters (i.e. 230) criticising the authors than there are contributions praising them.[491] Moreover, in nine of the comments and 26 of the letters praising the author, this positive feedback is coupled with criticism, as in (593) and (594):

(593) […] The author clearly has a lot of interesting points to make , but I see wedded to them a lot of axes to grind using a familiar attitude of self fulfilling prophecy, doom-laden self aggrandisation, which is so opposite to kind of self effacing tangible acheivements that Borlaug provided and which we could do with more of today. [CMC T10-025 c9]

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[491] This finding is all the more noteworthy as it contradicts Raeymaeckers's (2005: 219) account of selection and editing processes in letters to the editor written to the Flemish press, in which he comes to the conclusion that "newspaper editors are more sympathetic to complimentary letters. Critical letters or dissenting reactions to previous articles have far less chance of getting published. The positive, consenting versions, on the other hand, were published more often". This is clearly not the preference of the newspapers studied in the present analysis and points to cultural differences that would make an intriguing topic for further research.

(594) Phil Rees [AUTHOR] (Media, 14 September) rightly highlights the benefits of reporters working independently in combat zones. Phil is a distinguished former BBC correspondent – but he is, however, wrong when he suggests that […] [NEWS G10-036]

When used in such combinations, positive feedback is above all a means to mitigate the criticism (see 7.3.4.1.6 above), which usually occupies substantially more space and thus needs to be considered the dominant move and hence also the major purpose of such contributions. In the majority of these cases, positive feedback is used to open the letter or comment (see also the discussion of contextualisation strategies in 6.3.1.1 above), but it is directly followed by an adversative conjunction (e.g. *but*, as in (593) and (594) above) and the critical move, i.e. negative feedback. Since this form of mitigation is more frequent in the letters, the number of contributions constituting pure cases of positive feedback is almost identical in the two corpora: the author is acclaimed in 48 comments and 50 letters, i.e. in both types of reader response, such contributions have a frequency of only 5%.

Despite this similarity in overall numbers, the contributions providing positive feedback are not distributed in the same way: the 48 positive comments were posted in only 19 different comment threads, whereas the 50 positive letters to the editor were printed on 46 letters pages.[492] This difference clearly shows that if an article triggers a positive comment online, more are likely to follow (see (595) to (597) below, all posted in the same thread), whereas editors prefer to publish just one letter praising the newspaper, both per day and per article.

(595) Absolutely brilliant analysis, sharply accurate in every detail. [...] [CMC G08-104 c4]

(596) Excellent article, on all points. [...] [CMC G08-104 c9]

(597) Excellent article, Jonathan [AUTHOR] - glad someone here’s not taking this shit lying down!!! [CMC G08-104 c20]

As mentioned when arguing against considering references to the author or article in the third person as snubs (see 7.3.4.1.1.2 above), positive feedback in the letters is usually performed by talking about the author, article or newspaper in the third person: 33 of the letters follow this structure (see

[492] There is, in fact, only one newspaper article that is praised in two separate letters appearing in the same edition of the newspaper. In two cases, the positive letters appear in the same edition of the newspaper but react to different articles, and in one case, the *Guardian*’s climate change campaign 10:10 is praised in general, without reference to a particular newspaper article.

(598) to (600) below), and another twelve are of the *your* + *product* type discussed above (601).

(598) Sir, What a wonderful article by Richard Dawkins [AUTHOR]. I never thought that as a vicar I would agree with every word he wrote. He has given a very fair, balanced and temperate article on why creationism is such a menace. […] [NEWS T07-034-1][493]

(599) As an insomniac shipping forecast addict, all I would like to add to Adam Nicolson's [AUTHOR] excellent article (The voice of the shipping forecast has been sacked. Now we're all at sea, G2, 16 September) is my favourite forecast phrase: "Slowly losing its identity." [NEWS G10-078]

(600) […] The Guardian is to be applauded for raising this serious issue. [NEWS G06-008M]

(601) Your editorial on university finance (22 September) is the most reflective I have seen. […] [NEWS G11-058]

The only letters that can be considered truly dialogic are those thanking the author or newspaper, as in (602) and (603) below. With only three occurrences, however, these are comparatively rare.

(602) Four pages on the local soccer derby and a picture of the winning scorer on the cover. What a joy to have the real Manchester Guardian back. Thank you. [NEWS G11-030]

(603) Thank you for your splendidly comprehensive chart of UK government spending (Where your money goes, 16 September). […] [NEWS G10-082]

The comments are more varied in this respect: 26 refer to the journalistic product (see (595) and (596) above) and sometimes also the author (see (604) below). In contrast to the letters, the 14 comments that address the author directly are not of the *your* + *product* type but truly dialogic, as (605) illustrates. In addition, some comments combine references to the article with directed addresses to the author, as illustrated by (597) above and (606) below.

(604) As ever Libby [AUTHOR] is a paragon of common sense. [CMC T08-032 c2]

(605) Geoffrey Wheatcroft [AUTHOR]:
Your central point is well taken. We can still cherish the work even if we wouldn't ever want - in real life- to meet the artist. […] [CMC G06-060 c4]

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[493] In fact, the 'article by Richard Dawkins' is not a newspaper article but an extract from his book *The Greatest Show on Earth*, printed alongside an introductory article written by a journalist.

(606) This is the most sensible article I've ever read in the Guardian. Well done sir [CMC G10-056-59 c10]

Thanking occurs with the same frequency as in the letters and is not structurally different (607). What is different, however, is that positive feedback in the comments is often performed in a highly abbreviated form, sometimes consisting of only a noun phrase, as illustrated by (608) to (614) below.

(607) [QUOTE] It's no weirder than idolising Beckham [QUOTE]
A reasonably comprehensive summary of Catholicism. Harmless, futile, and all about personality cults and cash-rich endorsement values.
Thank you. [CMC G11-034 c14]

(608) Excellent, scary and thought-provoking article […] [CMC G10-086 c3]

(609) Good article but it makes my blood boil. [...] [CMC G10-086 c6]

(610) Extremely good article. Chilling of course. [...] [CMC G10-086 c13]

(611) Excellent article, [...] [CMC G10-086 c17]

(612) Brilliant article. […] [CMC T7-022 c15]

(613) Spot on. […] [CMC T08-032 c4]

(614) Easily the best Obit published so far. […] [CMC T10-052 c1]

In all the examples quoted above, the move of providing positive feedback is used to open the comment. In this position, incomplete sentences are far from infrequent in the online corpus. As discussed above (see 5.4.1.1), one of the syntactic particularities of online comments is that users frequently omit the subject and predicate; these structures are particularly common in the very first sentence. While they are sometimes also found in the opening sentences of letters to the editor, especially in the very short ones, they are still extremely rare in this genre, where positive feedback does not occur in such abbreviated forms.

All in all, this brief look at positive feedback has revealed that neither genre is only critical, even if criticism is decidedly more frequent in both. While both forms of reader response are also used for approval and appraisal, newspapers are fairly selective and usually do not publish more than one positive letter per day and article. This can be interpreted as a strategy to avoid being accused of undue self-praise: even if such positive feedback is good for the newspaper's reputation, publishing too much of it risks being perceived as using the letters page for boasting and self-promotion. This is not the case in comment sections online, where the same article may trigger several positive reactions and where positive feedback is often used to open the comment in an abbreviated, almost conventionalised form. Yet despite being frequently reduced to a noun phrase containing a positive premodifying adjective, the appraisal is not any weaker in this genre, as the use of the fairly strong evaluative adjectives ‘excellent’, ‘brilliant’ or the combination of a weaker adjective and an intensifying adverb (‘extremely good’) in the examples above illustrates.

7.4 Private vs. public

Having compared the linguistic make-up and the interactional patterns of the two types of reader response and having addressed the claim that comment sections are marked by aggressive and uninhibited verbal behaviour, the attention will now be turned to a further, also fairly popular, claim about online comments, i.e. the one that more and more private topics are entering the public sphere, thus leading to an increase in subjectivity and personalisation (cf. Landert and Jucker 2011). Such claims have not only been made for online comments but are commonly used to account for the differences between traditional and new media in general as well as those between public discourse past and present (cf. e.g. Dürscheid 2007 and Landert 2014). In an interesting case study comparing letters to the editor from 1985 to online comments from 2008, Landert and Jucker (2011: 1422) find “the traditional letters to the editor as being characterized by non-private contents and the language of distance while the discussion sections of recent online newspapers are characterized by private contents and the language of immediacy”.[494] Since the data of their diachronic case study only consist of eight letters and 31 comments, it seems highly promising to test their findings on the basis of the present, substantially larger corpus. Moreover, the synchronic design of the present study makes it possible to judge whether the characteristics of online comments can be attributed to the affordances and constraints of this new form of communication or whether their similarities with letters to the editor are indicative of a more general change in communicative practices unrelated to medium factors.

Although changes as the ones hypothesised about above are highly intriguing, they are difficult to study empirically. Especially in genres that fulfil the function of giving feedback and voicing one’s opinion, the

[494] For a discussion of the notions *language of distance* and *language of immediacy* see the concept of medial and conceptional orality and literacy reviewed in 3.2.3 above. Since the claim that letters to the editor are characterised by the language of distance and online comments by that of immediacy was already addressed above (see 5.5), the present discussion will focus exclusively on the public vs. private distinction drawn by Landert and Jucker (2011).

opportunities for referring to private issues and incorporating subjective assessments abound. Even though contributions may differ in whether their subjective nature is masked or marked explicitly, such texts can hardly be completely objective. The difference between (615) and (616) is not that the first letter writer states a fact and the second an opinion but merely that in the second case, the assessment is more clearly *marked* as an opinion.

(615) Paul Kingsnorth and George Monbiot [AUTHORS] miss the point. […] [NEWS G06-092]

(616) Reading the front page article about executive pay (Executive pay keeps rising, Guardian survey finds, 14 September), I couldn't help feeling that it missed the point somewhat. […] [NEWS G10-032]

Consequently, looking at surface-level indicators (e.g. the use of personal pronouns or certain lexical items) is not sufficient when investigating such complex features as personalisation and subjectivity, and findings may be hard to quantify. In the present analysis, the focus will therefore be on a selection of moves that can be categorised in a fairly straightforward manner: (a) *relating personal experiences* and (b) *statements about self* as signalling the private and subjective nature of the contribution, and (c) *claiming expert status* as signalling its public and objective nature.

7.4.1 Personalisation

7.4.1.1 Relating personal experiences

Relating personal experiences is the most obvious way in which the reader as a private individual can make an appearance in public discourse, as illustrated by the following three reactions to articles about the dangers of cycling:

(617) I am all for mandatory helmet laws. […] I am an avid cyclist who commutes every day to work and cycles with my family (including two young children) on weekends. I have had several instances (including one as a child) where my helmet has saved me from a trip to A&E [ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT]. […] [CMC T10-0955 c11]

(618) Sir, As the father of a young man killed by a careless lorry driver while cycling to work, I am acutely aware of the issues surrounding cycle lanes ("Safer cycle lanes endanger riders and bring out road hog in motorists", Sept 10). […] [NEWS T09-070_1]

(619) Sir, Today, while cycling, I was hit on the arm by a motorist's wing mirror. He braked, but obviously decided that as I had not fallen off I was all right and drove away. […] [NEWS T09-070_5]

Readers may choose to recount such personal experiences to lend support to their opinions and arguments (617), to express how they relate to the situation (618) and to provide further evidence for the problem described in the newspaper (619). Interestingly, this distinctly personal move is substantially more frequent in the corpus of letters to the editor, where 161 such letters (compared to only 104 comments) could be found. In both genres, such contributions are not restricted to what could be called ‘private matters’, e.g. baby names (620), but cover a vast array of topics, including politics (621).[495]

(620) Sir, Chance has a lot to do with naming babies (times 2, Sept 8). A games teacher shouting, “Apollo, we don’t do that with balls” immediately wiped the Gods off my list. [NEWS T09-026]

(621) […] Like most Welsh people, I was at least 9 years old before I realised that “fucking Tories” wasn’t one word. […] [CMC G10-069 c7]

Such recollections of funny incidents, found in both corpora, illustrate that readers’ experiences may also take the form of personal anecdotes used for humorous effect. Especially in the letters, where humorous remarks are not confined to private experiences (see for instance the Latin spellings string of letters discussed in 6.4.1.3 above), such entertaining contributions are particularly popular. The story-telling move often covers the entire contribution, and while some letters are fairly short (see (620) above), they can also be quite long – the longest counting 250 words.[496]

One type of personal experience that is decidedly more common in the letters is what could be called an eyewitness account of historical events:

(622) Sir, I write in defence of the Sten gun. (letters, Aug 26, 27, 28 and 29). During the Malayan Emergency in the early 1950s, I served as a young lieutenant […] [NEWS T08-007]

The letter quoted in (622) above is only one of many more published in reaction to a letter comparing the procurement problems at the Ministry of Defence to similar problems in the past, mentioning the Sten gun only in passing. Even though this trigger letter comments on an unquestionably public issue, it seems to have evoked memories and feelings of a very personal kind in many readers. As the authors of such historical eyewitness

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[495] This finding is particularly interesting, as Richardson and Franklin (2004: 460) argue that such personal stories are above all a feature of the letters page of local newspapers, where they serve a “‘community building’ function”.

