

DISCOURSE APPROACHES TO
POLITICS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE 78

The Discursive Construction of Identities On- and Offline

Personal - group - collective

EDITED BY

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Preface

This volume comprises a selection of papers on language and identity presented at the first international symposium on “The Linguistic Construction of Personal and Group Identity – Structure, Pragmatics and Cognition” at the University of Heidelberg in 2013 and a follow-up workshop on identity construction held at the University of Duisburg-Essen in June 2015.

Our warm thanks go to the contributors of this volume for their engagement and co-operation, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions. We are also very grateful for the support by the series editors, especially Jo Angouri and Andreas Musolff, and for the continued assistance we received from Isja Conen at John Benjamins. Finally, we would like to thank Sherry Föhr and Elif Avcu for their tireless support in preparing this volume for publication.

Essen & Heidelberg
The editors
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Introduction

Identity construction in complex discourse contexts

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1. Introduction

Despite its firm position on the social sciences agenda for some 60 years now, research on identity has taken many different, often opposing paths and directions (Wetherell, 2010, p. 3). Authors from different disciplines still treat identity as a “slippery”, “blurred”, “confusing”, and even “illusory” concept, which, according to Wetherell, is best defined “as an open problematic – a site gathering together a wide range of concerns, tropes, curiosities, patterns of thoughts, debates around certain binaries and particular kinds of conversations” (2010, p. 3).

This volume approaches identities “as highly negotiable in interaction, emergent and largely co-constructed” (De Fina, 2010, p. 206). It thus follows the turn from essentialist notions of identity to a social constructivist paradigm,¹ which has triggered exponential growth in identity research in the past 20 years (ibid., pp. 205–206). The contributions at hand view identity construction as inseparably and dynamically linked to language and other semiotic systems (see e.g. Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982, pp. 7–8; Joseph, 2004, pp. 12–14; Joseph, 2010, p. 9; Llamas & Watt, 2010, p. 2 and Wetherell, 2010, p. 14). As a common denominator, the contributions of this volume conceptualise identity in the broadest sense as “the social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586).

Adopting a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, the studies offer a multifaceted operationalisation of the linguistic processes of identity construction, in which Bucholtz and Hall’s framework (Kirner-Ludwig, Salonen,

1. For a detailed discussion of the three major methodological approaches in the social constructivist paradigm (the *talk-in-interaction*, *autobiographical* and *sociolinguistically oriented approaches* highlighting, e.g., indexicality and social practice as central domains of identity research) see De Fina, 2010, pp. 206–217).

Enzweiler, Eller, Mollin), especially indexicality (Wentker, Tanskanen, Kleinke & Bös, Fetzer) and the concept of ‘face’ (Eller, Mollin, Musolff) play a central role. Whereas some of them analyse identity construction in terms of its dynamic aspects of interactional negotiation and social practices (e.g. Kirner-Ludwig, Enzweiler, Wentker, Tanskanen, Fetzer, Musolff), others take a resultative perspective and focus on the linguistic indexes of identity produced by the interlocutors in specific instances of discourse (Salonen, Kleinke & Bös, Eller, Mollin).

2. Recasting sites of identity construction in the digital age

By considering both offline and online contexts, this volume pays tribute to the dramatic changes in technologies of communication which speech communities have experienced since the 1990s. The increasing mediatisation of our daily interactions has challenged long established communicative practices at a global level (Fraas, Meier, & Pentzold, 2012), leading to a loss of “stability and certainty as to who we can be and what we can do and say” (Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008, p. 1), metaphorically described as “liquid modernity” or the “foamy present” (Bauman, 2000 and Sloterdijk, 2004, both discussed in Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008, p. 1).

With the development of social media in an increasingly globalised world, these technological changes have reached a new quality: New patterns of participation have created new and more varied sites of online and offline identity construction, often with blurred boundaries. Online participation in social network sites has become a natural practice (Yus, 2011, p. 113) and is closely intertwined with offline social bonding – not just for a new generation of digital natives. Official public discourse has been increasingly opened up to different forms of participation from below, e.g. normal citizens feeding into the news stream on various channels (Johansson, Kleinke & Lethi, 2017). Furthermore, private aspects flow into the construction of leadership identities in mainstream media (on- and offline) and politicians as well as average members of the public swap between on- and offline, public and private (Bös & Kleinke, 2017), thus foregrounding different aspects of their identities.

Yet, the traditional top-down processes of constructing and positioning collective and group identities are, obviously, also still at work. As elaborated in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the institutional political discourse of mainstream media (be it offline or online) still gives political elites the prerogative of interpretation, and the power to shape common beliefs (van Dijk, 2008, pp. 89–91), which are central to the construction of collective and group identities. Also, cultural artefacts still have the potential to construct, perpetuate and distribute role models for identity construction. Interestingly, individuals, groups and collectives handle such

increasingly complex and diverse processes and sites of identity construction with ease, shifting between various facets as foci in their identity construction.

3. The lens of clusivity

Among the multiple facets of identity construction, *(in-/ex-)clusivity*, i.e. who, precisely, is included/excluded in an instance of identity construction, is a central human experience (Joseph, 2004, p. 3) and thus vital for both language users and researchers, including the contributors of this volume. Discussing the essential role of the *us-them* distinction from an evolutionary perspective, Hart argues that in order to survive, “humans have evolved cognitive capacities to (i) categorise coalitional groups in terms of an in-group/out-group dichotomy and (ii) construct associations between out-group members and negative or threat-connoting cues” (2010, p. 55; cf. also Dessalles, 2009). Thus, as speakers, we constantly align with some, and in doing so we detach from others; yet, we may affiliate ourselves with different groups and change our alignments.

The complex and multi-layered processes of identity construction have featured prominently in both CDA-related work and studies taking a broader range of perspectives (e.g. Bull & Fetzer, 2006; Duszak, 2002; Fetzer, 2014; Hart, 2010, 2011; Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008; Pavlidou, 2014a; Reisigl, 2007; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 2008). One aim of this volume is to scrutinise these complexities through the lens of clusivity and hereby exemplify and discuss the linguistic mechanisms of their negotiation in different online and offline discourse contexts in a dynamic discourse landscape.

4. Three strands of identity

The papers at hand address three major strands of human identity, each of which can be thought of as an aggregative abstraction with its own complexities: *personal identity*, *group identity* and *collective identity*. The contributions pay special attention to the interplay between the public vs. private dimensions of the interactions and possible audiences, as well as the potential impact of social and sociotechnical affordances of different communicative settings and different modes of identity construction online and offline. The three ontologically intertwined yet analytically separable strands of human identity motivate the three-part structure of the volume and will be examined against the backdrop of more general principles of discursive identity construction (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 2010).

While the separation of these strands, or any facets of identity, is necessarily artificial, since they represent linked processes that cannot technically be isolated in real social life, it serves as an analytical tool to carve out facets of clusivity which interlocutors make salient in ongoing discourse. Against the backdrop of a *self vs. other* juxtaposition, the relatively well-established dynamic and discursive concept of *personal identity* includes the other as a relational counterpart of the self, creating “self-designations and self-attributions brought into play or asserted during the course of interaction” (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1347). In a nutshell, “personal identity is the bundle of traits that we believe make us [and others – eds.] unique” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 298).

The concept of *group identity* pursued in this volume acknowledges the highly dynamic and negotiable character of group membership, which, just like personal identities, can no longer be adequately described in terms of discrete, independent macro-social variables such as gender, class, race or ethnicity. The contributions assembled here link two different aspects of group construction: firstly, they focus on processes of generating intersecting, hybrid and multiple group memberships, “which are not necessarily otherwise namable [sic] or pre-defined, but rather get constructed or delineated in discourse itself” (Pavlidou, 2014b, p. 5; cf. also Dori-Hacohen, 2014) – see, e.g. the contributions by Wentker, Tanskanen, Kleinke and Bös, and Eller. Secondly, they consider group construction as affected by (but not identical to) macro-categories, such as political affiliation, class or gender, which are made salient by the participants in an interactional context (for example, in ‘gendering’ or ‘ethnicising’ discourse, Litosseliti, 2006; Whetherell, 2010). These highly dynamic processes result in multiple varied, discursively emerging and shifting “constellations of identity categories” in the sense of complex (group) identity slots, i.e. complex ranges of “limits and possibilities made available by identity constellations” (Reay, 2010, pp. 279–280, here for educational contexts). These slots allow for (non-)alignment and (non-)allegiance, highlighting group membership constructed in the interactional moment and, in the spirit of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005, 2010) *positionality principle*, intersecting with (other) macro-categories in complex ways (see e.g. Tanskanen, this volume).

The third strand, *collective identity*, has not been as clearly delineated as *personal* and *group identity* in linguistic research, and further work is needed to assess the *how* and *why* of its construction (Desai, 2010; Wetherell, 2010). In contrast to *personal identity*, which we described above as “the bundle of traits that we believe make us unique”, both *group identity* and *collective identity* capture “what makes people occupying a category similar” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 298) and both may be affected by (demographic) macro-categories such as political/regional affiliation, gender or ethnicity. However, in addition, the notion of *collective identity* as used in this volume is rooted in the study of social movements (e.g. Cerulo, 1997;

Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Melucci, 1989) and is closely related to long-established concepts in sociology and social psychology, such as Durkheim's *conscience collective* (Durkheim, 1893) and Weber's *Gemeinschaftsglaube* (Weber, [1921] 1972, II, Chapter IV, § 2).

Collective identity can, for example, be observed in political discourse, not only at a professional, parliamentary level, but also among lay people discussing political issues in public Internet fora (cf. e.g. Tenenboim & Cohen, 2013). In order to account for such different discourse domains, this volume views *collective identity* from a top-down as well as a bottom-up perspective: On the one hand, *collective identity* is related to long-term, latent processes of identity construction by self-identifying communities (Schlesinger, 1993). It implies the construction of boundaries at an intersubjective level based on (latent) symbolic (civic) codes in the sense of 'socio-cognitive representations' which include "beliefs/knowledge, values, norms, goals and emotions" and related "attitudes and expectations" (Koller, 2014, p. 151). These can be instantiated by recurrent local social (including discursive) practices, and may embrace "assumptions about the origins of a social group, its evolution through time and space, and its arrival at its present destination" (Schlesinger, 1993, p. 7). *Collective identity* has a historical and spatial dimension and is frequently exploited in top-down official, institutional political discourse. Thus, in contrast to *group identity* as described above, which is highly dynamic and negotiable, often delineated and constructed merely in the interactional moment, the third strand, *collective identity*, relates to the discursive construction of rather stable, long-term affiliations and has a strong ideological component.

In order to account for collective identity construction from below, this volume adds the perspective of the *individual* to the intersubjective level of *collective identity* by including "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection to a larger community (real or imagined), category, practice, or institution" (Desai, 2010, p. 421),² which occasionally may complement top-down *collective identity* construction by politicians (cf. Fetzer's contribution, this volume).

By combining different elaboration sites of the *self-other dimension*, this volume aims to sharpen our awareness of the oscillation and correlation of the three different types of identity outlined above, scrutinising more or less stable patterns of its construction as well as 'moments of identification' that emerge in ongoing discourse (cf. Wetherell & Mohanty, 2010, p. 16).

2. See also Koller's (2014, p. 151) "individual/collective identity" which accounts for an individual's processes of self-identification, without, however, distinguishing *collective* from *group identities* on ideological grounds and in a historical dimension.

5. The contributions

Part I of the volume elaborates on the dimensions of ‘self and other’, ‘private and public’ from the perspective of individual identities. While Monika Kirner-Ludwig and Elise Salonen study identity construction in virtual blog formats, Claudia Enzweiler discusses the construction of the individual identity of a female protagonist in a comic book.

Monika Kirner-Ludwig’s contribution “Great pretenders: The phenomenon of impersonating (pseudo-)historical personae in medieval blogs, or: blogging for someone else’s fame?” explores the practice of intentional impersonation of a non-self by analysing how individual bloggers construct overtly fictional identities as if they were their own. Her study of the medieval weblog <http://houseoffame.blogspot.com/> scrutinises the interface of constructed *personal private identities* and *personal identities from the public realm at the pretend-level*. It shows how the boundaries between the historicity of the Middle English author Chaucer and the perceived contemporaneity of the blogger are blurred by the blogger’s use of the technical affordances of the blog context and the decision to speak from a pseudo-Chaucer’s *I*-perspective.