[496] This particular letter is the one quoted in excerpts in (622). The fact that the *Times* chose to print it – despite having already published numerous letters written in reaction to the same contribution in several editions of the newspaper – clearly illustrates the value attached to eyewitness accounts that contain humorous elements, as does this letter.

accounts can be assumed to belong to the age group least likely to use the Internet to participate in public debate, it is not surprising that such contributions figure above all in letters sections. Newspapers choose them for publication not only because such eyewitnesses are rare and able to provide valuable inside information but also because they often do so light-heartedly, combining the serious and the amusing, thus offering a unique perspective:

(623) Sir, Your wimpish correspondents have much to live up to. I qualified as a marksman with the Sten gun at Catterick in 1957. That the target riddled with bullets was not the one I was aiming at is something I felt it would be tactless to reveal at the time. [NEWS T07-075]

As has been shown, the move of relating personal experiences can be used for various purposes, and – in contrast to common claims – it is more frequently found in the letters than the comments. By selecting such a personal letter as the one in (623) above for publication, the newspapers not only lend this particular reader a voice but also a face, which is, of course, a strategic marketing move. After all, letting their readers share stories of how their private lives are or have been affected by the topics making the news allows the newspapers to position themselves as (a) being close to and in tune with their readers, (b) taking an interest in their fate and (c) being the medium a vast range of people read and turn to.

7.4.1.2 Statements about self

By telling a personal story or anecdote, readers clearly mark their contribution as being about them and their experiences. In addition, there are several other moves that allow them to make their contribution less objective and more personal; these can be subsumed under the heading of *statements about self*. The present analysis will focus on the most common sub-moves, which are in descending order of overall frequency: (a) *stressing the subjective nature of the statement*, (b) *stating how the article, contribution(s) or situation make(s) the contributor feel* and (c) *expressing bafflement/seeking clarification*. The move of (d) *revealing personal information* is more diverse than the others and will therefore be discussed last, even if it is not the least frequent one.

7.4.1.2.1 Stressing the subjective nature of the statement

The first form of personalisation to be discussed here is the most common one and used with equal frequency by both letter and comment writers (108 and 120 occurrences respectively): the move of stressing the subjective nature of the statement made. This can be achieved by using any of the means available to express opinion: verbs of cognition (e.g. 'I think', 'I believe', 'I feel', 'I suspect', 'I find', 'I guess', 'I reckon'), speech-act related adjuncts (e.g. 'frankly', 'honestly') or fixed expressions (e.g. 'in my opinion', 'in my view', 'I for one …', 'personally').[497] The point here is not just that the contributors refer to themselves (e.g. via personal pronouns, as in (624) below) but that they do so to tone down their statements. While the consequences in (624) are presented as inescapable and undeniable facts, the readers in (625) and (626) use a number of strategies for stressing that what they say just mirrors their subjective point of view – the most noticeable one being the use of what House and Kasper (1981: 167) call *minus committers* ('I think' and 'in my opinion'), "used to lower the degree to which X commits himself to the state of affairs referred to in the proposition".

(624) […] This will not enhance my children's safety and will dramatically limit their opportunities for fun activities. […] [NEWS G10-018]

(625) I hesitate to second-guess the Met's intentions, but I think it's likely that choosing two female officers to liaise with Climate Camp protesters is a practical move rather than window dressing for a less macho image (Report, 19 August). […] [NEWS G06-086]

(626) […] It's a complicated issue, but in my opinion many problems could be solved if people were asked to […] [CMC T11-032 c12]

As touched upon above, judgements and evaluations abound in reader response, and by definition, these cannot be fully objective. However, if readers decide to stress the subjective nature of their contribution (as done in (628) as opposed to (627) below), they automatically make their contribution more personal, even if the topic is a public one.

(627) The release of al-Megrahi was cowardly and asinine. […] [CMC G07-035_2 c13]

(628) […] I express no opinion about the decision to allow Mr al-Megrahi to return to die in Libya. But in my view, it is a misfortune that he has been induced to abandon his appeal. […] [NEWS T08-051]

In addition to such forms of open positioning, statements can be made both more personal and more tentative if the conditional (e.g. 'I would argue', 'I would say') or verbs like 'seem' are used:

[497] In the letters, such statements are also frequently made in the plural form – not only in letters signed by a group of people but also in those written by the representative or spokesperson of an organisation.

(629) […] I would argue that it is because those responsible for establishing levels of reward have a vested interest in setting them at a high level because their own income and incentives are often linked to those they allocate. […] [NEWS G07-087]

(630) […] I guess if Kermode does go with him, there'll still be (hopefully) the podcast. I'm not sure why he would want to go to R2 really, it seems a step down to me, although obviously not in terms of numbers of listeners. [CMC G09-076 c15]

A closer look at the coded text segments reveals great similarities between the corpora not just in quantitative but also qualitative terms. Some forms may be slightly more frequent in one corpus than in the other (e.g. asking for permission to make a suggestion, as in (631) below, which is more frequent in the letters than the comments), but overall, there are hardly any differences worthy of comment. Even such formal expressions as 'dare one …' can be found in the comments (632) as well as the letters (633).

(631) Sir, In response to Hugo Rifkind's "Someone find me a city to fantasise about" (Aug 21) may I suggest that a shopping mall in Southampton is not his best option. [NEWS T06-061]

(632) Dare one assume that in common with most celebrities her autobiography was ghostwritten? [CMC G11-034 c15]

(633) […] Dare one suggest that it was ever thus as the climate changed over the ages? Many species, unable to adapt, became extinct while others, more successful, have not. [NEWS T10-015]

In both corpora, such structures can be incorporated into the sentence (634) or added as parentheticals (635).

(634) […] I believe that wearing the veil and the segregation of sexes at religious gatherings is meant to ensure women's rights — not to take them away. […] [NEWS T06-037]

(635) […] But the new policies on nuclear will, I believe, lead to major long-term global security problems. […] [NEWS G09-051]

The effect is similar: in both cases, the proposition is toned down and the writer marks the statement as expressing a personal opinion.[498]

[498] According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 896), parenthetical supplements are backgrounded, i.e. the effect of down-toning is stronger in non-parenthetical constructions such as (634) above. However, they add that depending on contextual factors and the content of the subordinate clause, the matrix 'I believe' may also "be reduced in status to a modal qualifier, making it like the parenthetical".

7.4.1.2.2 Stating how the trigger text/situation makes the contributor feel

The move of stating how the article, other readers' contributions – be they letters or comments – or the situation described therein make(s) the contributor feel is used in 166 letters and 38 comments and thus markedly more frequent in traditional letters to the editor than online comments. Yet the seemingly surprising fact that such statements are more than four times more frequent in the letters is easily accounted for when taking a closer look at what they are used for in the two corpora.

In the clear majority of letters using this move, it opens the contribution, and it is frequently coupled with the move of criticising (and sometimes also praising) others. The letter writer stating his/her surprise in (636) for instance adds a quotation providing evidence that contradicts the impression given in the newspaper article and thus questions the article's accuracy and truthfulness.[499] In a similar vein, the letter writer in (637) uses the exclamative 'how sad' not just to express his/her sadness but above all to criticise the Labour party for taking the – in his/her eyes – wrong measures.

(636) Sir, I was surprised to read that "Albert Einstein struggled at school" (leading article, Aug 21). His mother, Pauline Einstein, wrote in a letter to Jette Koch (Albert's grandmother) on August 1, 1886: "Yesterday Albert received his grades, he was again number one, his report card was brilliant." […] [NEWS T07-017]

(637) How sad that the Labour leadership is prepared to act tough on public services (We will not flinch from hard decisions on cuts, says Darling, 8 September), but cringes when faced with the need to sort out the greedy bankers who produced this mess. […] [NEWS G09-048]

Even if the link between uttering one's feelings and making somebody else responsible for those feelings is not always as strong as in these examples, it could be argued that it is always present below the surface. The person or organisation responsible for the acts of 'skewing' and 'giving attention' and thus triggering the feelings of concern and pleasure or satisfaction in (638)

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[499] In the letters, stating one's surprise is a move frequently used by those who correct statements or disagree with the newspaper. On the one hand, it allows readers to make the criticism less explicit: after all, stating one's surprise about two incompatible statements or facts (e.g. 'Sir, I was surprised to read (Sept 8) that the 'oldest' lifeboat survives at Walton-on-the-Naze in Essex. I thought the 'oldest' surviving lifeboat to be the Zetland, built in […]' [NEWS T09-049]) is not the same as explicitly claiming that the newspaper is wrong, even though this meaning is implied. On the other hand, by stating their surprise, the readers also insinuate that the article commented on falls short of the high standards normally associated with the newspaper. This can be considered an indirect reproach, even if such statements imply a positive assessment of the newspaper's overall quality.

and (639) may not be named explicitly, yet a connection between these acts and the feelings evoked is established nevertheless, and the letter writers can be understood to be criticising and praising the respective developments in an indirect manner.

(638) Sir, I am concerned that the need to protect our children from paedophiles and those wishing to harm them ("Parents who take children to clubs face crime checks", Sept 11) has become completely skewed — again in the light of those giving lifts in a voluntary capacity. I heard this week of two instances. […] [NEWS T10-014.1]

(639) Sir, It is pleasing to see ("Modifying British wheat with 'magic' mineral", Sept 10) that more attention is being given to the inadequacy of selenium in our diet. […] [NEWS T10-002.1]

Interestingly, the link established on the surface level does not always lead to the target of the (implied) criticism. In (640), it is not the fact that the *Guardian* revealed the information that the reader finds appalling but the situation revealed. This important difference is best illustrated by taking another look at the comments discussed as (608) to (610) above, reproduced below as (641) to (643) for ease of reference. In these comments, the readers clearly applaud the journalist and evaluate the article positively ('excellent', 'good' and 'extremely good'). The only reason for them to find the article 'scary', 'chilling' and making their 'blood boil' is the fact that this is true of the situation described by the journalist. The feelings may have been (re-)awakened by the article, yet it is not the journalist who is responsible for them – he/she simply acts as a messenger or reminder.

(640) I was appalled by the Guardian's revelation that 470 minors are being detained in immigration detention centres (Ministers under fire for locking up immigrant children, 31 August). […] [NEWS G08-074]

(641) Excellent, scary and thought-provoking article […] [CMC G10-086 c3]

(642) Good article but it makes my blood boil. [...] [CMC G10-086 c6]

(643) Extremely good article. Chilling of course. [...] [CMC G10-086 c13]

Thus, while some of the feelings expressed by the reader obviously relate to and originate in either the journalistic product (see (636) above and (644) below) or the situation described therein (see (637) above), the trigger may not always be identified so clearly.[500] The effect achieved is the same,

[500] Since (641) to (643) above seem to belong to the first category on the surface level but to the second in terms of meaning, it was considered best not to differentiate between *stating how the trigger text makes the contributor feel* and *stating how the situation makes the contributor*

however: writing about the feelings triggered by the text or situation commented on not only allows the readers to take a stance, to position themselves and thus show their alignment or disalignment, it also gives their contributions a personal, emotional touch: instead of simply evaluating the article or situation from a seemingly neutral perspective, the readers in (644) and (645) write openly about how their feelings have been affected by what they have read and take this as the starting point of their topical contribution.

(644) I was glad to see the article on Gerrard Winstanley (Face to faith, 5 September). Privatisation of the land and natural resources is at the root of the present economic crisis, and Winstanley […] [NEWS G09-023]

(645) […] I am constantly saddened and embarrassed that the average British insight to German affairs seems to have stopped in 1945. I am fed up with the never-ending references to Hitler, the war and Nazism. Germany, of all nations in Europe, has […] [NEWS G07-031]

The strategy used in the comments is related but at the same time slightly different. Just as in the letters, the move of stating the feelings aroused by the article or the situation described therein may be used in combination with criticism directed at others: in (646), the commenter first uses the interjection 'oh dear' to express his/her annoyance about the situation described (i.e. a council's announcement to reform public services by adopting a business model similar to that of budget airlines). The reader then uses the expression 'it makes me laugh' to disagree with the politician quoted and to accuse him indirectly of lacking the experience required to comment. While this user certainly did not literally laugh when reading the article, the comment writer in (647) can be assumed to have felt sad about the fact that the debate sparked by a referee's decision in a Celtic vs. Arsenal Champions League play-off changed from being one on football to one on nationality and politics. This feeling of sadness is sparked by other readers' comments; in contrast, the state of weariness described in (648) seems to have been caused by the situation as such, and the newspaper website is only the platform used to express those feelings.[501]

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feel. Even if numerous clear examples of both categories exist, too many of the reader contributions could be attributed to both to warrant distinguishing between them.

[501] The words in quotation marks in (648) are not quotes from the newspaper article but scare quotes without a concrete original utterance, used by the commenter to distance him/herself from statements other people tend to make in this context. For a more detailed discussion see 6.3.2.1.1 above.