Elise Salonen’s paper “Constructing personal identities online: Self-disclosure in popular blogs” tackles the private–public dimension from a different perspective. In her study of altogether 150 journal blog postings from ten different personal blogs, she spotlights verbal techniques of self-disclosure (i.e. the revelation of personal information). Unlike previous work based on interviews that reveal the bloggers’ *perception* of their own self-disclosure, Salonen retrieves and analyses *I*-statements from the blogs themselves to determine what kind of publicly displayed personal identity is being constructed at a propositional level. Kirner-Ludwig’s and Salonen’s papers explore the ways in which bloggers and co-bloggers create and sustain identities – real or pretend – and employ a common language code to establish and maintain the fiction of the blog, and both address the question of how much the bloggers’ selves shine through their personae.

Claudia Enzweiler’s paper “The development of identity in *Batman* comics” on the long-term construction of Batgirl Stephanie Brown also delves into verbal techniques of personal identity construction, extending the perspectives taken by Salonen and Kirner-Ludwig on two dimensions. Firstly, her paper focuses on an individual fictional character from a comic book, locating her study, as it were, at one end of the ‘personal individual’ to ‘public individual’ identities scale, going one step further than Kirner-Ludwig’s paper in this respect. Secondly, Enzweiler’s study explicitly includes the relational dimension of verbal identity construction (cf. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 2010) by looking at both speech *produced by* a fictional character as well as speech *directed at* her by other protagonists. In her thorough

analysis of the verbal interaction between the various protagonists, Enzweiler shows that, in addition to the verbal techniques of identity construction produced by the main heroine, it is the verbal recognition by other protagonists that grants Stephanie Brown true Batgirl-status.

Part II comprises papers dealing with the dynamic construction of group identities in various digital discourse modes, from the essentially private context of a WhatsApp group chat, which users can only join by invitation, to the public format of online discussion fora.

Michael Wentker's paper "Code-switching and identity construction in WhatsApp: Evidence from a (digital) community of practice" shows how the use of WhatsApp fosters group construction and identity and thus helps to build social meaning that transcends on- and offline contexts. By combining corpus-linguistic and ethnographic methods, Wentker provides insights into a close-knit community of practice (CofP) of six German university students. The corpus data, consisting of 682 WhatsApp messages, coupled with a participant survey show how code-switching between English and German proves a powerful resource of group identity construction. Comparable to Kirner-Ludwig's (pseudo-)historical blogger (cf. Part I), the WhatsApp CofP members draw on verbal strategies and linguistic structures anchored in a playful 'pretend context'. Yet, in contrast to the other contributions in this volume, the identity construction processes evidenced here are not witnessed and fuelled by out-group audiences, but are essentially self-sustaining.

In her paper "Identity and metapragmatic acts in a student forum discussion thread", **Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen** focuses on the role of indexicality and relationality in the construction of personal and group identity positions in interaction, linking macro-level demographic categories with emerging temporary, interactionally specific roles. The paper studies interactions in Britain's largest online student forum *The Student Room*, concentrating on instances in which the participants themselves explicitly talk about their own and others' national identities at the interface of *group* and *collective identity*. The indexical construction of identity is thus approached through the lens of metapragmatic acts and how they are used in the joint negotiation of the national identity of individual users.

Sonja Kleinke and Birte Bös's paper "Indeterminate *us* and *them* – The complexities of referentiality, identity and group construction in a public online discussion" reinvestigates the polarising effects of indeterminate first- and third-person plural pronouns and determiners (i.e. the *we*-set and the *they*-set) from a digital discourse perspective, combining cognitive and CDA perspectives. The authors tackle the double-indexical nature of the use of the indeterminate *we*- and *they*-sets by, firstly, showing how posters construct and negotiate potential in- and out-group referents, and, secondly, examining the predicate expressions linked to both sets as inferential cues to the propositional characterisation of in- and out-group identities collectively

constructed in the thread. Thus, their contribution exemplifies the dynamics of cognitive conceptualisation processes and provides insights into the construction of cultural models. Particularly in the use of indeterminate *we*, traces of ‘collective identity’ emerge which are discussed in more detail in the contributions in Part III.

By highlighting the multifarious nature of identity construction, **Monika Eller’s** contribution “The interplay between criticism and identity management in the comments sections on newspaper websites” effectively bridges Parts I, II and III of this volume. Her paper offers a fine-grained analysis of the discursive construction of personal and in- vs. out-group identities, as well as spontaneously emerging traces of bottom-up collective identities in critical comments posted on the websites of *The Guardian* and *The Times*. In addition to the propositional level of identity construction discussed in Kleinke and Bös, Eller also includes an interpersonal perspective by tackling the intricate interplay among the discourse moves of disagreement, criticism and identity construction. The paper focuses on the type of target (individual/group/collective) on which the criticism is based, the way disagreement/criticism is expressed, the foregrounding and correlation of macro- and micro-identity categories of the author and the target, and linguistic techniques to express alignment or non-allegiance.

Part III of the volume moves on to the construction and role of ‘latent’, quasi-institutional long-term collective identities that are well established in the cultural knowledge of a speech community and can be easily accessed by the public when aligning with in-groups and constructing respective in- and out-groups. The three papers in this part focus on top-down professional political discourse offline, designed for a complex audience. They highlight a different dimension of the private–public interface and different functions of including the ‘private’ than the ones dealt with in Parts I and II.

Sandra Mollin’s paper “The use of face-threatening acts in the construction of in- and out-group identities in British parliamentary debates” links up with Eller’s study (Part II) in focusing on the role of face-threatening acts (FTAs) in the construction and reinforcement of identities. Mollin focuses on parliamentary discourse as an institutionalised arguing game of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ between political parties (cf. also Kleinke & Bös). Her study uncovers the ways in which FTAs are used to construct collective identities in the British House of Commons in more content-oriented and less routinely impolite debates in the field of health policy. Political discourse always addresses the invisible audience, the electorate, at the same time as the direct addressee (the political opponent). In addition, FTAs can be directed against individuals’ and groups’ faces. They not only aim to strengthen the in-group identification of voters who see themselves as affiliated with the party of their choice, but also to convince undecided voters that they really do belong to this group as well.

In the second contribution in this section, “Collective identities and the private-public interface in political discourse”, **Anita Fetzer** argues for collective identities as the default in political discourse. The focus of her analysis lies on those contexts in which political agents depart from the default by entextualising particular discursive identities, e.g. that of the private-domain-anchored family person, thereby assigning them local relevance. The doing and undoing of discursive identities is reflected in the strategic indexical use of deictic devices, as well as in the importation of private-domain-anchored communicative styles and genres, such as colloquial expressions and small stories, contributing to the hybridity of the discourse domain and the identities constructed therein.

The final contribution of the volume, **Andreas Musolff**’s paper “Nations as persons: Collective identities in conflict”, analyses collective identity building in the Middle East conflict, with special regard to the *NATION AS PERSON* metaphor instrumental in the conceptualisation of political entities as (pseudo-)personal identities. Based on a corpus of ten speeches delivered by the Israeli and Palestinian political leaders Netanyahu and Abbas to the UN General Assembly, the paper illustrates how this metaphor fundamentally informs the pragmatic stance of the speakers as ‘embodiments’ of their nations’ collective identities vis-à-vis other nations. The study is enriched by press material reacting to the speeches in terms of the folk-psychological notion of (social) face-loss or face-saving, which combines metaphoric and metonymic construals of the nation as a ‘Self’ in social interaction. As all the other papers in this volume, Musolff’s contribution takes a relational perspective on identity construction, extending the range of indexical means of identity construction to include conceptual metaphor.

Taken as a whole, this volume offers a multifaceted conceptualisation of the role that linguistic choices play in the discursive construction and meta-discursive negotiation – i.e. the genuinely relational construction – of identity across a wide range of communicative situations. All of the papers presented here make reference to the dynamics and the social, interpersonal and political functions of identity construction against the background of changing patterns of ‘ratified participation’. Thereby, they adhere to both bottom-up as well as top-down processes of identity construction – both in institutional public discourse as well as lay discourse.

What makes this volume unique is its complex approach to identities on- and offline. It addresses the links between the progressing mediatisation of our daily interactions and new forms of online and offline identity construction whose boundaries are increasingly blurred. The contributions explore the complexities and challenges of identity construction which members of a speech community face across a range of contexts, focussing on ‘clusivity’ as an overarching aspect of multiple interactional contexts.

Tackling the linguistic challenges posed by this complexity, the multi-level micro-analyses of identity construction at the personal, group and collective levels cover a broad range of discourse domains, accounting for both the productive and receptive ends of such processes. They shed light on social media applications such as blogging, WhatsApp and forum discussions, which are open to lay-participation, as well as top-down political discourse and cultural artefacts, in which ‘normal’ members of a speech community tend to be at the receiving end, primarily granting or ratifying discursively constructed identities.

The limits of a volume such as the present one are obvious. With its necessarily limited selection of interactional contexts, it can merely provide a rough sketch of potential sites of identity construction on- and offline. Thus, further research should expand the range of discourse domains discussed in Sections I–III as well as the scope of empirical studies within each of the discourse domains. Also, the relation of the propositional and interpersonal aspects of identity construction and the role of ‘face’ in these processes could be scrutinized more systematically for a broader range of discourse domains.

The ever-growing impact of ever-changing social media applications requires us to continually re-address questions regarding their impact on and interplay with identity construction processes in other, traditional off-line modes, such as face-to-face interaction, telephone conversations, lecturing, political speeches, etc. And finally, in an increasingly multicultural world, further insights could also be gained by studying processes of personal, group and collective identity construction cross-culturally, including a more comprehensive analysis of the different facets of clusivity, e.g. in the discursive construction of macro-level identities such as gender, professional, ethnic or national identities.

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PART I

Personal identities

Great pretenders

The phenomenon of impersonating (pseudo-)historical personae in medieval blogs, or: Blogging for someone else's fame?

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This paper deals with the contradictory phenomenon of fake profiles within the blogosphere, i.e. blogger profiles that are overtly fictional in specific. We encounter these in the medieval weblog *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog*, launched in 2006 by Brantley Bryant, then Associate Professor of Medieval Literature at Sonoma State University. During the interaction with other users within the boundaries of this blog, Bryant impersonates the late 14th century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer and creates pseudo-personal narratives that blend in both pieces of his real-life professional self as well as his pseudo-self (henceforth *LeVostreGC*). The main tool employed by himself and other users in playing the roles of (fictional) historical personae so as to uphold the fictional sphere and roleplay is the shared language code of pseudo-archaic English.

This paper discusses how the co-bloggers form a community of practice (CoP), while they enjoy both the privacy and the secrecy of the medieval blog. The fact that participants need very specific, historio-linguistic knowledge in order to access this community (and 'play the game') contributes immensely to the makeup and behavior within it: the community reinforces its members' identities as medievalists and values their command of knowledge generally perceived as arcane outside the community. As shall be argued, the language code(s) employed in the blog are the key to entering and acting within this CoP.¹

Keywords: fictional profile, fake profile, pseudo-archaism, Middle English, community of practice, self, (un)authenticity, bald-faced lying, Geoffrey Chaucer

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1. Framing the objective

Weblogs offer an infinite potential for self-presentation (cf. Brown, 1998). In order to project those facets deemed apt to be exhibited, bloggers functionalize online multimodal profiles and shape them to their specific wants. The degree of truthfulness of such profiles may, self-evidently, vary immensely according to the bloggers' subjective perception of their characteristics (un)worthy of (non-)mention or putatively in need of (de)emphasizing. Nonetheless, it is fairly safe to assume that the majority of such profiles – even if they operate with nicknames and pseudonyms – usually represent an expressive proportion of what the profile's creator considers to be his/her 'self'.

This paper adheres to Ervin Goffman's framework of self, i.e. his understanding of the self as a social construct and projected performance within social groups (1959, pp. 17ff.), which has been found – e.g. by Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) – to be highly valuable in its application to how individuals shape and form their online identity in virtual interaction. In fact, his comparison of one's presentation of self to performing onstage before an audience seems to particularly apply to the phenomenon this paper deals with, as the following discussion will be concerned with a very particular category of fake profiles and online impersonations, namely such which do not hide that they are fake and fictional, but rather use this factor as a creative springboard for their narratives. This paper will zoom in on fakester profiles in medieval blogs and shall be concerned with the overarching question of how medieval pseudo-identities are created and sustained by bloggers and co-bloggers in *Chaucer's Blog*. Concretely, I will zoom in on two research questions, namely on

1. how and to what extent a common stylized language code is used in order to establish and maintain the fiction of the blog and the fictional integrity of the in-group, and
2. how the bloggers' contributions reflect their intentions in this medieval role-play.

2. Browsing through relevant notions and frameworks

2.1 Fake and fiction

Only recently have (academic) studies become aware of so-called 'fakester' profiles emerging on online communication platforms and seemingly contradicting the assumption made above, i.e. that online profiles will usually present its creator's "core-self" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 294; cf. also Masnick, 2007; Rettberg, 2008; Roush, 2006; Terdiman, 2004; Thomas, 2007). Kernis and Goldman (2006, p. 294) have

argued that it is “the unobstructed operation of one’s true- or core-self in one’s daily enterprises” which defines authentic self-presentation. As the lexicological makeup of *fakester* suggests – the suffix {-ster} is also found in similar nouns such as *jokester*, *punster*, *trickster*, historically referring to a person’s regular occupation with something (i.e. joking, punning or tricking someone; cf. OED, *-ster* suffix) – the label refers to an individual who occupationally “tamper[s] with [something] for the purpose of deception” (OED, *fake*, v.2, sense 1).² In that sense, the act of faking immediately overlaps with the referential dimensions of fiction, i.e. the “action of [...] inventing imaginary incidents, existences, states of things, etc.” (OED, *fiction*, n., sense 3).

Setting out from the idea that all self-created profiles flexibly range and shift between two poles, which we may label [+ far from real life and character] and [+ close to real life and character], one decisive criterion for classifying fake-character profiles must be the degree of a creator’s intentional impersonation of a non-self in order to deceive the ‘audience’ or trick them into believing what is untrue about his or her self. Such profiles and narratives pretend to ‘be real’ (or rather to refer to reality), i.e. are created and upheld with the primary intention of strategically and systematically deceiving the audience, which will work as long as the creator of the pseudo-self continues to act out their role and as long as their game is not uncovered. It is needless to say that we are therefore facing a dark figure with regard to such *fakester* profile bloggers, since they will rarely be identified as fake. This type of deceiving self-representation overlaps extensively with the pragmatic understanding of ‘lying’ in the sense that the first of Grice’s maxims of quality is violated (Grice, 1989; cf. Dynel, 2011; Mooney, 2004, p. 914) with the blogger acting upon the intention of deceiving their recipients.

The phenomenon the present paper deals with pertains to a second and unique category of fake profiles, which differ from the former in that they are overtly untruthful or fictional: they do not only *not* hide that they are fake and fictional, but rather use this factor openly as a creative springboard for their mostly fictional narratives. One could argue that a user who takes on an overtly fictional self is committing to a certain extent to what Sorensen coined as ‘bald-faced lying’ (2007; Faulkner, 2007; Fallis, 2012, 2015). This being said, it has to be kept in mind that bald-faced lies are not in fact lies for it is “mutually known to the participants that what the speaker says is false” (Meibauer, 2014, p. 109):³ in other words, the speaker is merely flouting (not violating) the first maxim of Quality (cf. Dynel, 2011).

2. The lexeme *fakester* is not explicitly listed by the OED (yet). Note that the compound *fake news* in reference to “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213) might further enhance the saliency of this word.

3. On the other hand, though, this would then also be true for any impersonation of (non-) fictional characters, e.g. acting on stage.

According to Segar (2017),

[b]log fiction is not merely interactive (allowing interaction between the reader and the text) but relational (prompting reciprocal interactions between writers and readers, both through the text and beyond it). This has long been a feature of multiplayer ludic narratives such as those found in Role-playing Games (RPGs), Live Action Role Plays (LARPs) and Multiple User Dungeons (MUDs), where it tends to be over-shadowed by gameplay aims. (Segar, 2017, p. 23)

Given the intricate overlap between acting, impersonating and creating fictional narratives, most studies that have dealt with this phenomenon so far have subsumed it under fiction and roleplay, while the focus has mostly been on impersonations in fan communities and online video games (e.g. Lemke, 2014; Traxel, 2008; Wenger, 2003).⁴ The contextual frame within which we tend to frequently find fictional blogs, or blog fiction as a genre (cf. Segar, 2017), is one related to historical and, specifically, medieval topics.

Other than these, fakester profiles and fake narratives are absolutely rare and unusual in the blogosphere, since weblogs are, by definition, personal journals (cf. Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004, p. 6), technologically configured to enact quasi-authentic facets of one's self, designed to be shared with the world. Overtly fictional profiles and blogs are thus a highly intriguing phenomenon having so far escaped scholarly attention.

The medieval, multi-author-weblog *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog* (URL 12; henceforth *Chaucer's Blog*) gives a display of 'self-contradiction' in the truest sense: Brantley Bryant, Associate Professor of Medieval Literature at Sonoma State University, has kept this blog since 2006, impersonating (or "playing", as he puts it himself, cf. 2010, p. 15) the late 14th century poet Geoffrey Chaucer (under the pseudonym of *LeVostreGC*, i.e. literally 'Your Geoffrey Chaucer') and basing all pseudo-personal narratives on historical facts. By using the blog context and speaking from pseudo-Chaucer's I-perspective, the boundaries between the historicity of the Middle English author and the perceived contemporaneity of the *LeVostreGC*'s blogger become blurred. What is more, Bryant's blog has inspired further pretenders to impersonate medieval characters, such as *Sir John Mandeville* and *Katherine de Swineford*. They all "perform [their medieval] identities" (Lemke, 2014, p. 172) in both their pseudo-personally experienced narratives as well as their language, which, just like *LeVostreGC*'s, resembles what we today widely (but by far too simplistically) categorize as (Chaucer's) 'Middle English'.

4. MUDs (short for *Multi-User Dungeon*, *Multi-User Dimension* or *Multi-User Domain*) and MOOs (short for the online virtual reality system *Master of Orion*), for instance, provide platforms for medieval pseudo-identities and role-plays within constructed fictional medieval worlds.

2.2 Stylization and (in)authenticity

From a socio-linguistic perspective, the aspect of stylization (cf. Bakhtin, 1981), which directly pertains to the first research question above, is a particularly essential factor of the bloggers' 'performance' in *Chaucer's Blog*: the anachronistic usage of a medieval English pseudo-variety within the realms of CMC is merely indispensable in creating the fictional space in which 'Chaucer' and other characters interact. Thus, while the notions of stylization and authenticity are generally discussed with regard to speakers' "small performances", which, in general, only last for "brief and fleeting moments" in their interactions (Deumert, 2014; e.g. switching into "posh voice" or "stylized Cockney", Rampton, 2006), the unique dynamics and 'rules' of *Chaucer's Blog* require the blogger to keep up the performance throughout their virtual presence within that space. If "[s]tylization is strategic inauthenticity in self-projection" (Coupland, 2011), one could argue that the bloggers' usage of pseudo-Middle English is stylization only in relation to their spoken variety outside of the blogosphere; but within the latter, it will be their style that will be coherently and authentically demonstrated.

This being said, authenticity is a quality that is "culturally defined and/or situationally negotiated" (Weninger & Williams, 2017, p. 170; cf. Bucholtz, 2003; Leppänen, Møller, Nørreby, Stæhr, & Kytölä, 2015; Van Leeuwen, 2001; Williams & Copes, 2005), as it concretely pertains to

the interpersonal negotiations of what kinds of language use, semiotic practices and forms of participation count as 'genuine' and 'legitimate' for a given purpose [...], and how this kind of authenticity involves particular reflexivity and shared expertise. (Leppänen et al., 2015, p. 2; cf. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005)

The "shared expertise" in the specific case of *Chaucer's Blog* pertains to certain morphological and lexical features of Middle English as the main historical variety employed. Since social identity in general is "constituted through social action, and especially through language", as Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 588) stated, this seems to be even more true within *Chaucer's Blog*: the higher a blogger's or commenter's proficiency in one or more of the very specific pseudo-medieval linguistic codes (e.g. Old English, Middle English, Latin), the more authenticity they will bring to the game and the blogosphere. Section 4 will provide insights into the means of stylization that the bloggers in *Chaucer's Blog* employ in their performances.

2.3 A role-playing community of practice

It has repeatedly been argued and demonstrated that “virtual interactions enabled by computer mediated communication technologies [...] lead to new community formation and identity expression online” (Sims, 2016, p. 1; cf. Rheingold, 1993). While this is essentially true for blog communities and the self-label ‘blogger’ to begin with, this tenet seems to apply uniquely in the community that has assembled to participate in and contribute to *Chaucer’s Blog*. In fact, what we observe is the formation of a very specific community of practice (CoP), i.e. a group of individuals sharing a common interest in exchanging and expanding on their shared knowledge within a specific domain (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999). I will argue that the participants of *Chaucer’s Blog* share such a common interest due to their unique common affinity for their frame topic. They demonstrate a distinct striving for cooperative knowledge-building, for the refining of their very specific skills, and in connection with that, for the maintaining and developing of their own as well as others’ pseudo-identities within this community. At the same time, the members of this CoP share the willingness and readiness to enter the blogosphere as ‘fake personae’ and to play these out on an ongoing basis – with the shared intention to cooperatively learn from these exchanges and co-create frame-specific knowledge.

This common ground merges both Goffman’s notion of on-stage-performing and Coutu’s definition of role-playing as “performing” social roles, while emphasizing that this “term refers to *behaviour, performance, conduct, overt activity*” (1951, p. 180; his italics). Although Coutu’s definition is not exactly recent, it can be regarded just as valid for our case, for it is not only true that everyone plays their roles in various situations in real life, but just as much so in virtual spaces and fictional settings, such as the blogosphere. Within it, each blogger is free to decide to what extent and in which ways they will perform and simulate a (pseudo-)historical persona. This is also where fiction, fake and role-play fall together, which is indirectly confirmed by Ryan (2008), who regards fiction

as the product of an act of make-believe whose prototype can be found in children’s role-playing games. [...] Through their act of make-believe, readers, spectators, or players transport themselves in imagination from the world they regard as actual toward an alternative possible world – a virtual reality – which they regard as actual for the duration of their involvement in the text, game, or spectacle.

(Ryan, 2008, no pg.)

The blogosphere forms “a space” for the members of the CoP that, as Ryan (ibid.) continues, “serv[es] as container for concrete objects and individuated characters, obeying specific laws, and extending in time”. Within this space and with the experiences made and the wisdom and skills acquired, participants’ (self-)perceptions will change (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Merriam, Courtney, & Baumgartner, 2003).

Scholars have pointed out certain key roles that will conventionally be occupied in CoPs so as to keep both interaction and impact relevant and informative. While CoP members in general “are part of the active or peripheral zones with their degree of participation ranging between active and limited” (Baker & Beames, 2016, p. 74; cf. Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), core members (Baker & Beames, 2016) are “strong contributors”, who “participate actively in meetings of the CoP” and “provide intellectual and social leadership, while their passion for the CoP energises the community” (ibid., p. 74; cf. Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Usually, one of those core members will be the community leader (Wenger, 2003), and as such the one to “identify key issues to pursue and [to] take [...] responsibility for the vitality and effectiveness of the CoP” (Baker & Beames, 2016, p. 73). This is the role Bryant took on when he launched the blog and established the rules of the ‘game’.

3. *Blog, what art thou? – Assessing the surface levels of Chaucer’s Blog*

3.1 A medieval blog with (un)conventional features

As opposed to historical blogs, which are dedicated to (pseudo-)scientific discussions about events and socio-cultural and linguistic phenomena of interest, it seems to be the ‘fun factor’ that is one predominant cause for participation in medieval online games and role plays. *Chaucer’s Blog* not only provides entertainment, but also has its scholarly relevance as one of its major driving forces.