(646) Oh dear.
It makes me laugh that he [POLITICIAN QUOTED IN THE ARTICLE] refers to Ryanair as "cheap and cheerful". Clearly he has never flown with them before. [CMC G07-115-17 c18]

(647) I think it's sad that the comments are turning to an English/Scottish debate. That's not an issue. […] [CMC T08-004 c12]

(648) […] I am absolutely weary being told by City apologists that we "need" their skills and that "the talent" requires seven figure bungs commesurate with their unique skills. Only two years ago, […] [CMC G06-046 c13]

Even if such usage is not unlike that found in the letters, the comments differ from this genre in that the move of stating one's feelings is not as conventionalised as it is in the letters – both in terms of form and function. As shown above, writing about the feelings aroused by the trigger text or situation is one of the typical ways of opening a letter to the editor. Fairly often, the structure 'I was/am ADJECTIVE' (e.g. 'surprised', 'astonished', 'concerned', 'impressed', 'glad', 'saddened', 'annoyed', 'delighted', 'dismayed', 'appalled' or 'shocked'; see also (636) to (640) above) is used, allowing the letter writers to take a stance and position themselves before criticising or praising others, relating personal experiences or producing (counter-)arguments and hence contributing to the topical debate.[502] In the comments, on the other hand, the structures found are far more diverse, and readers also use this move simply to vent their feelings and express their frustration, as illustrated by the following examples, all quoted in their entirety:

(649) Again, what an incredibly poor, sad, depressing, stupid and plain WRONG idea.... for so many reasons, it doesn't even need to be explained why.. The worst thing is, it's probably going to happen, too..
Time to start about a revolution... or emigration. I'm not even joking.. [CMC G07-115-117 c19]

(650) D'you know what?
I give up!
Will the last one to leave the country please close the door after them.. [CMC G10-086 c19]

(651) Yawn.... more tiresome "look at me" indulgent nonsense.
What will those wacky guys and girls come up with next? [CMC G08-017 c5]

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[502] The conventionalised structures 'I was/am ADJECTIVE to read/hear' and 'it is ADJECTIVE to read/hear' can be found 23 times in the corpus of letters but only once in that of comments. This difference is certainly also influenced by the fact that these structures have the additional benefit of allowing the letter writers to contextualise their letter by repeating the main argument/piece of news and thus helping the newspaper readers to recall the trigger text (see the contextualisation strategies discussed in 6.3.1 above).

While such comments can – when read in context – also be understood as criticising others (in this case the government and climate change activists), they differ from the letters in that the move of expressing the reader's feelings is not just an introductory move, placed before his/her argument(s) or analysis of the situation, but the major move performed. The primary goal of such comments is to reflect the reader's mood, which in these cases is clearly pessimistic or even gloomy.

In regard to form, the comments are certainly far more varied than the letters and tend not to follow a clear structure. In the examples above, the users employ a diverse set of strategies to lend their feelings more weight and to add expressive force to their contributions. Instead of simply stating his/her feeling of resignation and despair, the user in (650) for instance addresses the reader with the colloquial attention-getting question 'D'you know what?' before producing the exclamation 'I give up!', thus imitating an interactive speech situation. The request performed via the volitional question (cf. Leech 2014: 153) 'will the last one …' added as a sort of postscript in italics gives further emphasis to the reader's feeling of hopelessness: after all, asking the last one to leave to 'shut the door' or 'turn out the lights' are common phrases for expressing hopelessness and frustration.[503] The reader in (649), on the other hand, combines an exclamative ('what a …') with enumeration ('poor, sad, depressing, stupid …') and capitalisation ('WRONG') to give his/her feelings more emphasis, and the one in (651) employs the performative predication 'yawn' and a rhetorical question to communicate his/her stance. In both cases, trailing dots are used to string the sentence fragments together; this gives the contributions a very spontaneous, direct and authentic feel and thus further underlines their personal, subjective nature.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that the letters are less creative and always conform to the conventionalised structures described above. The use of an exclamative in (652) and the exclamation providing a fairly graphic description of the reader's reaction in (653) clearly show that this is not the case.

(652) Sir, Ms Crossley-Holland [AUTHOR] is to be admired for not having given up yet. How I empathise with her. […] [NEWS T07-043-2]

[503] The sentence can also be understood as mimicking the 1992 headline of the *Sun* "If Kinnock [THE THEN LABOUR LEADER] wins today will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights", used to support the Conservative Party in the General Election. This headline can be assumed to be widely known, as it is often mentioned in relation to the famous controversial front-page headline "IT'S THE SUN WOT WON IT", with which the *Sun* celebrated the unexpected victory of the Conservatives three days later, on April 11, 1992.

(653) I nearly choked on my breakfast! I run a small training company, a not-for-profit social enterprise committed to road safety. […] [NEWS G10-032]

Moreover, (654) illustrates that such strategies may even be used when the letter is not written by a private individual but by the official representative of an organisation. Just as in the comments above, this letter writer, who speaks in his function as the director of a charity organisation, imitates an interactive speech situation by asking and immediately answering a question before using the interjection 'gosh', the spoken phrase 'hang on …' and a rhetorical question to express his annoyance and to ridicule all those people who fail to recognise the absurdity of the situation:

(654) Sir, So the Charity Commission is to investigate a claim against the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment made by a group called Republic, whose political aims are blindingly obvious ("Prince of Wales 'used charity as lobby firm' on architecture", Sept 15). And what is the claim? That the foundation "tried to influence a number of planning decisions". Gosh. Hang on a moment while I steady myself. The Georgian Group, a registered charity, does that each and every day. Can I, as its director, expect a knock on the door at the dead of night from Dame Suzi Leather's [AT THE TIME CHAIR OF THE CHARITY COMMISSION] henchmen?
In a democracy, the Prince of Wales has as much right to express an opinion during the planning process as the next man.
Robert Bargery
Director, The Georgian Group

It is hardly necessary to point out the satirical undertone in the letter writer's description of his feelings and reaction (being so shocked that he lost his balance).[504] Thus, even in the letters, highly vivid ways of communicating the feelings triggered by the article or situation exist. Such creative ways of expressing the reader's feelings may be more frequent in the comments, but they are by no means unique to this genre.

Beside the fact that the move of stating how the trigger text or situation makes the contributor feel is more than four times as frequent in the letters as in the comments, the most striking difference between the genres is that in the letters, the move has both a conventionalised form and function. This can be partly attributed to the special communicative situation requiring letter writers to establish coherence and contextualise their contribution in

[504] According to Bousfield's (cf. 2010a: 213) definition, the letter writer's behaviour is an instance of sarcasm: on the surface, he produces the kind of reaction that the group accusing the Prince's foundation would like to trigger and describes the shock he felt in the face of this accusation. However, this feigned consternation about the revelation is an insincere agreement constituting a severe threat to the face of any supporter of this group, which the letter writer clearly intends to ridicule and offend. Leech (1983: 142), on the other hand, would probably not speak of sarcasm but use the term *irony* instead, as, according to him, it is the irony principle that "enables a speaker to be impolite while seeming to be polite".

the opening move (see 6.3.1 above). Such statements not only allow letter writers to position themselves and prepare the ground for critical moves, they also help readers to identify and recall the trigger text, which makes them ideal for opening letters to the editor.

Thus, while the analysis of the move of clearly marking one's statement as expressing a subjective opinion did not reveal any differences between the corpora (see 7.4.1.2.1 above), personal emotions were found to play a far more important role in the letters than the comments.

7.4.1.2.3 Expressing bafflement/seeking clarification

Another way of making one's comment or letter more personal is by expressing one's bafflement or seeking clarification. This category was created in the initial bottom-up coding process because examples like the following were frequently found:

(655) Sir, Am I alone in being puzzled that Emmanuel Adebayor faces sanction for his celebration in front of Arsenal fans last Saturday (The Game, "FA ready to throw book at Adebayor", Sept 14)? […] [NEWS T10-029.1]

(656) [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE OMITTED] Anyone else scratching their heads at this one? [...] [CMC G07-115-7 c9]

(657) […] Why is anyone surprised that there is a problem with social work recruitment (Report, 1 September)? [NEWS G08-013]

(658) […] I thought children became adults at 18. Why do they need the suffocating love of the state until they're 23? […] [CMC G10-086 c14]

In (655) and (656) above, the contributors express their bafflement and seek clarification by reaching out to other readers, indirectly asking them to step forward in agreement or to offer an explanation. In (657) and (658) above, the interrogative form is also used, but in this case, the readers do not direct their (rhetorical) questions at anyone in particular but rather use them to make a statement ('there is no reason to be surprised/suffocate …') and to express their surprise about the fact that anybody should think differently. Interestingly, this strategy is far more frequent in the letters than the comments (52 vs. 17 occurrences).

In both corpora, such statements may be written in fairly colloquial and emotional language, e.g. by omitting auxiliary verbs (see (656) above) and by using syntactically reduced intonation questions (659), exclamations and interjections (660) or emotive modifiers (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 916) for added emphasis (e.g. 'what on earth …'; see (661) below).

(659) Cut back on the middle-class welfare state? […] [NEWS G11-003]

(660) I don't get it. How was a spy allowed to live out his life in freedom? Many things about the British legal system baffle me, but this is by far the most troubling. My goodness! [CMC T06-004.1 c8]

(661) Sir, If a family doctor's remit does not include administering swine flu and other jabs (report, Sept 15), what on earth are they being paid such high salaries for? [NEWS T10-031]

While such colloquial features are not always present, all the examples have in common that by expressing their bafflement or seeking clarification, the contributors abandon the position of a neutral, distant observer or commentator and make their contribution more emotional and personal.

7.4.1.2.4 Revealing personal information

The last sub-category of the move *statements about self* to be discussed here is that of *revealing personal information*. As the name indicates, this code was assigned to all text segments in which the contributors reveal some kind of personal information, e.g. about their age and social or financial background (see (662) and (668) below), their country of residence (663), their favourite football club (664), their health problems (665) or their height (667).

(662) As an 85-year-old pensioner living on slender means, I would be delighted to pay £6 per year for a speedier broadband (Report, 18 August). What is all the fuss about? [NEWS G06-063]

(663) Living in the grassiest of countries, Mongolia, I see the next problem: overgrazing. At the moment, Mongolia has 39 million livestock, where 21 was once considered sustainable […] [CMC T10-025 c2]

(664) Being an Arsenal fan, I cringed last night at the way Eduardo dived. It uncharacteristically lacked the integrity and class that he has consistently shown since joining Arsenal. […] [CMC T08-004 c16]

(665) Being an overweight diabetic with a heart complaint, high cholesterol and high blood pressure, I was most interested in Phil Daoust's advice (I've taken control back over my life, 3 September) on how to sort myself out. […] [NEWS G09-008]

While this move may co-occur with others (e.g. that of expressing bafflement and seeking clarification, as in (662) above: 'What is all the fuss about?'), all cases in which contributors reveal personal information in the process of recounting personal or professional experiences were excluded from the present analysis, as in those cases, the disclosure of information is an integral part of recounting those experiences and considering these cases twice would have skewed the results.

All in all, the move of revealing private information was found to be more frequent in the letters than the comments (46 vs. 34 contributions respectively), even if the difference is not as marked as in some of the other categories. Fairly often, the move is used to open the contribution and serves the function of making the reader's perspective explicit (e.g. 'As a parent/mother/Muslim/smoker' or 'Being an Arsenal fan/overweight diabetic'; also see examples above). Besides using such conscious acts of positioning at the beginning of their contributions, readers can also weave such information into their line of argumentation (666) or simply 'let it drop'. This last usage is best illustrated by looking at the playful use of such personal information in (667) and (668), where the letter writers add information about their height and age to their names, thus underlining the tongue-in-cheek nature of their complaints by admitting to being even shorter than Sarkozy or too old to get upset about missing bubble gums.

(666) Over 50,000 people took part in the world's largest half marathon, the Great North Run. I ran it. I would have liked to see a report or even a photo. Why should Manchester United dominate the sports section? […] [NEWS G11-029]

(667) Yesterday, Nicholas Sarkozy was 5' 6" (Report, 8 Sepember) and today he is 5' 5" (Does Nicolas Sarkozy have short man syndrome 9 September). Is he getting smaller? I think we should be told.
Martin Bland (5' 3")
York [NEWS G09-057]

(668) Thanks for the free copy of the Dandy [REPRINT OF OLD COMIC] with today's Guardian (16 September). But where's my free cola flavour bubble gum as advertised on the cover?
Pete Hendy (age 49)
High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire [NEWS G10-064]

Irrespective of the tone or purpose of the individual reader contribution, the move of revealing private information automatically makes the contribution more personal and less objective, which was slightly more often found to be the case in the letters than the comments.

All in all, the analysis has revealed three of the four sub-moves of *statements about self* to be more frequent in the letters than the comments. Just like *relating personal experiences*, this form of personalisation plays a substantially greater role in the corpus of letters than in that of comments (372 vs. 209 occurrences if the four sub-moves are added up). This clearly shows that against common expectations, strategies of personalisation are far from unusual in letters to the editor; in the present corpus, many of them are even more frequent in this more traditional genre. Given this astonishing finding, the attention will now be turned to attempts at the opposite: making one's contribution appear more objective by adopting the role of a professional.