Chaucer’s Blog fits a broad understanding of ‘medieval blogs’, which have been flourishing since about 2002. Sites like URL 1 provide impressive compilations of links to both “medieval blogs and blogs related to the Middle Ages”. Neither there nor elsewhere, however, is the distinction between these two types explained. For example, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Professor of English at George Washington University in Washington, DC, and initiator of the medieval blog *In the Middle* (URL 6), seems to use the notion *medieval blog* as an umbrella term for all kinds of blogs in any way concerned with the Middle Ages (see Cohen, 2010, pp. 33ff.). While I agree with and will mostly follow his use of the term, a subdivision of medieval blogs seems worthwhile, given both their increasing number and the fact that they can be pursuing a number of divergent aims.⁵

The types of blogs Cohen refers to by the notion “pseudonymous medieval” (ibid., p. 33) share the feature that they do not give away their creators’ names overtly. One example is *Blogenspiel* (URL 7), launched in 2002 by Julie Hofmann writing under the pseudonym ‘Another damned Medievalist’ (cf. Cohen, 2010,

5. The *Chaucer’s Blog* website itself provides a blogroll citing some of medieval blogs.

p. 34). Also cf. *HeoCwaeth* (URL 8, launched by “[a] medievalist, feminist, life-long student, and middle school teacher” in 2005, inactive since 2011), and *haligweorc* (URL 9, launched in 2005 by a female blogger focusing on church-related issues).

Another group of quasi-pseudonymous medieval blogs then do show the pseudonym of the author, while cushioning the real name behind some clicks one must be willing to make the effort to go for. This is true for e.g. *Modern Medieval* (URL 10, launched by Matthew Gabriele in 2007), some of whose contributors provide more, some others less details about themselves, which facilitates or impedes their identification.⁶

In general, quasi-pseudonymous blogs seem to pursue the goal of documenting one’s accomplishments in academia and making them visible online, just as the kind of self-promoting blogs mentioned above. Overall, the former, however, display a somewhat humbler attitude than the latter in doing so. The medieval blogs *Wormtalk and Slugspeak* (URL 2, launched by Michael Drout, Professor of English and Director of the Center for the Study of the Medieval at Wheaton College, Norton, MA, in 2002) and the *Ruminant* (URL 3, launched by Larry Swain, Bemidji State University, Bemidji, MN, in 2003), on the other hand, were designed explicitly to promote their creators as prolific, modern medievalists.⁷

Until 2010, when Bryant’s book about the blog was published, *Chaucer’s Blog* did not fit into any of the (medieval) blog categories just discussed. Only through his own unveiling as the author behind *LeVostreGC* did Bryant himself shift the blog from being a uniquely fictional kind amongst its kindred (which had mostly pursued the goal of conveying fun with medieval stories and language and thereby offering semi-expert knowledge) to a primarily self-promotional weblog. Bryant himself calls his blog “a humor blog” (2010, p. 15) or “joke blog” (*ibid.*, p. 22). At the same time, Bryant has not inserted any specifically self-promoting information to date. Even the section “Who am I?” on the site (see Figure 1) exclusively contains Chaucer-specific information.

As Table 1 further below displays, *Chaucer’s Blog* shares a good number of features with common blogs (also see Salonen, this volume), but also shows certain idiosyncratic features. In fact, it differs in one crucial way from other blogs, namely

6. Another example is the blog *Magistra et Mater* (URL 11, launched by Rachel Stone in 2005).

7. Also cf. *Got Medieval* (URL 4, launched by Carl S. Pyrdum III, a graduate student in Medieval Studies at Yale University in 2004, inactive since August 2012), *Unlocked Wordhoard* (URL 5, launched by Richard Scott Nokes, Professor of Medieval Literature at Troy University, in 2005), and *In the Middle* (URL 6, launched by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Professor and the Director of the Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute at George Washington University in Washington, DC, in 2006).

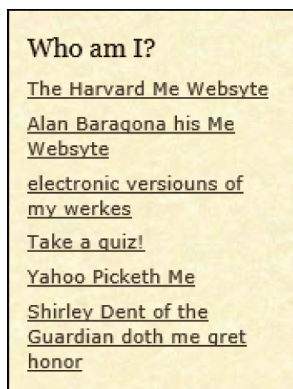


Figure 1. 'Who am I' section of *Chaucer's Blog*

in that the members of the CoP are overtly playing roles in claiming to approximate the identity of a historical figure in an authentic way. In doing so, they are not attempting to trick readers into believing that they are Chaucer or Katherine of Swineford, but they are clearly seeking to enhance their credibility as scholars or at least knowledgeable aficionados of all things medieval. In this context, stylization is an important tool since it highlights the bloggers' erudition and also limits the potential readers to those who can read and write the variety well enough to participate proficiently.

At first glance, *Chaucer's Blog* hardly deviates from a conventional weblog with respect to general features as defined e.g. by Hoffmann (2012, pp. 13–26), or Krishnamurthy (2002), who proposes a classification of blog types according to two dimensions, i.e. personal vs. topical, and individual vs. community. *Chaucer's Blog* may come closest to fitting Krishnamurthy's fourth quadrant, i.e. 'collaborative content', but in fact shows features from all four. In addition, *Chaucer's Blog* incorporates characteristics of various blog-subcategories, such as edublogs (cf. e.g. Huffaker, 2004), knowledge-blogs (cf. Herring et al., 2004), game-blogs or, as already hinted at, even online roleplays.

Not least because of the actual label chosen, we can safely assume that *Chaucer's Blog* was intended as a blog in the first place, when it was launched on the site *House of Fame* (URL 12) in January 2006.⁸ Bryant may well have aimed for what other blogs have conventionally targeted, which is to attract and network with like-minded readers and users sharing his interest in medieval studies and potentially willing to engage in active exchange about related topics (see lines 1 to 6 in Table 1).

8. The profile for Geoffrey Chaucer, i.e. *LeVostreGC*, had been created by Bryant on Friendster in 2002.

Table 1. Contrastive features of conventional blogs versus *Chaucer's Blog*

| | Blog features | Common blogs | GCHB | Description of specificities in <i>Chaucer's Blog</i> |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Aims and motives | 1. created in order to attract an audience (cf. Jarrett, 2012) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 2. created as a platform for exchange with others (cf. 5. in Katzenbach's list, 2008, p. 85; cf. Hoffmann, 2012, p. 39) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 3. created with the intention of playing a certain role in writing about oneself, one's interests, feelings and opinions (cf. 1., 2. and 3. in Katzenbach's list, 2008, p. 85; cf. Hoffmann, 2012, p. 39) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | surface level: Chaucer deep level: Bryant |
| | 4. created out of commercial interests (cf. Hoffmann, 2012, p. 39) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Cf. feature 13. in this table |
| | 5. created for fun (cf. Katzenbach, 2008, p. 85; Lenhart & Fox, 2006) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 6. created with the expectation of developing ideas whilst authoring (cf. 4. in Katzenbach's list, 2008, p. 85) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| Arrangement of blog components (cf. Section 3.2) | 7. primarily textual, written text-based | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 8. combines texts, images and links to other sites and weblogs related in content | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 9. components arranged in a user-friendly manner | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 10. posts automatically arranged in chronological order | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | since posts do not follow the pseudo-historical timeline, sequential divergences are inevitable |

Table 1. (continued)

| | Blog features | Common blogs | GCHB | Description of specificities in <i>Chaucer's Blog</i> |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Contents (cf. Section 3.3) | 11. addresses a certain topical frame established by the initiator of the blog | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 12. personal, online diary/journal; selectively presenting personal experiences and perceptions | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | pseudo-personal experience |
| | 13. features (commercial) advertisements (cf. Figures 5-9) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 1. mostly frame-related 2. partly fictional 3. both self-advertising and commercial |
| Addressees and contributors (cf. Section 4) | 14. addressed blogosphere comprises users sharing a comparable and related interest and knowledge with the blog initiator | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 15. The creator of the blog establishes rules of conduct, which are expected to be followed by all bloggers | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 16. episodic and communicative memory is shared by bloggers in the sphere | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | here, however, the cultural memory is predominant |
| | 17. blog entries require no expert knowledge on the side of readers | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | the numerous intercultural references contained as well as the puns and jokes woven into a 'dead' variety of English do require expert knowledge |

I would argue that *Chaucer's Blog* represents a modified form of the conventional personal blog, being in fact concerned with all three of the prototypically "salient blog purposes" listed by Hoffmann (2012, p. 39), i.e. self-expression, self-promoting as well as friendship-building. The only caveat here, of course, is that Bryant speaks through a fake persona and also mostly about that fake persona's self – at least on the surface level. Since all co-bloggers and commentators know about the game,

they are highly aware that behind the mask there is an anonymous, real-life and like-minded person who enjoys the fun of role-play as much as many other bloggers. The blog may thus even be regarded as bi-personal, reflecting the performing fake personality or role of Chaucer on the fictional and overt level on the one hand, and hiding the real person of the blogger in the background, with everyone being aware of both, though. Figure 2 sums up the most prominent features (boxed in bold) of *Chaucer's Blog*. All bold-framed boxes contain features also part of *Chaucer's Blog*.

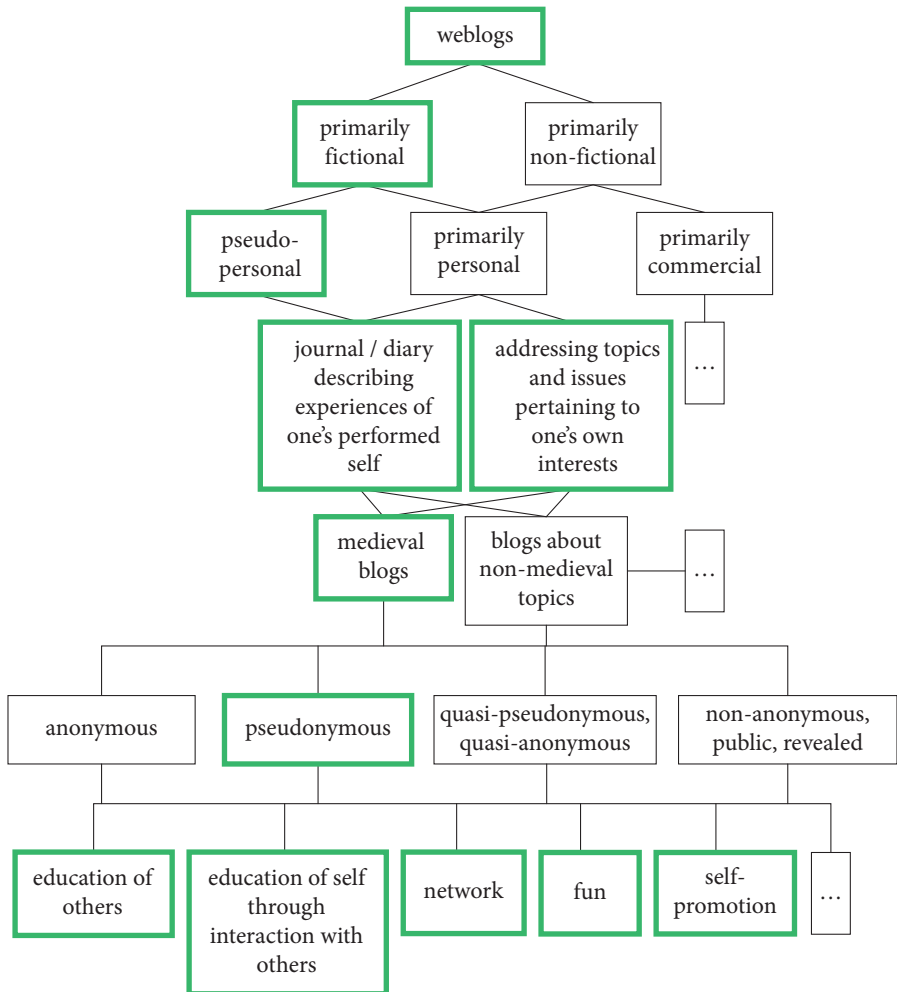


Figure 2. Classifying *Chaucer's Blog* (2006–2010)

3.2 Arrangement of blog components in *Chaucer's Blog*

As rows 7 to 10 in Table 1 above suggest, the structure and makeup of *Chaucer's Blog* is not explicitly different from other blog samples: The screenshot in Figure 3a shows it to be a primarily written, text-based blog. With the sections on the homepage being narrowly framed not using the whole space available between the left and right margins, they cannot all be displayed on one screen. Figure 3a thus displays a screenshot of the homepage with a zoom of 50% in order to give the big picture, while Figure 3b zooms in on individual subtexts and -frames.

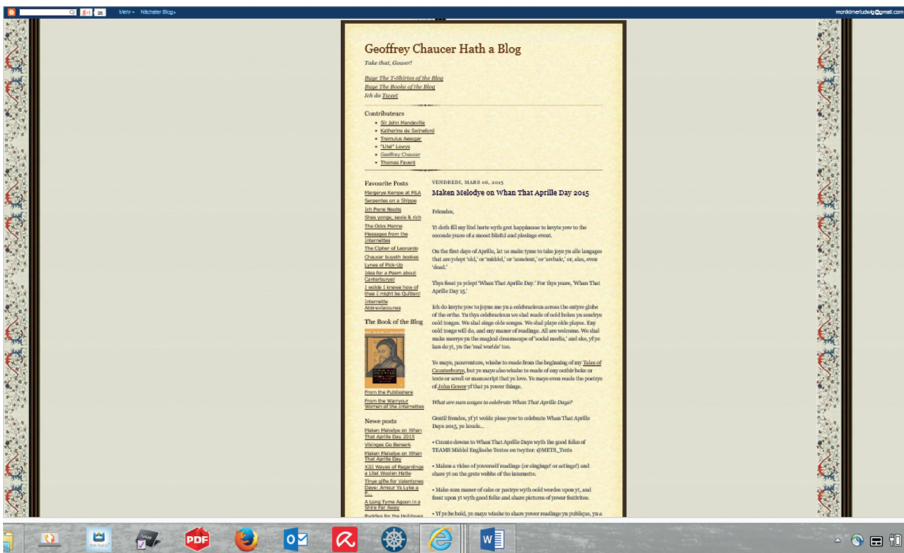


Figure 3a. Screenshot of main site (URL 12)

The layout of the page is relatively simple: the text box is situated in the middle of the page, its light brownish ground colour, vaguely assembling a vellum leaf, chosen to strengthen the intended medieval frame. This is also the function of the florally decorated borders, which, however, seem somewhat disconnected as they are set apart too far from the framed text box in the middle, separated by blank, greyed-out spaces of non-identical width. What is more, the left floral border runs outside the second set of thicker dark brown frames. Within the text box, the layout and structure remain simplistic with only few coloured components: only the title of the blog is typeset in a larger font and a golden-brownish colour (see Figures 3a, 3b), while all other text sections are printed in dark shades, such as black, grey and brown, with links underlined.⁹

9. Neither the alteration between these colourings nor the switching between italics and normal script is entirely transparent to me.

As Figure 3b displays more closely, separating lines are inserted to visually establish *caesurae* between the primary individual weblog sections: in the top part beneath the title and the exclamation “*Take that, Gower!*” – a joking exclamation that is only understood by readers equipped with the relevant expert cultural knowledge and common ground (see Section 3) – there is a small first section presenting links that advertise products related to the blog (also see Figures 5 to 9, and line 13 in Table 1).

The second section is entitled “Contributeurs” and lists the six users that are acknowledged as the actual authors or bloggers of this multi-author-weblog (see Section 3 and Figure 11 below). A third section on the bottom left-hand side, of which Figure 3b only shows the beginning, contains a lengthy list of grouped postings, starting with Bryant’s (?) “Favourite Posts”. Below these follows a long listing of all posts chronologically ordered by month of publication (see Figure 3c). As can be seen, the posting activity has clearly decreased between March 2006 and March 2015, with postings coming in only once or twice a year in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. It also has to be added that, although all postings are automatically arranged and displayed on the site in the chronological order of their publication through their authors, the post contents can be highly asynchronous due to both partially (pseudo-)historical and (pseudo-)real contributions.

Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog

Take that, Gower!

[Buye The T-Shirtes of the Blog](#)
[Buye The Booke of the Blog](#)
[Ich do Tweet](#)

Contributeurs

- [Sir John Mandeville](#)
- [Katherine de Swineford](#)
- [Tremulus Aescgar](#)
- ["Litel" Lowys](#)
- [Geoffrey Chaucer](#)
- [Thomas Favent](#)

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Favourite Posts</p> <p><u>Margerye Kempe at MLA</u> <u>Serpentes on a Shippe</u> <u>Ich Pwne Noobs</u> <u>Shes yonge, sexie & rich</u> <u>The Ocks Menne</u> <u>Messages from the Internettes</u> <u>The Cipher of Leonardo</u></p> | <p style="text-align: center;">SAMEDI, FÉVRIER 27, 2016</p> <h3 style="text-align: center;">Maken Melodye on #WhanthatAprilleDay16</h3> <p style="text-align: center;">Goode Friendes and Readeres of thys Litel Blog.</p> <p>Yt doth fill my litel herte wyth gret happinesse to invyte yow to the thirde yeare of a moost blisful and plesinge celebracioun.</p> <p>On the first daye of Aprille, lat us make tyme to take joye yn alle langages that are yclept 'old,' or 'middel,' or 'auncient,' or 'archaic,' or, alas, even 'dead.'</p> |
|--|--|

Figure 3b. Section displaying core sections

The actual core of the blog, i.e. the postings themselves, are situated in the middle of the page. The beginning of the most recent post by Geoffrey Chaucer, published on 27 February 2016 (last checked on July 31, 2017), is shown in Figure 3b. Figure 3d displays a section of the blogroll fixed to the left margin of the site. Content- and language-specific details are discussed in Section 4.

| |
|---|
| <p>Kalendar of postes of yore</p> <p>mars 2006</p> <p>avril 2006</p> <p>mai 2006</p> <p>juin 2006</p> <p>juillet 2006</p> <p>août 2006</p> <p>septembre 2006</p> <p>octobre 2006</p> <p>novembre 2006</p> <p>décembre 2006</p> <p>janvier 2007</p> <p>février 2007</p> <p>mars 2007</p> <p>mai 2007</p> <p>juin 2007</p> <p>septembre 2007</p> <p>octobre 2007</p> <p>novembre 2007</p> <p>février 2008</p> <p>avril 2008</p> <p>juillet 2008</p> <p>août 2008</p> <p>septembre 2008</p> <p>mai 2009</p> <p>juin 2009</p> <p>septembre 2009</p> <p>novembre 2009</p> <p>janvier 2010</p> <p>mai 2010</p> <p>juin 2010</p> <p>juillet 2010</p> <p>octobre 2010</p> <p>janvier 2011</p> <p>février 2011</p> <p>avril 2011</p> <p>mai 2011</p> <p>juin 2011</p> <p>septembre 2011</p> <p>décembre 2011</p> <p>avril 2012</p> <p>février 2013</p> <p>août 2013</p> <p>mars 2014</p> <p>décembre 2014</p> <p>mars 2015</p> <p>février 2016</p> |
|---|

| |
|---|
| <p>Professir Galfridus Hieronymus Cohen</p> <p>Doctor Viraqo</p> <p>Ladye Bracknelle</p> <p>Medievale Meeteth the Worlde</p> <p>Johannes Gowere</p> <p>Jennie Davidson, who redeth muche</p> <p>Neil Gaiman, who oones dide make mencioun of me in a novello qraffico</p> <p>Blogge aboute Katherine Swynford</p> <p>Humanitees Resercher</p> <p>Boethius von Korncrake (AT KALAMAZOO!)</p> <p>Blogge aboute Kynqe Edwarde II</p> <p>Newes for Medievalistes</p> <p>Ancrene Wiseass</p> <p>Thomas Hoccleve</p> <p>Anglo-Saxon Out Loud technolotics: an podcaste by wylde yrsshe studentz</p> <p>aggreqatinqe educator</p> <p>The Blogge of Katherine Swynford herself</p> <p>William Langeland</p> <p>The auncient feende Kehuthlewe</p> <p>Eurylochus, an brave knight of Grece in the Werre of Troie</p> |
|---|

Figure 3c.

Figure 3d.

As Figure 3c shows, posts in *Chaucer's Blog* have been created since March 2006 and, most recently (last accessed August 2, 2017), in February 2016. Throughout this period, 117 posts (my manual count) have been published, with 47% out of these in 2006. The number of posts and amount of exchange between the bloggers within the blogosphere has decreased significantly from 2007 onwards, as Figure 4 shows. Since 2011, none of the core contributors has published any posts, with only Bryant himself continuing to post only one or two posts per year since 2012.

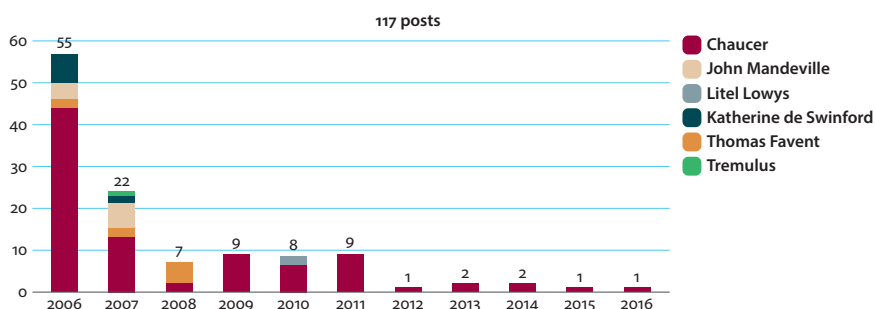


Figure 4. Published posts since 2006

The distribution of published posts is clearly one-sided with 89 contributions (76.1%) created by 'Chaucer'. Note that the roles of Litel Lowys and Thomas Favent are also covered by Bryant himself, which adds 6 post to Bryant's posting census, pushing his involvement up to 95 posts overall and thus 81.2% of all posts published in *Chaucer's Blog*. Table 2 sums up the post count for each of the core contributors.

Table 2. Overall and individual distribution of posts

| Core member | Absolute frequency of posts | Relative frequency of posts |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>LeVostreGC</i> | 89 | 76.1% |
| Litel Lowys | 1 | 0.8% |
| Thomas Favent | 5 | 4.3% |
| Sir John Mandeville | 12 | 10.3% |
| Katherine de Swineford | 9 | 7.7% |
| Tremulus Aescgar | 1 | 0.8% |
| Posts total | 117 | 100% |

3.3 Some obvious oddities and idiosyncrasies of *Chaucer's Blog* on the surface content levels

Criteria 11 to 13 in Table 1 above are concerned with the contents of the blog. While *Chaucer's Blog* corresponds with the conventional criterion of addressing a particular topic or frame determined by the initiator of the blog, i.e. the time and language of *LeVostreGC* (line 11), *Chaucer's Blog* deviates from the norms when it comes to criteria 12 and 13: For one thing, the blog has diary-like qualities, presenting texts which were motivated by matters of subjective relevance. As such, they deal with pseudo-personal experiences and impressions from the perspective of the fictional persona Geoffrey Chaucer. It is Bryant, of course, who speaks through the mouth of this character(s), choosing for himself what to narrate. Since these choices can be assumed to be personal ones on Bryant's part, it is not only the overtly fake identity of *LeVostreGC* that we encounter, but, wrapped within his posts, Bryant's predilections as well.

Further deviations from the norm on a content level are found in the curious assembly of advertisements embedded on the website. Whereas it is common practice of weblogs to enter agreements of symbiotic marketing and financial interests by, e.g., referring to donors and sponsors, who, in turn, expect a valuable visibility within the respective blogosphere, *Chaucer's Blog* presents another, rather unconventional and unsystematic collection of promotional materials. As far as I can see, there is no ad present that is not frame-related, i.e. does not stand in some association with the Middle Ages. Figures 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 show the advertising items embedded on the website. The advertisements provide a colorful but disjointed picture: for one thing, Figure 7 is a neutral item, referring to *sitemeter*, a counter tool to track the numbers of visitors to the site,¹⁰ as well as to *Blogger*, which is the blog-publishing service *Chaucer's Blog* is using. Figure 8 introduces *Postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, published by Palgrave Macmillan, who also published Bryant (2010) in their *New Middle Ages* book series. The book is referred to both in Figures 5, i.e. by the demand to "*Buye The Booke of the Blog*", and Figure 7, which thus make their references extensionally synonymous.

Only the ad shown in Figure 9 is not linked to an external page. What is more, its aim is not entirely transparent. The text above the picture reads: "Yn how many dayes doth an Archibshop [sic] earne thyn yeerlye wage?", and below: "Do try the Prelate paye calculator todaye. The resultes shal astovnd thee!". There is neither an embedded link with the image, nor does this marginal component seem to stand

10. As this paper does not explicitly consider the role of the blog audience, see e.g. Jarrett (2012) for insights.

in connection with the main text, i.e. the posts right next to it, the intention of Bryant remains unclear: it may be no more than a fake ad intended to enhance the supposedly medieval character of the blog and its audience, or even a private joke, cognitively isolated and not decodable by the nonprivy reader (also cf. Arendholz & Kirner-Ludwig, 2015).