7.4.2 Claiming expert status/expertise

As shown above, newspapers frequently publish fairly personal letters, thus giving private individuals not only a voice but also a face. This strategy allows the media producers to demonstrate both the diversity and involvement of their readership. The next move to be discussed, i.e. *claiming expert status*, reveals that the respective newspapers also aim to present themselves as the medium of choice of a very specific group of people: fairly often, letters are published in which readers adopt the role of professionals offering their insights, thus lending their contribution – and, by extension, the newspaper – an air of trustworthiness and reliability:

(669) As a social welfare lawyer, I can confirm that Jenni Russell [AUTHOR] is spot on in her comments about the problems caused by having a benefits system that is […] [NEWS G07-020][505]

(670) Sir, The GMC agrees with Dr Christopher Smith (letter, Sept 10) that it would indeed be a tall order for medical students to administer a general anaesthetic before they graduate. […]
Professor Jim Mckillop
Chairman of the Undergraduate Board, GMC [NEWS T09-055]

In letters to the editor, expert status can by claimed in both the signature line (see (670) above) and the body of the text itself; readers commenting online, in contrast, need to use the latter to position themselves as experts and are hence forced to make their special status known to others from the beginning if they want to use it to support their argument. On the one hand, this may be achieved by stating one's status explicitly, for example using the 'As a …' structure described above (see (669) above and (671) below) or making an explicit statement about one's past or present work

[505] From a formal perspective, the strategy used in this example is the same as the one used to reveal personal information discussed above (see 7.4.1.2.4). The difference between contributors saying 'As a parent/mother/Muslim/smoker' and 'As a social welfare lawyer/an A level examiner' lies of course in the fact that the latter can – and certainly want to – be considered experts in the topic of these particular debates (i.e. the benefit system and the supposedly declining standards of A levels respectively), instead of simply making their perspective explicit. Such qualified experts can not only provide valuable insider information but also be expected to do so objectively. Parents or smokers may well have considerable experience in the areas of raising children or dealing with the habit of smoking; however, in contrast to family therapists or doctors, they would not be considered neutral experts or qualified professionals when contributing to debates in the respective fields.

experiences (see (672) and (673) below). On the other hand, users may simply recount professional experiences or provide enough clues (e.g. writing about having 'returned from court' and using terms such as 'my client' and 'prison sentence' as in (674) below) for readers to be able to infer the writer's profession.

(671) As an A level examiner, every year I see A2 papers ranging from essays which would get high passes at second year undergraduate level to others where I wonder how the candidate managed to get sufficient GCSEs to proceed to A level. […] [CMC G06-011-12 c3]

(672) I worked in executive remuneration and the finance sector in the 1980s and 90s and saw the exponential salary growth occur. […] [CMC G06-M13 c10]

(673) Working with traumatised adults coming to seek asylum, occasionally with children, I can […] [CMC G08-074-75 c4]

(674) I have returned from court having spent 3 hours trying to rectify a mistake, made by an incompetent police officer, which had lead to my client wrongly serving a prison sentence. […] [CMC T09-020 c7]

The need to find a means to communicate one's expert status in the body of the comment as opposed to simply adding one's affiliation or status (e.g. 'Airport Operators Association', 'Vice-chancellor, University of Bedfordshire') in the signature line of the letter may be one of the reasons for the radical difference in frequency: expert status is claimed in 361 letters but only 32 comments.[506] This does not mean, however, that the people commenting online have no expertise; it rather illustrates that signalling one's expertise is one of the strategies employed in letters to signal trustworthiness and to increase the chances of being chosen for publication.

The present data suggest that this strategy is fairly successful: 32.5% of the letters published in the *Guardian* and as much as 41.5% of those published in the *Times* are written by experts in their respective fields – be it professionals (e.g. doctors commenting on an article about vaccination), official representatives of organisations (see (670) above) or high-ranking

[506] Using the signature line for claiming expert status is very convenient, yet this is not the only strategy used in the letters. There may be several expert claims in the same letter, e.g. explicit claims may be combined with implicit ones, and explicit or implicit claims in the body of the text may be supported by explicit claims in the signature lines. It also needs to be stressed at this point that not every signature line including information about the letter writer's profession was automatically counted as an expert claim. If the signature line for instance reveals that the letter writer is a professor at the University of Aberystwyth, but in the body of that letter said professor recounts his personal experiences with nude beaches, providing this information was not considered an expert claim [NEWS G09-003]. This clearly demonstrates that looking at signatories alone (the method adopted by Wober (2004), a study to be briefly discussed below) cannot replace a detailed qualitative analysis.

politicians (e.g. a letter on Internet piracy written to the *Guardian* by Peter Mandelson, at the time Secretary of state for business, innovation and skills). This particularly strong preference for letters written by experts in the case of the *Times* is also documented by Wober (2004: 51), who, studying the signature lines of the letters page in the *Times* between 1953 and 2004, found the percentage of letters from what he calls 'elite writers' (e.g. officers of associations, MPs, company directors, leaders in education) to remain largely constant over the years, always ranging between 35.4% and 42.6%.[507] In any case, the large number of letters with expert claims in both newspapers of the present corpus strongly supports claims that editors have a strong preference for letters displaying authority (cf. e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen 2002) – after all, it allows them to position themselves as the medium that experts choose to share their professional insights.[508]

Yet prestige is not only the driving force for those who select the letters but also for those who write them: having one's letter published in the printed version of the *Times* or the *Guardian* is of course far more prestigious than being one among hundreds of anonymous commenters on the Internet. Especially for public figures, companies or organisations, taking a stand in the form of letters to the editor is an important part of their PR strategies; to use the words of a handbook for public relations writers, "[l]etters to the editor often present excellent opportunities for positive publicity, whatever the initiating context or pretext" (Aronson et al. 2007: 246). If the response section is to be used – maybe not exclusively but at least partly – as a stage, i.e. to draw attention to oneself or the organisation, company or party one represents, printed newspapers are without doubt a better choice than comment sections on newspaper websites, where contributions such as the following letter written by the chief executive of Oxfam would be lost in the thread of comments and fail to reach the intended audience:

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507 Wober (2004: 53) also argues that "[t]abloid newspapers carry much smaller letters sections (if any at all) and include very few elite contributors" but fails to provide empirical data to support this claim. He is certainly not wrong in concluding that "[t]op people write to The Times" (2004: 49), but on the basis of his knowledge, it would certainly be more to the point to say that 'letters by top people are published in the *Times*', as looking at the tiny fraction of letters printed reveals only little about the mass of letters received and far more about the selection process.

508 This preference in the present data is certainly influenced by the fact that both newspapers studied are nationals or even internationals. The proportion of expert voices can be expected to be different in local newspapers. As Richardson (2008: 60; emphasis in the original) rightly argues, "different newspapers have different understandings of what personal authority actually means […]. In other words, for a local newspaper, a *relevant* and *authoritative* voice is a *local* voice".

(675) Your special reports on the West Bank (24-26 August) should be essential reading for western diplomats and politicians who failed to take any effective action to end settlements. […] Oxfam is helping Palestinian farmers work their way out of poverty by gaining Fairtrade status so they can sell their olive oil in UK supermarkets. It should be a simple task, but in June the farmers we work with had around 1,350 olive trees damaged in attacks by settlers. […]
Barbara Stocking
Chief executive, Oxfam [NEWS G07-069]

However, this does not mean that all letter writers claiming expert status have this self-promoting function in mind. Neither does it mean that the people commenting online care more about the topic at stake and never use the platform as a stage. Yet if they do, they can only promote their online identity and not use it in the way letters to the editor can be, and often are, used for image-building.

While signature lines or other means of revealing the letter writer's expertise, status or affiliation may be used to increase the likelihood of being chosen for publication, matters of prestige are not the only reason for the great number of expert claims; they also serve an important argumentative purpose. As has been shown above, one of the core functions of reader response is criticism and disagreement. Yet by criticising or correcting others, the critic automatically assumes authority over the person criticised. This not only constitutes a threat to the addressee's positive face but also to that of the critic. It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of strategies to tone down or mitigate the criticism have emerged. However, the analysis above revealed that in the present corpora, these strategies are used far less frequently than in other feedback contexts (see 7.3.4.1.6). What is frequently used in combination with criticism, however, is the move of claiming expert status or expertise. This strategy of accompanying the criticism by claims to knowledge or experience can be interpreted as an attempt to make the criticism appear valid and well-founded, irrespective of whether the journalist or another letter writer is the target:

(676) Sir, As a former long-serving public servant whose duties included "managing" sickness levels, I am surprised that the real cause of much of the high average sickness in many government (or similar) jobs never seems to get properly aired. It is simply one of the natural consequences of […] [NEWS T06-049]

(677) Sir, Dr Mark Scibor-Rylski [LETTER WRITER] (letter, Aug 26) is correct in his analysis of the problems facing early-stage companies seeking venture capital but he is, I am afraid, entirely mistaken as to the cause.
As a former stockbroker and an individual with many years experience in venture capital, I concur that […] [NEWS T07-054]

As outlined above, when contributors criticise others, they run the risk of being made the target themselves (see 7.3.4.2). Expert claims in follow-ups can therefore also be understood as a strategy to pre-empt counter-attacks criticising the contributor for lacking the experience or knowledge required to comment. In (544) above, reproduced below as (678) for ease of reference, the commenter corrects information provided in the article and both justifies and supports this correction by claiming expert status, i.e. construing an identity with a professional background related to the topic under discussion (i.e. that of a Licenced Crop Inspector). In a similar vein, the reader replying to an article entitled 'The students who get extra marks simply for turning up' (Angelini 2009) tries to pre-empt criticism by explicitly stressing his/her experience in a closing remark added to the 'three very simple points' made about university life (679).

(678) […] By the way Hobbit [NAME OF A CROP] was a PBI variety, I used to be a Licenced Crop Inspector. [CMC T10-025 c14]

(679) I have three very simple points:
1. Universities are […]
I say this as somebody with a bachelor degree, two master degrees and a PGCE. I know student culture and Higher Education well [CMC T10-003 c6][509]

All in all, these means of self-presentation allow contributors to create an expert identity and, in doing so, an air of authority and trustworthiness. Owing to the editorial control exercised by newspapers, this strategy may be markedly more frequent in letters to the editor, but it is – as the examples above have illustrated – also found in online comments.[510] That the strategy can be considered a conventionalised form of opening a reader contribution is nicely exemplified by the last case to be discussed here. Example (680) below is the beginning of a comment posted below a newspaper article about a new code of conduct that is to be introduced for teachers. The author, called *legalcynic*, lives up to his/her username and reveals – using the very frequent 'As …' structure discussed above – that he/she works in the legal profession, i.e. has expert knowledge of codes of conduct based on

[509] It is of course to be debated whether this user can be considered a true expert in the field, despite his/her first-hand experiences. However, he/she certainly claims expert status by adding this information and thus tries to position him/herself as such.

[510] Interestingly, this finding is supported by one of the comments from the thread drawn on in the conclusion (see 9.2). In response to the *Guardian*'s question "Do you like below-the-line comments?" the commenter argues: 'The main reason I come here is for the comments, especially those that begin: "well, actually, I speak fluent Arabic/have a PHD in Economics/worked as a quinoa farmer for 20 years and this is absolute bollocks/a fair reflection of reality".' [CMC G-BTL c74].

professional experience. The user then presents his/her criticism of the proposed code and the people responsible for it with an ironic twist, mimicking a spoken delivery with features such as a metadiscursive aside addressed to the audience ('now bear with me while …') and suspension dots signalling a slight pause before the delivery of the punchline:

(680) As one who deals with things like codes of conduct, breaches of the same etc
I can say that this code, now bear with me while I get all technical.....
Is a sack of bollocks. […] [CMC G08-094 c11]

By revealing his/her professional expertise at the beginning of the comment and using a standard structure for doing so, the author raises certain expectations in the readers, which he/she even makes explicit ('while I get all technical'). However, he/she then deliberately chooses not to meet these expectations, thus lending all the more weight to his/her negative evaluation of the proposed code of conduct ('sack of bollocks').[511]

In summary, the data reveal that one of the core reasons for claiming expert status, i.e. to support the argument by making the contribution appear more trustworthy and reliable, has been adopted in online comments, even if such claims are decidedly less frequent in this genre. The immense number of letters claiming expert status must in part be attributed to the fact that this genre is often used by public figures as a means of self-promotion, i.e. to signal that they are an active and recognised player in the public debate. Since online comments are unsuitable for this purpose – partly because of their technological makeup, partly because of their comparatively low prestige – it is not surprising that they are not used to fulfil this function. Yet even though expert claims are far more frequent in the letters to the editor, this does not make the genre as such less personal and more objective. As the analysis of the individual personalisation strategies has shown, a substantial number of the letters in the present corpus are written from the perspective of private individuals sharing their personal experiences as well as their innermost thoughts and feelings.

In their case study, Landert and Jucker (2011: 1430) come to the conclusion that the authors of letters to the editor "adopt a professional role, which lets the information appear more objective and credible" and "[i]n contrast the authors of online comments tend to write from a more

[511] This British expression for 'complete nonsense' may be fairly common, yet it is still marked as 'impolite' or 'usually vulgar', depending on the dictionary consulted. 'Impolite' is the usage or register label used by the Macmillan English Dictionary Online (http://www.macmillan dictionary.com/dictionary/british/bollocks_2; last accessed January 30, 2017) and 'usually vulgar' the one provided by the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bollocks; last accessed January 30, 2017). For a discussion of the use of informal and taboo vocabulary see 5.3.3 above.

subjective viewpoint, supporting their arguments by referring to personal experiences and emotions, and highlighting how they are personally affected". These assertions cannot be supported by the present data. While it is true that expert claims are a common feature of the letters and far less frequent in the comments, the authors' description of online comments applies just as well – or even better – to the letters to the editor of the present corpus.

7.5 Concluding remarks on identity and face

The goal of the present chapter was to address two common (mis)conceptions of comment sections, i.e. that they are marked by aggressive behaviour on the one hand and a very subjective, personal stance on the other.