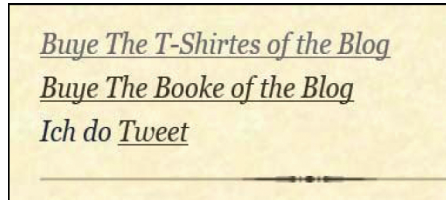


Figure 5. Hyperlinks on the site



Figure 6. Hyperlinks to sitemeter and *Blogger*

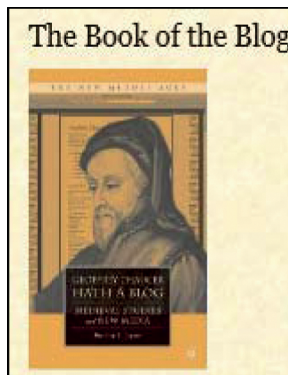


Figure 7. Cover of Bryant's book



Figure 8. Hyperlink to *Postmedieval*



Figure 9. Intransparent ad

4. Framing the ‘pretenders’: Medieval aficionados, role-playing metagamers and fun “hunch-backed keepers of a dark culture and age”?¹¹

4.1 Fan fiction, fictional personae and merged identities in the blogosphere

For a number of years now, and after long phases of carefully observing the diachronic progress (which surely lies in the nature of their profession), medieval scholars have been warming towards the potentials of Digital Discourse to facilitate international and interdisciplinary exchange, transfer of knowledge, and to promote the Middle Ages. In an interview, Bryant addressed the latter aspect by saying that his and other blogs about the Middle Ages

show the importance of examining not just ‘matters medieval’ but how the medieval matters. [...] Focusing on medievalism and pop culture opens up a potentially wider audience. (Bryant & Pyrdum, 2011, pp. 307–308)

When Bryant created the fakester profile of *LeVostreGC* on the social networking site *Friendster*, his primary motivation (as far as he stated) was that he “thought it would be funny to have Chaucer listed as [his] ‘friend’” (2010, p. 16). As Bryant (2010) states, it had become fairly common that

Friendster users turned the site’s professed mission of factual self-presentation on its head by creating what became known as ‘fakesters,’ profiles of dead, famous, or fictional persons (sometimes all three). (Bryant, 2010, p. 16)

Clearly, just as *Facebook* users may define their standing by the number of ‘friends’ they ‘collect’, the esteem of *Friendster* users (and of people in real life as well) can be boosted by gathering an extraordinary assembly of highly respected and admired (celebrity) acquaintances.

As Bryant describes, he “had not thought of starting a public blog until Friendster offered one to Chaucer”, but accepted the “fun” challenge (ibid., p. 17), welcoming the opportunity to share his affection for and expertise in Chaucer’s works and the Middle English language and history with other admirers. It was thus “completely accidental” (ibid.) that he came up with the idea of an overtly fictional blog by and about a historical persona,¹² thus combining academic interest in medievalism with the fun of storytelling and impersonating.¹³ While one might suspect that he had the

11. Cf. URL 2.

12. Blogs in the names of fictional characters (see also Enzweiler, this volume) have been reported to be rather common on *LiveJournal* (URL 13) (cf. Thomas, 2007, p. 203).

13. According to Rettberg (2008), former exemplars of fictional blogs were hoaxes, pretending to be real and were believed to be.

aim of boosting his career opportunities in mind (cf. Cohen, 2010, pp. 36–37), this does not seem to have been his initial intention, as, from 2006 until 2010, he posted his contributions without revealing his real-life identity. 2010 was the year of the print publication of his blog-biography, *Geoffrey Chaucer hath a blog* (cf. *ibid.*, p. 15), by which he disclosed his identity. What Bryant (2010) admits, though, is that he

most enthusiastically embraced writing the Chaucer Blog during an extended ‘momen[t] [sic] of career uncertainty,’ namely the finishing of a dissertation and [his] encounter with the academic job market. (Bryant, 2010, p. 15)

He goes on that “[f]aced with doubts about career prospects,” he “found it comforting to lead a secret life as ‘The Chaucer Blogger’” (*ibid.*, pp. 17–18). This delight in writing under the guise of a pseudonym or a persona and, in doing so, taking one’s liberty of creating and shaping one’s fake personality, has been shared by many other academic bloggers (and not only them, of course). As Trigg (2001) pointed out,

Chaucerians [here: the bloggers on *Chaucer’s Blog*] traditionally keep their playful adaptations far from the real work of scholarship; the ‘academic play’ of such creations is only permissible ‘outside the ‘real’ book’ and ‘serves to point up by contrast the absolute seriousness’ of scholarship. (as quoted in Bryant, 2010, p. 24)

One crucial aspect that makes *Chaucer’s Blog* so fascinating from a linguistic identity-construction point of view is that the fictional profiles allow the bloggers an almost unlimited potential of shaping their roles. For *LeVostreGC’s* profile, Bryant did not aim for a scholarly portrayal of Chaucer. On the contrary, he wanted to establish him “as a modest, unthreatening, and inadvertently ridiculous figure” (2010, p. 19). He therefore chose to leave certain historical bits unmentioned which would impugn the image of a purely “‘fun’ Chaucer” (*ibid.*, p. 20). This would certainly have included, for instance, the more or less established fact that the real Chaucer was charged for having raped Cecilia Champaigne (cf. e.g. Harley, 1993).

Wiseman affirms this impression in his online blog review of Bryant’s book, stating that “he seems to have set out to the blogosphere with two goals: Chaucer=‘nice’ and temporality=‘muddy’” (URL 22; cf. Bryant, 2010, p. 18).¹⁴ The blog was “meant to offer Chaucer without canonical fame, to blend specialist medieval scholarship with pop culture” (Bryant, 2010, p. 20). These goals are reflected in Geoffrey Chaucer’s blogging profile, displayed in Figure 10.

14. The feature ‘nice’ only gets interrupted when Bryant inserts mock insults against John Gower, who the real Chaucer is said to have had disagreements with. See e.g. the posts “ther is no coincidence here!” (posted April 8, 2006, URL 14), “tresoun is spelled G-O-W-E-R” (posted May 1, 2006), and the exclamation “*Take that, Gower!*” posted right on the main site, beneath the title of the weblog.

Blogger

Geoffrey Chaucer

[My Photo](#)
[View Full Size](#)

On Blogger since
March 2006

Profile views -
29541

My blogs
[Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog](#)

About me

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Gender | Male |
| Industry | Government |
| Occupation | Justice of the Pees for Kent |
| Location | Kent, United Kingdom |
| Links | Wishlist |
| Introduction | I here neyther that ne this, for when my labor doon al ys and have made al my rekenynges I goon hom to my hous anoon and, also domb as any stoon, I sitte at another book tyl fully daswed ys myn look. Certes, I oghte to get outte more. Thou kanst fynde myn feede for livejournal at the username 'chaucerhathblog', sum swete soule hath sette yt vp for me. |
| Interests | pilgrimage, astrology, allegory, lyric poetry, the potential of the vernacular, drinking, hanging in southwark, penance, bastard feudalism, surviving political upheaval, my yearly tun of wine |
| Favorite Movies | A Knight's Tale, Anchoress, Pasolini's Canterbury Tales |
| Favorite Music | Machaut, Deschamps, al maner balades roundels & vielayes |
| Favorite Books | De Consolacione Philosophiae, De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae, De Placitu Naturae, Anticlaudianus, Aeneid, Thebaid, Metamorphoses, Romance of the Rose, Dante, Petrarch, Seabiscuit |

How do you pronounce the 'g' in bologna?
In the same maner as the yogh yn yoghurt.

Figure 10. Screenshot of Geoffrey Chaucer's (i.e. *LeVostreGC*'s) *Blogger*-profile (URL 23)

The 'protagonists' in *Chaucer's Blog* are explicitly listed and linked (see Figure 2b above and Figure 11). The sequence in which the names are displayed neither follows an alphabetical order, nor corresponds to a high or low number of either posts published or profile views. Every single name in the list is linked to the profile of the respective blogger, with *LeVostreGC*'s being the most detailed (see Figure 10). The profiles of Sir John Mandeville, Katherine de Swineford and "Lytel" Lowys are similarly detailed, as their screenshots display (Figures 12, 13 and 14). In contrast, the profile information provided by Tremulus Aescgar (literally: 'shaking/shivering' [Latin *tremulus*] ash spear [Old English *æsc gar*], Figure 15) and Thomas Favent (Figure 16) is limited to the few details automatically provided by the blog-publishing service *Blogger*: i.e. the point in time when they registered, the number of views of their profiles counted since then and the blogs they have taken part in, which, for either of them is only *Chaucer's Blog*.



Figure 11. Core contributors to the blog (URL 12)

My blogs
[Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog](#)

About me

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Gender | Male |
| Industry | Government |
| Occupation | kinges gofer |
| Location | London, England |
| Introduction | I am Sire John Mandeville, knyght, though that I be unworthi. I was born in the ryght plesaunt citee of St Albans in Herfordshire, and when I had but xv wynteres age I passed the see. For xx yeeres I travelled the whole erthe. I was in the servyce of the sultan in Egypt; I saw the risyn sun in the Japanese ysles; I was att the court of Prester John, the most hooly emperour. Of all of these adventures I have ywritten into a book, The Travels of John Mandeville, the which is a hot-seller to say the leest. |
| Interests | travel , gardening , drinking , roadside geology , walking clubs , country pubs , boating , wonders of the east , practical orientalism |
| Favorite Movies | The 13th Warrior , Rivers and Tides , Around the World in 80 Days , 1492: Conquest of Paradise , Aguirre: The Wrath of God |
| Favorite Books | The Travels of Sir John Mandeville , Pliny's Natural Wonders , All Creatures Great and Small |

What reason do you have to believe the earth is flat?

By cause that I have seen the earthes end with myne owne eyen two, that ys why. Whatte a dumbe question.

Figure 12. Screenshot of Sir John Mandeville's *Blogger*-profile (URL 24)

Blogger

Katherine de Swineford

[My Photo](#)
[View Full Size](#)

On Blogger since June 2006
Profile views - 14188

My blogs
[Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog](#)
[L'autre journalle de Katherine de Swyneford](#)

About me

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Gender | Female |
| Industry | Government |
| Occupation | Noblewoman & Babysitter |
| Location | London, United Kingdom |
| Introduction | I am the mothor of sevene childeren, my sones Thomas Oon, Thomas Tweye, Lite Johne, and Henry, and my daughtters Joan, Margaret and Blanche. They are from my deede housbond Hugh de Swineford, who I loothe, and my lord Johne the Duke of Launcestre, who I love. I am a gode a moral womman, save for my longe trakke record of avoultre and assaying to cwelle Constanze de Castille. I am up to date on my shriverye, though. |
| Interests | John of Gaunt, sewing, chaus, stock trading, gold, breede, chese, cockale |
| Favorite Books | Aucassins and Nicolette |

You laughed so hard you can't catch your breath. Stick out your tongue and show us what's funny.
That be nat no questioun.

Figure 13. Screenshot of Katherine de Swineford's Blogger-profile (URL 25)

Amongst the core contributors to *Chaucer's Blog*, only Katherine of Swineford also co-authors another blog (see Figure 13). It is worth mentioning that the creators of the profiles of Katherine of Swineford, Thomas Favent and "Lytel" Lowys have chosen real historical persons to play their bloggers' roles. Katherine (†1403) was a mistress of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and later became his third wife.¹⁵ Her sister was Philippa, Geoffrey Chaucer's wife, and mother of their son Louis, i.e. "Lytel" Lowys, to whom *Treatise on the Astrolabe* was purportedly dedicated. The blogger Thomas Favent steps into blogging action together with the Lords Appellant in a posting published July 24, 2008 (URL 15).¹⁶

John de Mandeville and Tremulus Aescgar are the two special cases among the assembly of fake contributors: while the latter is neither based on an actual historical figure, nor equipped with a profile faking any details at all (see Figure 15), the creator of John de Mandeville's profile chose a persona that is a fictional celebrity

15. Also cf. Figure 13: Katherine inserted John in her interests-section.

16. Thomas Favent (†1400) was a tract writer.

Blogger

"Litel" Lowys

My blogs
[Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog](#)

About me

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Gender | Male |
| Industry | Student |
| Location | Kizzent, United Kingdom |
| Introduction | I be just a yonge fellow trying to find some mirth. //Exboxe CCCLX gamere - currentlie playinge: Crecy; Knight Commander (4 EVER!) / C Yeeres of War / Auncient Scrolles: Obfuscacioun / Thomas de Chancey's Ghost Knightes: Werre in Puce. l2 < <3! |
| Interests | gaming, phat beats, dicing, pwning Dad at Auriole, reading FHM (fabliaux et histories magazine), ryot and disport, punk, chillaxing, antifraternat graffiti, NOT astrolables or N E thing to do with them seriously ZOMG do NOT talk to me about astrolables and miridians and all that mizzerde! |
| Favorite Movies | That troye 'Lionheart' wyth Eric de Stolts alwey warmeth my heart because it is so rank. |
| Favorite Music | Myn Alchemical Romaunt, L Shilling, Scrope Dogg, Old Skool |
| Favorite Books | NOT BEOTHUIS |

Come up with some possible band names for your group that features a washboard and a styrofoam tuba.