The present analysis brought to light that overall, criticism is slightly more frequent in the letters (see 7.3.2 and 7.3.3 above). Criticism targeted at clearly identified individuals was even found to be decidedly more frequent in the letters, which are used almost twice as often as comments to attack the author of the article commented on. All in all, the analysis revealed that fairly open, outspoken criticism directed at the journalist is neither new nor unique to online comments (see 7.3.4.1). The subsequent analysis of critical contributions targeting other letter/comment writers also showed some striking findings: in each genre, the criticism directed at other contributors strongly resembles that levelled at journalists, and in both corpora, these contributions are frequently counter-attacks. This means that if readers criticise others, they are more likely to find themselves the target of criticism in reactions to their own contribution (see 7.3.4.2). Despite some minor differences between the two corpora, which proved to be above all a matter of degree and not kind, the similarities between the two types of reader response in (im)politeness matters are quite astonishing. Not only do the present corpora provide no evidence to support the view of online comments being full of aggressive and disinhibited behaviour, they even suggest that the behaviour encountered can be attributed to the function that these two genres have in common and not to matters of anonymity or spontaneity.

As regards the topic of subjectivity and personalisation, the analysis revealed the strategy of personalisation to play a greater role in the letters than the comments. Especially the moves of *relating personal experiences*, *stating how the trigger text/situation makes the contributor feel* and *expressing bafflement/seeking clarification* turned out to be markedly more frequent in the letters. While it is not uncommon for readers commenting online to adopt a personal stance and write about private experiences and emotions, this kind of behaviour does not seem to be influenced by medium factors (e.g. anonymity) but to constitute an inherent feature of reader response – whether it is performed via letters to the editor or below-the-line comments. In the present synchronic comparison, the differences in terms of subjectivity, private topics and personal stance encountered by Landert and Jucker (2011) could thus not be found. However, the analysis also revealed expert claims to be far more frequent in the letters than the comments – a finding that at least partly supports those of Landert and Jucker's (2011) diachronic case study. Matters of prestige and self-promotion play an entirely different role in the comments; yet neither their anonymity and spontaneity nor the fact that they are largely free from editorial control has caused people to get carried away when commenting online.

All in all, these findings clearly call for a large-scale diachronic study of letters to the editor. This would enable investigating whether this genre changed substantially over the 24 years that separate the letters studied by Landert and Jucker (2011) from the present data. If this was found to be the case, it would speak in favour of a general trend towards personalisation in the media. However, it might also be that letters to the editor have always constituted this intriguing mixture of personal experiences and professional expertise and that the perceived difference between letters and comments is created by the fact that below-the-line comments are still not the official medium that public figures or organisations use to promote their interests or share their professional expertise. In any case, the present study has revealed both genres to be surprisingly complex and remarkably versatile; in short, they offer a rich and fascinating source for (future) research. Before coming to the conclusion, a brief assessment of the gatekeeping function performed by the editors allows to review some of the findings and round up the discussion.

8 The editors' selection criteria

Although the present analysis could focus only on a selected number of moves, it has provided a fairly detailed – even if not fully complete – picture of the two types of reader response under investigation. The numerous similarities uncovered have shown below-the-line comments to be closely related to letters to the editor, in spite of the contrasting ways in which they are not only produced but also perceived. When presenting the communicative situations (see chapter 4 above), the considerable difference in the degree of editorial control was emphasised: while comments posted on the newspaper website may only be deleted in a post-moderation process, letters need to be selected for publication first. The letters of the present corpus thus represent only a tiny fraction of those received by the newspapers, and this cherry-picked selection can be expected to be quite different from the largely uncensored and unfiltered below-the-line comments collected for the present study.

Yet on what basis do editors decide which letter to publish and which not? In an attempt to "understand[ing] the conditions for public discourse", Wahl-Jorgensen (2002: 69) investigates and evaluates these selection criteria by looking at more than 60 articles in which letters editors discuss their work, published since 1967 in *The Masthead*, i.e. "the trade journal of the US National Conference of Editorial Writers" (2002: 71). This data set is supplemented with an analysis of 23 in-depth interviews that she conducted with letters editors in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1999. This allows her to identify four rules of selection: (1) relevance, (2) brevity, (3) entertainment and (4) authority. In the following, each rule will be presented and assessed in terms of whether it also holds for the letters of the present corpus. In addition, its applicability to the online corpus will be discussed – after all, the great number of similarities between the genres identified above suggests that the selection process does not play as big a role as might be assumed.

8.1 Relevance

"First, the rule of relevance refers to the demand for the content of the letter to be 'relevant', or respond to issues and events already on the agenda" (2002: 69). When discussing this rule, Wahl-Jorgensen (cf. 2002: 73) refers to the key news values of newspapers to which letters to the editor have to conform by being relevant, of use and of interest to a broad readership. She criticises that the editors' preference for letters responding to the newspaper's front page articles or editorials does not allow readers to introduce their own topics and ideas: "[r]eaders can merely be the 'watchdogs' over a newspaper's point of view" (2002: 73).

All in all, the rule of relevance holds for both genres, as the great majority of letters and comments represent a follow-up triggered by an initiation found in the newspaper or on its website (authored either by a journalist or another reader). Self-initiated letters exist (see 6.5 above), yet they are closely linked to the topics dominating the public discourse of the time. However, it is not true that readers are only watchdogs over the points of view expressed in the newspaper: the letters commenting on radio programmes, newspaper content besides articles (e.g. comics, photos, crosswords), up-coming events or new initiatives show that the option to open new topics for debate is provided and used, even if the large number of letters criticising the journalist suggests that readers have indeed a tendency to assume the role of a newspaper watchdog.

It was argued above that below-the-line comments, by definition, represent a follow-up. However, the layout of the comment section does not guarantee that the comments posted are also relevant – after all, online discussions have a reputation for going off topic fairly quickly. Yet this was not found to be the case in the present data: all the comments analysed are closely related to either the newspaper article or another user contribution (including prior comments by the same user) and hence constitute a response to issues on the newspaper's agenda. In terms of relevance, there is thus only a slight difference between the present corpora, with the comments adhering more closely to the rule than the letters.

8.2 Brevity

"The rule of brevity, in turn, encapsulates the requirement to write short, punchy letters that state the reader's view in less than 300 words" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002: 69). The space available being limited, editors seem to prefer publishing a greater number of shorter letters over a smaller number of longer ones, as shorter letters are more likely to be read: "[t]he smaller the bites, the argument goes, the more of them we can swallow" (2002: 75). The requirement for letters to be succinct, however, makes it difficult for readers to develop a detailed argument and engage in in-depth discussions, which is reason enough for Wahl-Jorgensen (2002: 75) to criticise this "bite-size debate approach".

The average letter to the editor of the present corpus counts only 126 words and is thus substantially shorter than the figure suggested by Wahl-Jorgensen. However, markedly longer letters can also be found, especially if written by a public figure or the official representative of an organisation. The longest letter, urging the government to take action against excessive pay, counts an impressive 776 words, more than half of which (i.e. 464) are taken up by the signature lines, listing 92 public figures [NEWS G06-012M].[512] The other extreme of course also exists: quite a number of letters are extremely short and punchy. While many of them belong to strings of

[512] The longest letter excluding signature lines has 586 words [NEWS T09-009] and was written by the Bishop of Swansea and Brecon. All in all, 21 letters published in the *Times* and 15 published in the *Guardian* are longer than 300 words. All but four of these are written either by professionals (see 7.4.2 above) or constitute reactions by the person/organisation in question (see 6.3.2.1.2 above) – a finding that suggests that exceptions are made above all for privileged authorities. On average, letters published in the *Times* are slightly longer than those in the *Guardian* (147 vs. 113 words), which is in line with the greater percentage of contributions from professionals in the *Times* (see 7.4.2 above).

letters (see 6.4.1.3 above), this need not be the case, as illustrated by the following letter commenting on a political speech:

(681) In his speech (Report, 5 September) the prime minister said "our aim in 2009 is the same as in 2001". Surely this is the principal problem. [NEWS G09-011]

All in all, 57 letters of the present corpus consist of just a single sentence, and both newspapers even have a special *brief letters* category in their reply section. While only 12% (i.e. 49) of those in the *Times* count 50 words or fewer, every fourth letter in the *Guardian* falls in this category (25%, i.e. 152). In such short and punchy contributions, there is often not enough space for using any of the contextualisation strategies discussed above (see 6.3.1), which may make such indirect reactions hard to interpret for readers without the required contextual knowledge. Even if the propositional content of (682) can be understood if the letter is viewed in isolation, only in combination with another fairly short letter published the same day (683) can this instance of relating a personal experience be recognised as a means of providing anecdotal evidence for the phenomenon of railway-ese criticised in a comment piece.

(682) Sir, On the train to London today we weren't asked for our tickets, we were reminded that we would need to produce our travel documents. [NEWS T10-008.2]

(683) Sir, Matthew Parris [AUTHOR] should raise his concerns about railway-ese (Sept 10) with his train manager (who used to be the guard; and, even before that, the ticket collector). If he receives an unsatisfactory response he should proceed immediately to the buffet car and buy a stiff drink from the on-board purser. [NEWS T10-008.1]

If the editors do not group together follow-ups responding to the same initiation (see 6.3.1.3 above), irregular newspaper readers probably have their difficulties in positioning such succinct contributions in the wider debate, as in the following example:

(684) Sir, Ambiguous it may have been, but a teaching colleague wrote in a boy's report: "I wish I could remember his being at my lessons." [NEWS T09-007]

The headline summarising individual letters or groups of letters certainly provides some clues in this case ("Non-attendance: Ambiguous classroom appearance"), yet only the contextual knowledge of the heated debate about the allegedly declining standards in education and reported irregularities in attendance raging at the time allows the reader to understand this teacher's anecdote as humorous criticism in line with previous letters:

(685) Sir, When I was a pupil at the Dragon School, Oxford, a parent was unwise enough to ask the headmaster for permission to take her son out of school for a week (report, Aug 27). "Of course," he said, "but don't bring him back." [NEWS T08-019.2]

As shown above, such short, witty and – at least for outsiders – fairly enigmatic contributions are a typical feature of letters to the editor, used to establish and signal membership of an in-group to the exclusion of all those readers on whom the joke is lost due to a lack of contextual knowledge.

Comments posted online tend to be shorter than letters to the editor, the average comment counting only 87 words. However, the longest follow-up in the present data is not a letter but a comment of 856 words [CMC G08-094 c8], and several further fairly long comments can be found, the longest three counting 693, 681 and 673 words respectively.[513] While these would certainly not have been published in the printed version of the newspaper, the majority of comments do not reach the 300 word limit and thus meet the second selection criterion at least in terms of brevity. Whether they are not only short but also punchy is much more difficult to assess and can hardly be quantified. Nevertheless, this is part of the third rule of selection identified by Wahl-Jorgensen (2002).

8.3 Entertainment

"Thirdly, the rule of entertainment highlights how editors prefer spectacular, punchy letters" (2002: 69). Even if the term 'spectacular' is perhaps carrying the idea a bit too far, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) is certainly right in observing that such letters tend to be favoured. In fact, many of the letters quoted as examples of punchy, short letters above belong to the group of what I like to call *pithy pieces*, ranging from succinct letters full of witticism (see the strings discussed in 6.4.1.3 above) over funny anecdotes (see (686) below, which also belongs to the Latin spellings string discussed above) to biting retorts (687) and sarcastic remarks (688).

(686) There was, of course (Letters, 24 August), the Cambridge mathematician who emailed a colleague suggesting they spend Saturday afternoon "investigating some conundra about pendula"; to which his colleague replied that there were better ways to spend a weekend than "sitting on our ba doing sa". [NEWS G08-015]

[513] The fact that the longest comment is cut off abruptly in the middle of the last word is an indication that the character limit was reached; indeed, the comment counts 4,983 characters, the official limit being 5,000. The other three long comments mentioned above are CMC G07-035_2 c11, CMC G07-083 c18 and CMC G06-046 c2. In contrast to the difference in average length in the case of the letters, the newspapers hardly differ in the average length of their comments, i.e. 85 words in the case of the *Times* and 89 in that of the *Guardian*.

(687) "Materialism is a threat to planet and human identity, says Blair" (30 August) – from the deck of a billionaire's yacht. He's worried that people of all faiths "allow aggressive secularism to gain traction in part of the west". Is he thinking of all those atheist suicide bombers? [NEWS G08-029]

(688) Must buy a heritage gift "with soul" [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE] (Museum stores booming, 19 August). Love the oh-so-English V&A [VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM] garden trowels with William Morris designs. As he's been dead rather a long time, it won't bother him at all that they're mass-produced in China. [NEWS G06-101]

While (686) above might make the readers smile, (687) and (688) are more likely to make them cringe, which clearly shows that entertaining letters may also be deeply critical. One could even go so far as to argue that phrasing the criticism in a particularly witty and caustic way is a strategy readers use to justify their role as critics. Rather than constituting an attempt to mitigate the face-threatening act, it is an attempt to position the contributors as shrewd and eloquent observers who have the right to judge others when voicing their opinions (see 7.3.4.3 above).

This strategy can also be found in the comments, as (689) illustrates. However, even more than in the letters, such punchy contributions can only be interpreted with the required background knowledge: the article commented on in (690) quotes the finding of an inquiry launched by the British government that led to a suspension of the government of the Turks and Caicos Islands (Bone 2009); using a quote and a short rhetorical question, the commenter simply turns the allegation against those who made it. In a similar vein, the commenter in (691) criticises and even ridicules the government for proposing the new child protection scheme briefly discussed above (see 6.3.2.2.2) by suggesting further similarly extreme safety measures.

(689) My word, what a unifying figure Gordon [GORDON BROWN] is - everyone hates him! [CMC G10-069 c3]

(690) [QUOTE] "A high probability of systemic corruption" [QUOTE]?
Would that be Westminster they are describing? [CMC T09-022 c1]

(691) Any more rules the people in teh know would like to add? Maybe wrapping your child in special not able to suffercate bubblewrap, at all time? or knee pads must be worn at all times whilst in school 'just in case they were to fall'? [CMC T10-055 c4]

The similarities between the corpora are best illustrated by (692) to (695), which all constitute reactions to the news that the "Tory controlled borough Barnet adopts budget airline model" (Booth 2009). This project, unofficially dubbed 'easyCouncil' in analogy to the budget airline EasyJet, includes plans to charge the public for extras that are normally considered standard services.

(692) in fact the more i think about it the better it gets.
how about easycops. want your burglary investigated? cough up...
easyfireman? house burning down....oops you haven't paid we'll watch it burn... [CMC G07-115-17 c13]

(693) Hmmm. The last time i flew ryanair i had such an unpleasant experience i though to myself 'next time, I'll fly with someone else, pay a little bit more and actually have a service that doesn't cause me stress and discomfort'.
These were much the same thoughts i had the last time the Tories were in power, actually. I guess it IS a good analogy! [CMC G07-115-17 c15]

(694) So now we know. Life in David Cameron's Britain would be a five-year journey on Ryanair. Hope it's cancelled. [NEWS G07-116]

(695) Barnet Tories might note that some of us have sworn that if Ryanair is the last airline on the planet, we will be walking. [NEWS G07-117]

In all four cases, a witty, pointed remark is used to level strong criticism against the government. Instead of providing rational, reasoned arguments against the project, the readers rely on irony and analogy, which makes the criticism not only quite fierce but also entertaining – even if the contributions have a haunting poignancy.

Wahl-Jorgensen (cf. 2002: 74) argues that the rule of entertainment is driven by commercial considerations: after all, newspapers face strong competition on the market and need to find a way to appeal to a wide audience. Yet as enjoyable as the contributions above may be, they form "a debate that primarily entertains and provokes rather than bringing about rational discussion" (2002: 75). The editors interviewed, however, justify this rule with the argument that "entertainment can be one powerful way to create and fuel a public debate" (2002: 75). The comments quoted above may well have had this effect – at least they received fairly large numbers of recommendations in comparison to other comments in the same thread (i.e. 79 and 120 respectively).

Despite these similarities, spelling and style might be argued to give away which contribution is a comment and which a letter. The strategy of mimicking a spoken dialogue (by asking and answering questions), the incomplete sentences (e.g. 'want your …?', 'house burning down'), the trailing dots ('…'), the interjection ('oops'), the missing capitalisation, the syntactically reduced declarative questions ('want your …?', 'easyfireman?'), the informal language ('cough up …') and the missing punctuation marks (e.g. 'you haven't paid we'll watch it burn …') in (692) above are without doubt far more typical of the comments than the letters (see chapter 5 above). Yet even the letters may be fairly colloquial, as illustrated by (694) above with its short and simple sentences, the omission of the subject in the last sentence and the common phrase ‘so now we know’, which is even given the status of a sentence, thus further underlining the matter-of-fact tone of the entire contribution. As shown in the analysis above, some of the linguistic characteristics commonly associated with comments are also found in the letters, which leads directly to the fourth and last rule to be discussed: the rule of authority.

8.4 Authority

“Finally, the rule of authority captures the rejection of ungrammatical writing, and letters written in unconventional styles” (2002: 69). Formulating the rule this way, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002: 76) draws attention to the fact that even though “since 1990, editors have argued against the bias for the words of the powerful”, commonly claiming not to favour letters from authorities or professionals over those written by members of the general public, there is still a strong editorial bias towards linguistic eloquence. The skill to produce an articulate piece of writing, however, is part of the cultural competencies only those from privileged backgrounds have, thus making it very hard for certain people to make their voices heard. Wahl-Jorgensen (2002: 77) supports this argument by quoting one of her interviewees as saying “[l]etters that are well written do stand out […] interesting letters are better than boring letters, well written letters are better than poorly written letters” and comes to the conclusion that “herein lies the more covert and complex manifestation of the rule of authority, which embodies the desire for letters that adhere to cultural standards of eloquence and expertise”.

This is a highly intriguing observation; not only does it support the finding that expert claims play a far more important role in the letters than in the comments (see 7.4.2 above), it also helps to account for the fact that certain reader contributions (e.g. (691) to (693) quoted above) can be identified immediately as belonging to the online corpus, where “spelling, grammar and persuasiveness” (2002: 77) are not a selection criterion. This does not mean, of course, that below-the-line comments never meet the requirements editors have for letters, nor is every letter published the epitome of eloquence. It simply shows that readers who give less consideration to spelling or grammar rules or who spend less time carefully formulating and revising their contributions can still get their comments out and make their voices heard (see 5.5 above). In many cases, it cannot be told whether they lack the necessary skills, have other priorities or simply do not care as much about linguistic correctness as editors do.

However, it is not true that "letters written in unconventional styles" (2002: 69) are automatically rejected. While the above has shown that certain conventionalised ways of performing certain moves exist, not all letters follow such standard patterns. Just like the comment quoted in (692) above, the letter reproduced as (696) below (a) starts with a very common colloquial phrase ('So here we go'), (b) can be described as imitating a spoken dialogue (asking a question and answering it in the last sentence; using an agreement token 'Yes, we all agree …') and (c) is opened by a fairly loosely structured sentence. It is also similar to (692) above in that it (d) contains a syntactically reduced declarative question ('Bank Busters […]?'), (e) a colloquial phrase given the status of a sentence or speaker's turn ('Not a chance.'), (f) informal language ('amount to a hill of beans', 'fat cat bankers') and even (g) a typographical error ('lead' instead of 'led').[514] The letter writer thus clearly draws on features of conceptional orality, and the letter would need to be positioned further towards the pole of linguistic immediacy than a considerable number of comments (see 5.5 above).

(696) So here we go – a Channel 4 "exposé" on those who cheat on benefits – with a provocative ad campaign. Yes, we all agree it's wrong but the money lost don't amount to a hill of beans in comparison with our fat cat bankers. Bank Busters, lead by Mervyn King [at the time Governor of the Bank of England]? Not a chance. [NEWS G07-023]

[514] The incorrect subject verb agreement ('the money lost don't amount to a hill of beans') is not considered a syntactic mistake here, as the letter writer is most likely quoting Humphrey Bogart's line "it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world" in the famous movie Casablanca, i.e. he/she is using a set phrase. The plural verb 'don't' is thus understood as a deliberate attempt to strengthen the allusion to the original line. In its periodicals archive, the website *The free dictionary* lists numerous examples with similar constructions, several of them including direct references to the actor and one containing a similar agreement error (see ; last accessed September 20, 2016). The example with the agreement error is from an article in the magazine *U.S. Catholic*: 'In the grand scheme of events transpiring in the 20th century, the married life of these two people don't amount to a hill of beans, to quote Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*.' (McGrath 1998: 50; emphasis in the original). While one could argue that in this case, the choice of the plural verb is influenced by its proximity to *people* (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 757ff. or Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 500f.), this interpretation does not hold for (696), where it is more likely that the construction is used to conjure up Bogart's voice or at least a colloquial American one, thus adding to the informality of the entire contribution. The many references to Bogart or *Casablanca* strongly suggest that the set phrase owes its popularity to the movie, yet Sacher (2013: 24) argues that "the expression 'it don't amount to a hill of beans', meaning worthless, [was] born in the rural American colloquialism of the late nineteenth century" (cf. also Yates 1995: 235, who discusses it as a typical Southern proverb). Whatever its origin, the departure from simple agreement in (696) above is not considered a grammatical mistake; however, it is clearly non-standard.

Even if Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) neither describes the conventional style of letters to the editor in greater detail nor provides any examples of what rejected letters deviating from this style could look like, it is highly likely that the letter above does not fit most people's ideas of letters to the editor. However, it is not alone in being out of line or using what Wahl-Jorgensen (2002: 69) would probably refer to as "unconventional styles". There are quite a few letters in the present corpus that mimic an interactive speech situation (N=65), e.g. by using question-answer pairs (see (696) above and (699) and (700) below), response tokens (see (696) above and (697) below) or other phrases typically found in dialogic conversation (e.g. 'wait a minute' used to introduce a disagreement, see (698) below). Especially anticipating and immediately answering/countering the addressee's question/objection is a strategy that is quite often found (see (699) and (700) below), thus lending the monologic contribution a dialogic quality. Questions in general and rhetorical ones in particular are a common feature in reader response, yet this is to be expected in argumentative and persuasive texts (see 5.2.4.4.5 above). What is quite striking, however, is the large number of intonation or declarative questions found in the letters corpus (N=44), as this is a feature more typical of spoken language. As (701) shows, these questions may even be syntactically incomplete, thus further increasing the degree of informality (see 5.4.1 above).

(697) […] OK, Sid Vicious was crap, but he didn't actually play on any of the records anyway. […] [NEWS G09-038]

(698) Wait a minute: aren't the financial service industries supposed to service something (Reforming finance: Daring Adair, 28 August). […] [NEWS G08-027]

(699) […] One reason the exam system is collapsing is that they cannot get suitable, well-qualified examiners to do the marking. Why? Because they treat them so badly. […] [NEWS T06-059.2]

(700) […] How do I know? Because I publish a music magazine, […] [NEWS G07-118]

(701) So management consultant McKinsey recommends axing one in 10 NHS workers to save £20bn. Coincidentally, £20bn is the estimated cost of the government's many and varied NHS privatisation schemes. A better way of saving money, maybe? […] [NEWS G09-002]

In the comments, contributions imitating an interactive speech situation are, of course, far more frequent (N=232), and so are declarative questions (N=94); yet their existence in the letters at least suggests that the editors' stylistic selection criteria are not as rigid as one might assume.

The analysis above (see 5.3.3) also revealed both tone and register to be immensely varied. Many quite formal and factual letters can be found, but the tone may also be highly involved and emotional. Instead of signalling his/her engagement by describing the proposals in (702) as 'lunatic', the letter writer could have adopted a more detached perspective by simply calling them 'ill-considered' or 'disproportionate' (compare also the letter writer speaking of a 'monstrous hypocrisy' in (707) below). However, he/she chose not do so, and the letter was published nevertheless. In addition to revealing their emotional involvement, letter writers may also use vocabulary that is commonly considered informal ('pompous old twit', 'before he snuffed it', 'bashing'), impolite ('crap') or even offensive ('greedy, stupid, cynical bastards') without having to fear that their letters are rejected.[515]

(702) […] the latest lunatic proposal coming out of the Home Office […] [NEWS G10-018]

(703) Brian Sewell is entitled to his opinion (Spray it again, 1 September) and over the years he has had many. It is my opinion that he is a pompous old twit. […] [NEWS G08-051]

(704) Please can the pretence of sending al-Megrahi back before he snuffed it in the UK – thus setting off a wave of terrorism – and keeping up the delusion of acting out of compassion be stopped (Marcel Berlins, 31 August) […]? [G08-028]

(705) Hot on the heels of Americans bashing the NHS, another British institution […] [NEWS G08-002]

(706) […] We all know who caused the meltdown, and it wasn't nurses, firefighters or even trade union barons. There is no excuse for not sticking it to the greedy, stupid, cynical bastards responsible […] [NEWS G10-057]

As discussed above (see 5.3.3), 70 letters were coded as signalling involvement via lexical choices or containing vocabulary marked as *informal*, and another four contain vocabulary marked as *impolite*, *offensive*, *slang* or *vulgar*. While such features are far more frequent in the comments than the letters (with 287 comments coded as containing informal language and 69 as containing offensive language), this finding still indicates that

[515] *Informal*, *impolite* and *offensive* are the register labels used to describe these words in the *Macmillan Dictionary Online*. The *OED* uses *slang* for 'twit', 'snuff it' and 'crap' and attaches the register label *vulgar* to 'bastard'.

letters are not necessarily rejected if they contain emotional, informal or even offensive language.[516]

Exclamations (see 5.2.4.4.2 above), interjections and expletives (e.g. 'hurrah' and 'for goodness sake'; see 5.2.8.1 above), which are all signs of an involved style, can also be found in a considerable number of letters. Even if the number of occurrences in the online corpus is much higher, this still suggests that such features are also at least partly accepted in letters.

(707) […] What monstrous hypocrisy this Libya nonsense is! [NEWS G09-044]

(708) So the mayor runs the police force now. God help us, it's just like The Wire [A CRIME TV SERIES] (Tories step up 'broken Britain' attack on Labour party, 26 August). [NEWS G08-084]

(709) Sir, Hurrah. Rachel Sylvester tells us that our so-called "special relationship" with the United States is finally over ("Special Relationship. Passed away 2009. R.I.P.", Sept 1). And about time, too. […] [NEWS T09-018]

(710) […] For goodness sake, stop attacking the NHS, stop the privatisation, and let us get on with using our skills to care for patients. […] [NEWS G09-002]

Interestingly, many of the characteristics discussed are among the strategies newspapers use to signal involvement in their headlines. As Chovanec (2003) demonstrates, newspapers have two opposing objectives: on the one hand, they need to remain objective, neutral and trustworthy observers that simply inform their readers. To achieve this, they need to signal detachment, for example by using impersonal structures or non-evaluative vocabulary. Yet on the other hand, they also need to attract readers and ensure their engagement, which is best achieved by signalling involvement. As Chovanec (2003: 49) argues,

> [T]he tension between these two tendencies becomes manifested on the level of the mixed modes: the written form of anonymous mass communication comes to rely on linguistic features evoking the oral mode, adding a synthetic "personal touch" to the discourse.