That sounds like sum of that mystery processiou stuff. Al lyk the washboarderes guild presenteth the bathing of Susanna' or sum swich thing. LOIz!

Figure 14. Screenshot of "Litel" Lowys's *Blogger*-profile (URL 26)

Blogger

Tremulus Aescgar

My blogs
[Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog](#)

About me

On Blogger since February 2007
 Profile views - 5280

Figure 15. Screenshot of Tremulus Aescgar's *Blogger*-profile (URL 27)

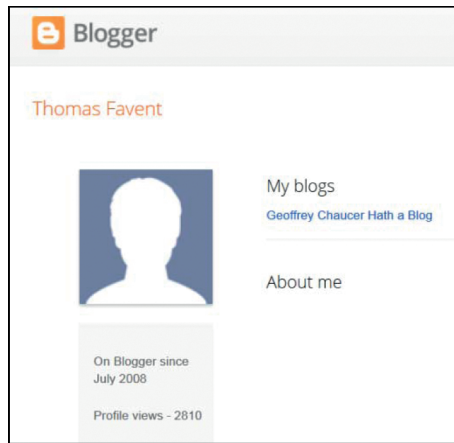


Figure 16. Screenshot of Thomas Favent’s *Blogger*-profile (URL 28)

(see Figure 12): The same pseudonym had once been chosen by an anonymous author who, in the second half of the 14th century, wrote an extensive fictional account titled *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* describing the *I*-narrator’s travels to the Holy Land, the Far East and the fabled lands ruled by Presbyter John. Bryant does not state anything about the real identity of this blogger and neither does he reveal too much about the identities of his co-bloggers, possibly because he does / did not know them (at that point). With respect to Katherine de Swineford, he claims that he has “no idea who wrote the Katherine Swinford [sic] entries, since she (?) and [Bryant himself] corresponded only in-character as Chaucer and his sister-in-law” (2010, p. 16). Not knowing too much about the real-life identity of one’s interlocutors, though, did certainly facilitate maintaining the role of one’s persona within the blogosphere. According to Höflich and Gebhardt (2001, p. 32), it is not ‘persons’ communicating in cyberspace, but multiple online identities. This is certainly true for *Chaucer’s Blog*, where the boundaries between the blogger’s self and that of the blogging persona are extremely blurred.

The creators of both Katherine’s and Sir John Mandeville’s profiles have made an effort to fill their identity-specific sections with data comprising partially historical and biographical details, adding a portion of humorous, fictional and anachronistic chunks that are used as frame breakers meant to bridge the gap between the then and the now and to thus make themselves more easily likeable to their readers and followers.

According to Dorta’s terminology, this set of bloggers is best classified as a ‘small group’ (“Kleingruppe”; 2005, p. 277), whose scope is determined by “opinions, world views and expectations shared by its members, not by a superior

authority” (ibid.). He claims that the shared identity felt by members of a small group can “generally be assumed to be more intensive and binding” than in larger groups (ibid.). Given the specific framing topic, this surely holds true, too, for the CoP assembled in *Chaucer’s Blog*. One might even argue that its core as well as its occasional contributors form a specifically academic community of practice (cf. Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, & Diekamp, 2015, p. 3), displaying “various degrees of expertise (from experts to novices), community ages (from oldtimers to newcomers) and participation (from central to peripheral)” (Nistor et al., 2015, p. 3; cf. Nistor & Fischer, 2012). It has to be added that the occasional contributors in particular have, literally and metaphorically, been playing a significant role in shaping *Chaucer’s Blog* since its beginning. The community is enriched by numerous occasional users leaving comments to the postings, many of them joining the assembly of fictional personae. One example is Henry Scogan, a man of the court (†1407) to whom Chaucer dedicated the poem *Lenvoy a Scogan* (cf. Bryant, 2010, p. 20).¹⁷

The group identity in *Chaucer’s blogosphere* can be assumed to be additionally strengthened by the special fact that participants are aware of each other’s fake profiles and personae and of everyone playing their specific role(s). This shared knowledge makes them confidants, relying on each other to conscientiously uphold their parts in the game, i.e. their fake identities. It may even be possible that everyone’s curiosity will enhance the endeavour of unlayering identity facets of one’s co-bloggers’ real-life selves, which thus becomes an asset of the game. The latter, *vice versa*, may render each blogger’s determination of playing out their persona’s role as thoroughly and entertainingly as possible even stronger. As Thomas (2007) puts it,

[i]n addition to getting inside a character’s head and creating a back story for fan fiction writing, online journals are also a means of exploring and constructing the self. (Thomas, 2007, p. 204)

At the same time, from his very first posts onwards, Bryant did drop clues about his real self. In May 2006, for instance, he had *LeVostreGC* lament about his paper not having been accepted by the Kalamazoo conference committee, after weaving in numerous intertextual and pseudo-historical references so to establish the fictional frame:¹⁸

17. The blogger behind this persona also has their own blog to be found on <http://scogan.blogspot.com/>.

18. Note that sample (1) and all following were chosen randomly and quoted verbatim from the blog.

(1) To Kalamazoo, wyth Love

O, swete ys the lusti moneth of May, swete aren yts floures and yts gentil zephyrs eke. Euen sweetre ys the facte that ich am aboute to gette a realli goode deale on some lande in Kente. Peraventure, eftsoon ich and myn householde shal be far from stinkye olde Londoun wyth yts large advertisementz and yts almost constante factionale violence. [...] Ther is oon othir enchesoun for the swoteness of Maye: yn this moneth ther ys the gatherynge of Kalamazoo. From alle laundes and regiones of the globe of the erthe, folke do come to talke of tymes of yore, to share akademik werke, and to get rioutouslye dronke on free wine. Yt is, ywis, a jolie paradise ful of pleasaunte and lernede peple and muchel joye. Ther is also a daunce at the ende. Ich wolde haue visited thys yeere, but they rejectede myn papere proposal, the whiche ys a thyng of much ridiculousnesse, for the papere was on myn selfe! Thou woldst thynke that ich was somedeel of an experte on that subiecte. (URL 16, my emphases)

Although Dorta's (2005) observations regarding individual nickname choices refer to chat environments, they can partially be applied here, addressing "funny fictionalizations" that may result from the pseudonyms each individual chooses for themselves in anticipation. The range of pseudonyms fit for blogs and chats is infinite, and the individual choice of one may or may not be well thought through. While in Dorta's samples, chat-nicknames can be deliberately vague, not forcing their users into any specific categories themselves (also cf. e.g. Fraas, Meier, & Pentzold, 2012, p. 75),¹⁹ the blogger's pseudonym and inherent persona had to be chosen with care, as it was to define one's space for creative maneuvers for good. The vaguer a pseudonym is, the more easily one can introduce, establish, and negotiate identity facets during the interaction within the chatroom or blogosphere. In *Chaucer's Blog*, the contributors impose restrictions on themselves and create expectations in the other bloggers – e.g. with respect to their sex, status, profession, life experience. The more facts are established and shared about the historical persona, the more restricted the potential of identity creation on the blogger's part become – and the higher their (self-)imposed obligation to fill the role associated with the name. According to this logic, the personae of Thomas Favent and Tremulus Aescgar – with the latter being fictional altogether and the former hardly known and unshaped in the blogger's profile – are those holding the highest potential of creative make-up.

19. While 'icibonn' may be a reference to the user being in some way connected to the city of Bonn, Germany, 'Schneckerlchen' implies that its user probably is female.

4.2 Breaking down the ‘langage’: Pseudo-personae writing pseudo-archaic English

The use of both archaic and pseudo-archaic English by most of the contributors to *Chaucer’s Blog* certainly is one of the strategies used to establish a meaningful and coherent social pseudo-reality within the community of practice (also see Wentker, this volume)²⁰ – and thus lends itself well to a discourse analytical approach. My understanding of the notions *archaism* and *pseudo-archaism* follows that of Traxel, who uses the former to refer to “linguistic forms that used to be common but [...] went out of fashion” (2012, p. 42) at some point, while the notion *pseudo-archaism* refers to “linguistic forms that never existed but [...] evoke the impression as if they could have been part of the language in former times” (ibid., pp. 42–43). Whereas it is either the one or the other that is (deliberately or accidentally) used in modern texts, it can be assumed that more often than not the contributors to *Chaucer’s Blog* use both systematically. Many of them practice this linguistic strategy in a professional and determined manner, also since it is perceived as an inherent feature of the blog. In Wheeler’s (2010) understanding, the use of “Middle Englishy” is even a rule of the game all bloggers play their roles in:

[I]t has rules (write Middle Englishy), the Web is its playing field, it incites controversies and duds (queynte ideas), but [...] has no limited duration to its enchantment. Every posting is a winner. Chaucerians delight in word play, in Very Bad Puns [sic], in Great Vowels Unshifted, and in collaboration as much as pseudoflaming. (Wheeler, 2010, p. 12)

This is affirmed by respective meta-comments by some blog commenters, such as Anonyme’s: “I would humbly like to ask (in modern English if I may) what you think of the many varieties of real and cod-Middle English you have spawned” (posted June 24, 2006, URL 17).

While Bryant and his co-bloggers tend to step out of their roles, blending their pseudo-selves with their real-life professional ones, it is remarkable that his blogging audience mostly keeps the unspoken agreement to not overstep the boundaries of the blogosphere’s (linguistic) integrity. Unlike in conventional blogs, which expedite interpersonal exchange of potentially any sort and on any kind of topic deemed appropriate by the users (and potentially inappropriate by others; see e.g. Salonen,

20. Many people appear to find imitating Middle English and other ‘dead’ languages enjoyable. Examples to affirm this claim can be found in the reasonably popular Latin translations of books like *Winnie the Pooh* (Lenard & Walker, 1991) or Manfred Görlach’s (1992) *Mac ond Mauris in Old English Rhymed and Alliterative Verse*. Also cf. Paul Kingsnorth’s novel *The Wake*, written completely in a pseudo-archaic variety of English, as well as the academic papers by Minugh (1999), Traxel (2008), and Twomey (2011) dealing specifically with pseudo-archaisms.

this volume), the majority of user comments responding to blog entries and earlier comments display a clear aspiration to leave the linguistic and conceptual integrity of the blogosphere intact. Disregarding the linguistic ground rule in the blog is linked to what Goffman (1959: 141) referred to as “under-communication”, i.e. the phenomenon that

[g]iven the fragility and the required expressive coherence of the reality that is dramatized by a performance, there are usually facts which, if attention is drawn to them during the performance, would discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters. (Goffman, 1959, p. 141)

In those few cases where a user publishes a comment that deviates from the ‘language policy’ of the blog, *LeVostreGC* will ‘repair’ such infringements and return to the script intact, which is shown in sample (2), a dialogue triggered by *LeVostreGC*, providing a list of “LYNES OF PICKE-VPPE” (i.e. ‘pick-up lines’ (URL 16)):

(2)  **rohina said...**

Chaucer, your pick up lines would fully work on me. I sent you an email about using my pix on your shirts, but you did not reply. I fear that you are the kind of guy who picks up a girl after one session and then pretends not to know her at the next.

mardi, 02 mai, 2006

 **Geoffrey Chaucer said...**

Ma Chere Rohina,

Mea maxima culpa. A thousande pardones, my deere. Ich haue ben so bisy aboute the custoum hous and aboute myn purchas of lande that ich haue neglected thyn letter. [...]

Sine misericordia tua, nihil mihi remaneat.