Among the involvement features that, according to him, typically characterise the spoken mode rank emotional and evaluative vocabulary, wordplay, simulated personal address, exclamatives and interrogatives. It could thus be argued that letter writers are exposed to a similar tension as the newspapers in which their contributions are published: on the one hand,

[516] It needs to be stressed that the vast bulk of the comments merely contain informal and not offensive language, including words like 'kids', 'uni', 'a poor lot', 'pals', 'stuff', 'barbie' (for barbecue), 'jolly difficult' and 'a big wodge of cash'. See 5.3.3 above for a detailed discussion of lexical features.

they want to signal objectivity and inform their fellow readers. Yet on the other hand, they also want to attract their attention and touch, entertain, encourage, persuade or even entice them. The stronger this second objective, the more likely it becomes that one or several of the involvement phenomena introduced above are used, thus leading to unconventional styles.

Despite the considerable number of letters not fitting the standard style of letters to the editor by using features more commonly found in online comments, the selection criteria proposed by Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) are a valuable contribution to any discussion of this genre. Even if the editors are no longer as strict as her data suggest and numerous interesting exceptions to her rules can be found, this does not mean that letter writers do not – whether consciously or unconsciously – orient to these rules. Readers posting their comments online, on the other hand, do not have to worry about being selected for publication and can thus ignore these rules. In particular, they know that linguistic correctness and elegance do not act as gatekeepers.

While Wahl-Jorgensen (2002: 78) critiques all four rules, it is the rule of authority that she considers particularly problematic as it "squash[es] the voices of the underprivileged from the get-go" and makes social status "an entrance variable for public participation" (2002: 77). According to her, her study

> points to the need for a proactive effort on behalf of the media to seek out a diversity of voices. More than that, it shows the necessity for providing assistance to those who are usually left out of the debate because they lack the kind of competencies required to gain a voice (2002: 79).

Even if online comment sections do not offer assistance, they most certainly are open to all readers, irrespective of their linguistic and stylistic abilities. Thus, this new form of reader response, which grants everybody a voice, should represent a genuine and highly welcome advancement in her eyes.

9 Conclusion and outlook

9.1 The (mis)conceptions guiding the analysis

The present study set out to investigate below-the-line comments posted on the websites of the *Guardian* and the *Times* by comparing them to letters to the editor written to the same newspapers in response to the same articles. This synchronic comparison of two highly popular forms of user-generated content produced in different media was not only based on previous research into CMC (see 3.3) and the differences between speaking and writing (see 3.2) but also guided by four popular (mis)conceptions about online comment sections (as outlined in chapter 2). As the discussions in each of the three chapters presenting the individual analyses and findings have shown, approaching the data and the investigation from this perspective has proven to be a fruitful endeavour. In the following, each of the (mis)conceptions will be reviewed briefly to highlight the most important findings and provide an outlook.

First of all, the study revealed the below-the-line comments to be largely free from most of the features commonly considered typical of CMC; i.e. the language used in this computer-mediated form of reader response did not turn out to be fundamentally different from the language used in letters to the editor produced in the written medium. While many discussions of the linguistic particularities of CMC put considerable emphasis on graphological deviations, the majority of characteristics found on this level belong to only a small number of categories, i.e. non-standard capitalisation for stress and emphasis (see 5.2.3 and, in particular, 5.2.3.3.2) and a more relaxed attitude towards punctuation.

The detailed functional analysis of the occurrence of non-standard capitalisation in the comments (see 5.2.3.3) revealed that, in the clear majority of cases, capitalisation is neither random nor used to represent shouting. Rather, it is used to signal marked focus – a function that, at least in the case of the *Guardian*, is sometimes also realised via graphic means, i.e. bold print and italics. The readers commenting online thus employ visual means to mimic vocal emphasis, which allows them to draw the reader's attention to a particular word in order to increase its expressive force, to express an explicit or implicit contrast and/or to create intertextuality and coherence (see 5.2.3.3.4).

The comparison of the two corpora in terms of punctuation (see 5.2.4.4) revealed the comments to be less systematic, even if features commonly considered typical of CMC, such as the iteration of punctuation marks (see 5.2.4.4.7), are far from being as frequent as one could have expected. However, the genres clearly differ in that punctuation is drawn on in the comments to signal hesitation and pauses, i.e. to mimic features of spoken discourse in writing (see the discussion of the use of trailing or suspension dots in 5.2.4.4.3).

In terms of spelling, the comments turned out to be largely free from the features commonly perceived as emblematic of CMC, e.g. simplified spellings, such as acronyms and clippings (see 5.2.5.3), or letter and number homophone spellings (see 5.2.5.4). Yet while the study uncovered that the below-the-line comments were not produced with as much attention to linguistic correctness as the letters (see 5.2.5.6), they are not characterised by "devil-may-care spelling" (Baron 2004: 411). All in all, the analysis on the graphological level revealed strategies of economy and text entry reduction to play hardly any role at all when commenting online. Rather, the deviations from standard graphology could be attributed to the goal of adding expressive force or creating a fairly relaxed communicative atmosphere.

This trend was also noticeable on the lexical level, where the only characteristic worthy of mention is the greater overall frequency of lexical items marked as *colloquial/informal* and *offensive/impolite* in the comments (see 5.3.3). The role played by foreign languages and dialect words, on the other hand, was found to be negligible (see 5.3.3 and 5.3.4). While the degree of informality in below-the-line comments is certainly higher than in letters to the editor, the data revealed that even the latter can be quite informal in style, irrespective of the topic under discussion (see also 8.4).

On the syntactic level, some comments were shown to be marked by a telegraphic and fragmented style (see 5.4.1), yet CMC-specific features, such as performative predications (see 5.4.2), were found to be as rare as the single most emblematic feature of CMC, i.e. the emoticon (see 5.2.8.2).

All in all, these findings were interpreted as revealing that commenting below the line is perceived as a fairly relaxed communicative situation, where attention to linguistic detail is not as important as in a letter to the editor, which, after all, needs to be selected for publication first (also see 8.4). However, since the interaction takes place in public and on platforms provided by two quality newspapers, the reader contributions are usually not only designed to be readily understandable to a mass audience but also to display the wit of the contributors. In addition to the medium factors introduced above (see 4.3), the linguistic product in both types of reader response is thus shaped to a considerable extent by situation factors (above all the participants and the activity engaged in), and the interlocutors in both genres were shown to use language to position themselves in a certain light – a fact that was taken up when discussing matters of identity and face (see chapter 7).

While some intriguing linguistic differences between the comments and the letters were uncovered on all levels of analysis, both genres are marked by an extraordinary stylistic diversity and thus constitute fertile ground for further research. Future studies could, for instance, adopt a diachronic perspective and trace the linguistic development of both genres. Moreover, researchers could compare different comment sections or contrast different types of newspapers (broadsheets vs. tabloids or local vs. national ones). From a CMC perspective, it would certainly be interesting to investigate the role played by the device used to access the platform and compose the message or to analyse an entire corpus of meta-comments on matters of linguistic correctness or style.

The second (mis)conception addressed in the present study revolved around the buzzword *interactivity* and the idea that while letters to the editor only allow readers to 'talk back' to the media, comment sections online provide a platform for interactive debate. However, the analysis revealed that – at least in 2009 – the interactive potential of comment sections was still underexplored, the communicative patterns strongly resembling those present in letters to the editor. The number of letters constituting a direct or indirect reaction to another reader's contribution was even found to be greater than the number of such comments (see 6.2). Of course, this does not mean that readers never engage in dialogic exchanges when commenting online, and it needs to be stressed once more that the present investigation only concentrated on the first twenty comments of each thread (the reasons for proceeding in this way were discussed in detail in 4.2.1 and 6.4.4 above). However, the analysis was able to identify several factors hampering interactivity in below-the-line comments, thus revealing the paradoxical effect that those characteristics of the communicative situation that promise increased interactivity (i.e. less editorial control, faster response, open to more people) are the ones that inhibit or disrupt the unfolding of a truly interactive debate (see 6.4.4).

In addition to these surprising findings, the investigation also addressed the profound differences between the genres in the use of contextualisation strategies in follow-ups triggered by a newspaper article (see 6.3.1), with a special focus on the form and function of quotations (see 6.3.2), and provided a detailed discussion of how such ties are signalled in contributions initiated by another reader's contribution (see 6.4). Future research in this area could focus on how coherence is established in other types of multiparty discussions taking place online as well as offline or concentrate on how the affordances and constraints of individual commenting systems (e.g. nested systems vs. strictly chronological ones) influence the interactive behaviour of the users and whether – or rather to what extent – changes in the system are reflected on the linguistic level.

The third (mis)conception addressed was related to aspects of (im)politeness. As outlined above, online comments have a reputation for being "clogged with vitriol and hate-mongering" (Meyer 2008: 44). According to the title and dust jacket of a recent book (Reagle 2015), they are "the bottom of the web", where "haters and manipulators often seem to monopolize the conversation". Letters to the editor, in contrast, are usually not viewed in such a negative light but rather perceived as emanating an air of respectability and authority. Given this radical difference in terms of public perception, the first goal of the chapter devoted to matters of identity and face (see chapter 7) was to offer a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the face-threatening act of *criticising others*, in particular the author of the trigger text, i.e. the journalist in reactions to a newspaper article (see 7.3.4.1) and another reader in reactions to previous reader contributions (see 7.3.4.2). This investigation brought to light that criticism targeting the journalist is decidedly more frequent in the letters and even constitutes one of the most important moves performed in this form of reader response (see 7.3.3). Despite these differences in frequency, the aspects criticised turned out to be largely the same (see 7.3.4) and were even found in a similar distribution, with just one additional minor category only present in the letters (i.e. *missing information*, see 7.3.4.1.5). Yet while criticism targeted at the journalist is almost twice as frequent in the letters, it tends to be slightly harsher and less indirect in the comments, where it may even be the sole purpose of a reader's contribution. In terms of identity construction, criticising the journalist allows the readers to position themselves as knowledgeable, responsible members of the public who fulfil their duty of holding the press to account. Publishing such critical contributions, on the other hand, allows the newspapers to present themselves as open-minded, liberal and self-confident media who have no need to stifle critical voices. While positive feedback on the journalistic product is also published occasionally (see 7.3.5), the analysis revealed such positive contributions to be far rarer in both types of reader response, thus further underlining the role played by criticism.

The criticism directed at other readers was shown to be very similar to that levelled at journalists in both genres, i.e. even lay readers are expected to possess certain qualities and meet certain standards if they decide to assume an active role and contribute to public debate. Interestingly, readers criticising others run the risk of becoming the target themselves in both genres, i.e. a considerable number of the critical contributions were shown to constitute counter-attacks. This tendency is also mirrored in the existence of so-called *pre-emptive moves*, i.e. attempts to pre-empt possible criticism for instance by pointing out one's own shortcomings, apologising and anticipating counter-arguments (see 7.3.4.2.3). In sum, the analysis revealed that despite their bad reputation, online comments are only slightly adapted versions of letters to the editor, where criticism directed at the author of the initiation – be it a journalist or a fellow reader – was shown to play a more important role overall. This finding is particularly valuable and insightful because features commonly held responsible for aggressive behaviour on the Internet, above all the disinhibition effect caused by anonymity, were shown to be of little relevance in the present case. After all, criticism was found to be not only a substantial part of, but even more frequent in, the genre where the interlocutors are not granted the safe position of anonymity.

Since the study was limited to two genres, considerably more work will have to be done to explore the intricacies of the relationship between genre, communicative setting, participant structure and features such as (im)politeness, conflict and aggression. Future studies working with data from comment sections or comparable forms of communication could, for instance, investigate the reactions to critical or even aggressive contributions, trace the stages of conflict development or explore and further develop strategies of conflict resolution or avoidance. In the case of comment sections on newspaper websites, it would be fascinating to investigate what types of article (in terms of section, topic, style and message) are most likely to ignite a fierce debate below the line and to examine how such debates evolve over time.

The last (mis)conception guiding the analysis was that online comments are marked by subjectivity and personalisation, whereas letters to the editor are characterised by non-private content and a professional perspective. However, accounts of personal experiences (see 7.4.1.1) and several other types of statements about self (see 7.4.1.2) were found to be more frequent in the letters: a surprising discovery that might be indicative of a more general trend towards personalisation, which is claimed by some to be affecting journalism in general (cf. e.g. Coward 2013 and Landert 2014). The only finding that did not run counter to popular conceptions was that contributions with claims of expertise are markedly more frequent in the letters (see 7.4.2). However, this difference could be attributed to the fact that readers are more likely to be accepted as active players in public discourse if they signal authority by claiming expert status. The letters page is thus strongly shaped by how not only the readers but also the newspapers want to position themselves – after all, "letters to the editor communicate[d] a newspaper's brand identity" (Coward 2013: 38).

Again, there are numerous possibilities for further research. As touched upon above (see 7.5), addressing matters of identity and personalisation from a diachronic perspective would allow researchers to determine whether we are witnessing an ongoing trend towards more personalisation or to investigate how this trend manifests itself in individual genres. Just as a diachronic study of letters to the editor promises to be revealing, this genre could also be approached from a cross-linguistic or cross-cultural perspective. Such research could address the question of whether letters to the editor published in other countries are as fierce as those of the present study and explore what kinds of identity readers create for themselves in different cultures. It would also be interesting to compare the options different newspapers offer their readers to contribute to the debate and compare the commenting behaviour in different countries or sectors of the press.

In any case, in being open to all, online comment sections represent a radical step away from the rule of authority (see 8.4 above) and the gatekeeping function of editors. Social status and linguistic eloquence are no longer a prerequisite for joining public debate. As revolutionary as this change may be, one final question still needs to be addressed: what causes readers to contribute in the first place?

9.2 Why contribute in the first place?

If everybody is granted a voice online, are comment sections then a more egalitarian version of the letter to the editor? The analysis above (see 7.4.2) revealed a strong preference for expert opinions in the letters published by the *Times* – a finding that supports previous research (cf. Wober 2004). Yet while this makes the letters page of the *Times* clearly not representative of the population at large, a more subtle version of this trend seems to be far more pervasive. Grey and Brown (1970: 454) claim that "most research agrees in substance that letter-writers are older, richer, better educated, more rooted in their community and more conservative than the general population" – in short, they constitute an "articulate minority" (Richardson and Franklin 2004: 461). While it is impossible to tell whether only such people write to newspapers or whether these are the ones editors select because of their *linguistic capital*, they demonstrate the "capacity to make their voices heard" (Bourdieu 1977: 20; author's translation).[517] What about people who lack this capacity? Have they now gained a foothold in public discourse thanks to comment sections, where gatekeepers in the form of editors are largely absent?

It is certainly true that everybody is granted a voice below the line. However, this creates a general hum that is so loud that this voice is unlikely to be heard. After all, the most fundamental difference between a newspaper's letters page and its comment section online is its size: while the former represents the newspaper's 'finest selection' from the mass of contributions received, the latter offers a dazzling and at times simply overwhelming plethora of voices, experiences, perspectives and thoughts

[517] When introducing the concept of *linguistic capital*, Bourdieu (1977: 20; emphasis in the original) discusses and extends Chomsky's (1965) notion of *competence* (i.e. the capacity to produce an infinite number of grammatical sentences), arguing that "la compétence est [donc] aussi capacité de se *faire écouter*" ("competence [thus] includes the capacity to make onself heard").

only loosely monitored. If a letter is chosen for publication, it is certain to be read by a great number of people. In contrast, if a comment is posted online, it is easily lost in the sea of comments competing for attention – after all, the *Guardian* website receives "on a good day somewhere north of 55,000 comments" (Burrows 2014: xiii). As one of the commenters discussing the benefits and downsides of below-the-line comments puts it:

(711) Remember - a right to free speech doesn't include a right to be heard. […] [CMC G-BTL c174]

So why do people still contribute – and in such large numbers? Grey and Brown (1970: 454) argue that "[o]ne of the functions of the letters to the editor in a democratic society is that of catharsis. A letter column gives the irate, the antagonist, the displeased, a chance to speak out and to be heard". Raeymaeckers (2005: 212), in contrast, contends that this is only the chief function in the popular press:

> While the quality dailies tend only to print letters that extend the debate on some particular issue, the popular titles also print emotional letters, which mainly serve to vent the writer's opinions and grievances. Whereas the chief function of such letters in the popular dailies is of a cathartic nature, the quality papers typically select contributions that contain well-reasoned points of view. The latter quite often emanate from policy-makers or from individuals with a proven expertise on some topic, while in the popular papers it is the common citizen who is invited to contribute the [sic] letters section.

The present data speak against such a distinction: numerous letters published in the two quality newspapers studied do not extend the debate (at least not in the sense of reasoned arguments) while personal experiences and emotions play a substantial role. Moreover, although the cathartic function may be most obvious when writers blow off steam and purge their anger, worries or fears, the letters page can also be a source of comfort for those who contribute to a more moderate and less heated or vigorous form of debate.

In the comments, catharsis seems to play a considerable role as well. In 2014, the *Guardian* reacted to the news that the *Chicago Sun-Times* closed its comment function by asking its readers "Do you like below-the-line comments?" – a thread that needed only four days to receive 858 comments.[518] In this intriguing meta-discussion below the line, numerous regular commenters admit that partners like to refer to them as 'keyboard warriors' [CMC G-BTL c62] or describe them as needing to get away from

[518] The thread is still available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/15/do-you-like-below-the-line-online-communities (last accessed March 13, 2017).

their ‘arguing terminal’ [CMC G-BTL c48], where they are ‘furiously banging the keys’ [CMC G-BTL c56]. Such comments suggest that

(712) There is also the therapeutic aspect, providing a venting conduit for frustrations […] [CMC G-BTL c77]

Yet this ‘therapeutic’ aspect is not only present when commenters let off steam:

(713) [….] I would also just add that there have been countless occasions when my day has been brightened immeasurably by the exceptionally sharp wit and off the cuff observations posted BTL [BELOW THE LINE] .[…] [CMC G-BTL c166]

Copious such comments can be found, and many readers seem to be drawn to the newspaper website on a regular basis because they enjoy being offered a platform for interesting, intelligent and thought-provoking debates (714) or simply because they have a good time reading the comments (715).

(714) […] I think a lot of the comments below the line are intelligent, constructive and help further the debate and bring new angles to it, and as such it’s rewarding to be a part of it. […] [CMC G-BTL c185]

(715) I love reading the comments! I like being challenged to think about an article and occasionally I learn things I didn’t know.
Thanks for the humour and dreadful puns. They brighten up my day! [CMC G-BTL c511]

This is another aspect in which the comment sections closely resemble letters pages in newspapers: according to Pounds (2005: 60), readers’ expectations of the letters page in quality newspapers are that they are “witty and entertaining”, and, as the discussion of the selection process has shown, this is also an important criterion for the editors. The letters that conform most closely to this ideal are what I have referred to as *pithy pieces* (see 8.3). As argued above, even critical contributions can be entertaining and full of wit, i.e. such qualities do not preclude a fruitful discussion or stifle the debate. As one commenter puts it:

(716) […] Can’t I have a heated debate about art or bad behaviour and also be entertained by it? […] [CMC G-BTL c76]

Yet while reading (and also writing) reader contributions seems to be perceived to have an entertaining, educating and therapeutic function in both genres, the comment sections lack the recognition that comes with having one’s letter published in the *Times* or the *Guardian*. For the therapeutic effect to take place, the commenters need more than a passive, invisible audience; they need some sort of signal that their message was read. While both newspaper websites already had a function allowing readers to recommend comments at the time the present data were collected (see 4.2.2 above), the *Guardian*'s redesign of the comment section, which now makes it easier to react to individual commenters (see 6.4.4 above), and the introduction of the *Guardian pick* function (i.e. comments recommended by the *Guardian* that are displayed in a grey speech bubble above all other comments and adorned with the label 'Guardian pick') can be interpreted as attempts to remedy this shortcoming by offering commenters some forms of gratification and recognition.

9.3 Genre matters – the medium as message

Virtanen (2010: 70) argues that "[t]o understand the form and function of a particular genre in relation to a given discourse community it is often helpful to investigate the genre through comparisons with adjacent genres". The present synchronic comparison of letters to the editor to below-the-line comments offered indeed valuable insights into the form and function of both types of reader response. Although the two genres are perceived very differently, the analysis uncovered a considerable number of similarities and parallel tendencies. This can be attributed to the fact that new genres have a tendency "to emerge from the familiar" (2010: 70), as interlocutors fall back on and repurpose existing genre conventions when confronted with novel or unfamiliar communicative situations. Emigh and Herring (2005: 9), for instance, analyse online encyclopedias and ask "why Wikipedia – a user-created encyclopedia – is largely indistinguishable stylistically from the expert-created Columbia Encyclopedia". According to them, two factors are involved: on the one hand, "users appropriate norms and expectations about what an 'encyclopedia' should be, including norms of formality, neutrality, and consistency, from the larger culture". On the other hand, "those norms are enforced through the agency of dedicated, socially-approved members of the Wikipedia community" (2005: 9). In the case of reader response, the similarities – albeit clearly present – are far from being as pronounced. This can be attributed to two reasons: first, letters to the editor as a genre are not as homogenous as encyclopedia entries, i.e. various sub-types exist, which may also vary considerably in style. The norms and expectations are thus far from being as strict as those governing encyclopedias, and the ensuing stylistic and functional diversity is also mirrored in the comments. Second, comments are not authored collaboratively, and there is not a community of users who enforce stylistic norms, which, again, leads to more diversity and a more relaxed attitude towards linguistic norms.[519] However, the various links between the two genres are still evident and a number of commenters clearly mimic patterns of the older genre.

Drawing on the distinction between *reproduced*, *adapted* and *emergent genres* on the world wide web as suggested by Crowston and Williams (2000), Herring (2013: 7) argues that "there appears to be a trend over time for web genres to shift along a continuum from reproduced to adapted to emergent, with the seemingly paradoxical effect that as genres age, they move along the continuum in the direction of 'emergence'".[520] If traditional letters to the editor are also published online, as is the case in the two newspapers of the present study, one can speak of a reproduced genre, as the content of the print newspaper is simply reproduced in a different medium (i.e. online). With the introduction of the comment function came the adaptation of the genre, i.e. old genre patterns and conventions were adapted to suit the new environment. Over time, however, the *Guardian* comment section has developed, and many new features have been added – most recently the *nested system* and the *Guardian pick* function; it can thus be considered to be moving towards the emergent end of the continuum. Conform to the *principle of stylistic inertia* (cf. Bausinger 1972: 81), the shift from *reproduced* to *adapted* has left its traces on the linguistic level, as newspaper readers exploring the novel genre of below-the-line comments have drawn on the communicative practices of letters to the editor (and other genres) but adapted them to the affordances and constraints of the new form of communication and medium (e.g. contextualisation strategies are only used when reacting to another user's contribution rather than the article, and the @ sign is given an interactive function). The ongoing, gradual shift from *adapted* to *emergent* can be expected to go hand in hand with further changes, and it would certainly make for an interesting project to compare the present corpus with what is happening below the line today or in ten years' time. Genres are always on the move (cf. e.g. Giltrow 2010 and Virtanen 2010), and letters to the editor can also be expected to develop over time. It will be fascinating to observe how the two genres evolve in the future and whether their paths will diverge or converge anew.

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[519] However, the *report abuse* function can be considered as allowing readers to enforce norms of politeness (see 4.3.8 above). In a similar vein, the moderators make sure that commenters abide by the community standards. Nonetheless, these processes are only designed to keep the comment section free from abuse and do not affect the commenters' linguistic, stylistic or structural choices.

[520] In her own classification scheme, Herring (cf. 2013: 7f.) replaces *reproduced* with *familiar* and *adapted* with *reconfigured*; yet this terminological subtlety is of little importance in the present case.

I would like to end by coming back to the initial question of why comments tend to be portrayed in such a bad light. One reason might be that the extremely diverse sites allowing comments online tend to be lumped together in public perception. Obviously, the comments posted on quality newspaper websites are not representative of online comments as such, as some of the commenters also feel the need to point out:

(717) I agree BTL comments can sometimes be the best thing about the Guardian but on the other hand BTL comments are nearly always the worst thing about YouTube. [CMC G-BTL c10]

(718) […] Some BTL threads are so funny and intelligent that it restores my faith in humanity then I happen to catch a few on youtube and it just serves to remind me that we are all just shaved apes wearing trainers. [CMC G-BTL c165]

Another reason could be that below-the-line comments are hardly ever compared to letters to the editor, which seem to be a fairly underexplored genre when it comes to matters of language use and, in particular, (im)politeness and face. One could also argue that genres are not only "'templates' for production" but also "cues for reception" (Giltrow 2013: 717), i.e. the way a message is perceived is to a considerable extent influenced by the genre (and medium) it is produced in – an idea most prominently advocated by McLuhan (2005 [1960]) with his aphorism 'the medium is the message'.[521] The reason for the fact that below-the-line comments are perceived negatively while letters to the editor are not may thus also be linked to the worries about the allegedly detrimental influence of the Internet on both language and human behaviour outlined in the introduction. The analysis above provided no evidence for such extreme views and the comment below nicely sums up the impression gained from the present data:

(719) […] I am almost always impressed by the btl content. It scotches the myths of internet-phobes who predicted a freefall in standards of communication, argument and grammar. By no means all, but many of the comments are well-constructed, punctuated, informed and witty offerings to the debate gods. […] [CMC G-BTL c697]

However, there is no denying that even in the case of the *Guardian* and the *Times*, vile comments exist, and these are likely to leave a lasting impression on readers' minds, even if – in relation to the immense number

[521] In a similar vein, Tannen (2013: 111) argues that 'the medium is the metamessage', i.e. "the choice of the medium itself sends metamessages", indicating how what is said is to be evaluated. However, expectations about which medium is appropriate for which communicative act may differ, which may result in the kinds of misunderstandings described by Tannen (2013).

of comments produced on a daily basis – they are in the minority. Bad memories and negative experiences have a strong tendency to stick far better than positive ones – a phenomenon commonly known as *negativity bias* – and a single badly worded, conceited, opinionated or hateful comment may be enough to ruin what could otherwise be a pleasurable experience. It is probably best to heed the advice offered by Marc Burrows, who, as Senior Community Moderator for the *Guardian*, should know best: "remember that *Guardian* commenters are like Marmite – strongly flavoured, a little gooey but hugely enjoyable if used with moderation" (Burrows 2014: xix). Perhaps it is time to give Marmite another try.

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