Le Vostre, GC

mercredi, 03 mai, 2006

LeVostreGC’s specialist style in (2), containing two rather dramatic Latin phrases, i.e. “Mea maxima culpa” ([‘through] my terrible [lit.: ‘greatest’] fault’) and “Sine misericordia tua, nihil mihi remaneat” (‘without your forgiveness I have nothing left’), is clearly applied to override rohina’s neglect of the blog’s language policy – and of course is an overt display of Bryant’s multilingual skills. Whereas “Mea maxima culpa” is a well-known quote from the Penitential Act, also referred to as the ‘*Confiteor*’, Bryant constructed “Sine misericordia tua, nihil mihi remaneat” himself – in correct school Latin, considering e.g. that the preposition *sine* requires a noun phrase in the ablative case and forming the present tense conjunctive (“remaneat”) to indicate a conditional sense.

The linguistic knowledge of Bryant as well as his co-users, comprising “the declarative information *about* language as well as procedural information on *how to use* language in various contexts” (Hoffmann, 2012, pp. 63–64; cf. Bublitz, 2006, p. 368), which is highly restricted and expert-specific, can certainly be considered the most effective and venerable tool applied in *Chaucer’s Blog*. In this, it even trumps the immediate and declarative knowledge, which Bublitz (2006) established as the three cognitive domains fundamental to common ground between interlocutors. Clearly, though, the mix of expert-knowledge within each of these three domains provides a significant asset on the metagaming level – note that metagaming (originally a notion occurring within the frame of mathematics and game theory) is used here broadly as pertaining to all kinds of strategies that apply out-of-game knowledge and ‘real-life’ experience within the game frame.

When we compare samples of blog posts published by individual contributors, very distinctly idiosyncratic features are revealed: sample (3) demonstrates the self-confident tone of John de Mandeville’s (e.g. “Yt is nat overweening to claim that myne travelogue ys y-flying off the shelves”)²¹ following a classy formulaic *captatio benevolentiae* in the second line: “knyght, though that I unworthy am”. His linguistic style closely resembles Chaucer’s (cf. e.g. his relative clause constructions as in “the which recounts mine aventures beyond the see”; see again (1) above), but differs remarkably from Katherine de Swineford’s, whose contributions are surprisingly blunt and even offensive at times (cf. e.g. “Constanze de Castelle is a bytch and I hate hir”, cf. (4)). The blogger behind the persona also constantly weaves in bits from what may be her (?) real life as well (cf. e.g. her reference to her kids being home-schooled: “I kepe my childeren from herynge hit onle by hauynge hem home-schoolen” (5)):

(3) Benedicitee, good readers all!

Allow me to introduce myne-self. I am Sir John Mandeville, knyght, though that I unworthy am. Yow myght have read myne best-sellyng travelogue, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (that is I!), the which recounts mine aventures beyond the see, whych first I passed whan I had but xv winteres age. Yt is nat overweening to claim that myne travelogue ys y-flying off the shelves; oonly our holy writ hath y-sold more copies, but (and I mene no disrespecte to the evangelistes!) holy writ hath not the chilles and spilles of myne travel boke.

(4) SAMEDI, JUILLET 01, 2006

Affayres Presente

Geffrey hath sayd I ought to speke of affayres presente and of courtlie gossip. Here is some gossip for yow: Constanze de Castelle is a bytch and I hate hir. As for affayres presente, let us seen what the town cryer hath sayd: [...]

21. Post published October 20, 2006.

(5) Katheryne Swinford a dit...

I have herden of this "rappe" musique. I kepe my childeren from herynge hit onle by hauynge hem home-schoolen, though wel I woot nat the ne Philippe should adbyde this nocioun. Hmmm... shalt thou maketh a "remix" of Machaut togetheres wyth thatte Snoopie Dogg Dogg ower whatevere he be?

While the postings by Chaucer have a highly poetic tone, due to archaic word order and word choices, *O*-exclamations, and constant allographic choices reflecting variants common in Middle English (cf. again (1) above), the texts by "Lytel" Lowys, for instance, display a strong preference for mock youth language features found e.g. in Modern (American) English slang. In fact, knowing that the creator of both Geoffrey Chaucer's and "Lytel" Lowys's posts is one and the same man, makes them highly hyperbolic. Bryant admits himself that he "created all of the[ir] entries [...] as well as the material published by Thomas Favent and the Lords Appellant during Chaucer's absence" (2010, p. 15).

Sample (6), a snippet from one of "Lytel" Lowys's posts published April 19, 2006, shows that the rule just mentioned, i.e. "write Middle Englishy", is deliberately violated by Bryant and systematically made up for by anachronistic word choices applied by "Lytel" Lowys. Amongst these are the following: the generalizing noun "stuff",²² the interjection "yo",²³ and the discourse particle *like* in "then dad would like sell me to Flemings". Louis concludes his post by creating an overwhelming sequence of (pseudo-)youth language and colloquial devices, such as "Okay", "peace out", "yall" and "wanna" (7) and two postscripts that contain anachronistic references to the Xbox and craigslist.

Another frequently chosen linguistic device in "Lytel" Lowys's posts are direct phonemic-graphemic translations using initialisms (mainly common in computer-mediated discourse; cf. Jacobs, 2008, p. 204; Vandergriff, 2010, p. 237), such as "N E Way" for *anyway*, "U" for *you*, "OMG" for Oh my god or "skillz" for *skills* (representing the voiced plural-*{s} /z/*) and "da" as the dialectal variant of the definite determiner *the*. These marked linguistic devices compiled in such density are clearly used to paint an unambiguous and hyperbolically funny picture of a rebel teenager, "conceived as an opinionated adolescent and hip-hop fan" (Bryant, 2010, p. 20): he not only deviates from his fictional father in terms of language but also with respect to his own fictional interests, which include "*knight commander*" as being "the best game ever for the Xbox" (see (6)) and definitely not "that wack poem" his father "keeps working on at night about pilgrims and all that" (see (6)).

22. See OED online for *stuff* (n.1, sense 3, 6ff).

23. Whereas *yo* interj. has been attested since 1450 according to the OED online, its use as a discourse marker and attention grabber – particularly in American English – has been strongest since the 1940s.

- (6) N E Way – Dad told me to put this entry up with my html skillz because Adam Linkfirst is away and Dad is out in Kent doing some stuff for our lord da King (trespuissant Richard Second Since da Conkwest roy dengleterre et dirlande et par grace de dieu roy de fraunce). So here I am to save teh [sic] day yo. Big ups to all U gentils and churlz who read his blog like every day. You must not have N E thing else to do. PSYCHE! LOLZ I kinda want 2 put up some dirrty pictures or sometin’ or copy that centerfold of Katie Swin outta my FHM but then dad would like sell me to Flemings or something he would be so mad. He loves this blog almost as much as he loves that wack poem he keeps working on at night about pilgrims and all that.
- (7) Okay, peace out yall
-Louis Chaucer
p.s. anybody wanna buy an astrilable (sp.?)? I’ll give it to you for one pound. Tell me soon OK before I put it on craigslist
p.p.s OMG *crecy: knight commander* is the best game ever for the Xbox CCCLX. All your aquitaine are belong to us!

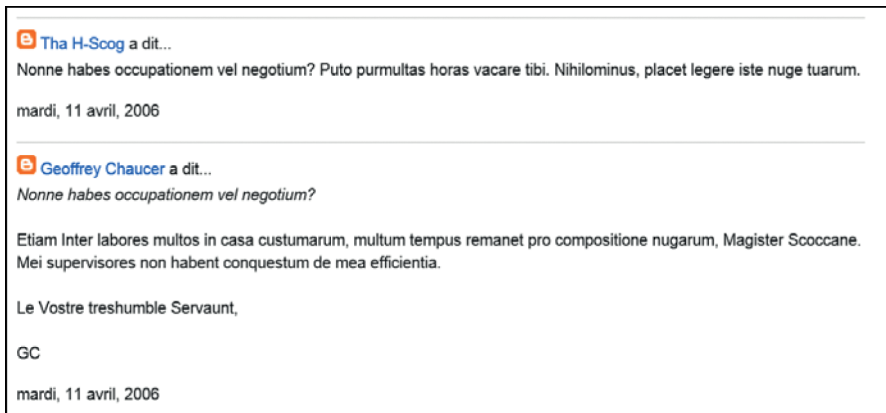
Knowing that Bryant also is the author of Thomas Favent’s postings, a text sample to contrast it with the above reveals some of the idiosyncrasies Bryant has chosen to go with this persona. Sample (8) is taken from the section “THE EDITOR [Thomas Favent] ANSWERETH YOWER QUERIES”, published in a post from July 2008 (URL 18).

- (8) How hangeth it, ladyes and lordes? This is nat Geoffrey Chaucer. Geoffrey Chaucer ys chubtastick and hath a smal woolen hat the which was cool back when round tables seemid lyk a fresshe idea. Chaucer, my darlinges, hath left the building. Ich am Thomas Favent and let me telle yow ich am a lot thinner and a whole lot moore fun at large outdoor summer-tyme festivals. Ich am so totallie ypsyched to be running this syte and providinge yow wyth the hottest and moost up to date content concerninge the mattirs aforemencioned by the lords appellat in their grace and wisdam. [...]

Bryant chose a language style for Favent that is supposed to sound queer. This is, amongst other devices, suggested by the sexually connoted introductory question “How hangeth it” (cf. *MoDE How’s it hanging?*), the address “my darlinges”, the use of the adverb “totallie” (plus *so*) modifying “ypsyched”, as well his self-confident self-description (“ich am a lot thinner and a whole lot moore fun at large outdoor summer-tyme festivals”) and his self-attested knowledge about “the hottest” news. Apart from these seemingly affected lexical choices for addressing his blog audience, Bryant basically retains the same graphemic-orthographic display of Middle English for Favent as he does for *LeVostreGC*.

As *LeVostreGC*, Bryant does not only blog, but also responds to numerous comments of other personae, such as the aforementioned Henry Scogan and King Richard II. The two following samples further demonstrate Bryant's selection of registers and language depending on Chaucer's conversational partner. As sample (9) shows, Bryant and Henry Scogan enter into a dialogue in Latin, triggered by Scogan addressing *LeVostreGC* first:²⁴





(9)



Scogan ‘Tha H-Scog’ asks *LeVostreGC* if he has no job, since he apparently has so many hours of leisure – presumably for writing his little texts (“iste nuge”), for which Scogan compliments him (“placet legere”). Also in Latin, *LeVostreGC* responds that his duties still leave enough time to work on his texts (“multum tempus remanet pro compositione nugarum”) and that his supervisors are not concerned about his efficiency after all (“supervisores non habent conquestum de mea efficientia”).

Bryant uses still another register in the upcoming example. The comments shown as (10), (11), (12) and (13) were posted in one thread (URL 19) and in direct sequential reference to each other: In reaction to a mock insult uttered by Sally’s Life against Richard II, the persona ‘richard, seconde of that name, kyng’ responded by posting comment (10). The reaction of Sally’s Life was her addressing *LeVostreGC* and pleading for his help (11). Before the latter could actually respond, however, richard, seconde of that name, kyng published comment (12), which immediately triggered *LeVostreGC*’s comment (13).

24. Also in earlier and later posts, Tha H-Scog’s preferred that the blog-register remain Latin, whilst at times mixing it up with Middle English. Cf. e.g. in “Sayeth Daun Catoun: ‘Quid agitur in campo, manet in campo.’” (posted March 29, 2006, comment to *Chaucer’s* Blog entry “Ich and the Perle Poete, on Mont Dorse-Quasse” (posted March 25, 2006, URL 20)).

- (10)  **richard, seconde of that name, kynge said...**
 We commaunde Owre high sherriffe of Disshire to seken out ane recreant,
 yclept Sally, and hir imprisoun for that she doth intend tresovn ayeinst Owre
 Royalle Personne. All hir estates shall vnto Galfridus de Chavcer, knicht of the
 covntie of Kente be deliuered, for the bettir encovraging of the art literaire.
 Given bi Owre Hande atte Westminstre,
 Ricardus, Rex Angliæ
samedi, 24 juin, 2006
- (11)  **Sally's Life said...**
 Eeke, Saints preserve us and spare my wheels.
 Good Mr Chaucer, plead for me, for His Magnificent Majesty King Richard
 did not take kindly to this fool's jape.
 Besides, the welfare state of the 21C has diminished what little estate I brought
 to this Disability Shire.
 I aint worth a bean.
 (Do His Majesty's Prison facilities comply with DDA?)
samedi, 24 juin, 2006
- (12)  **richard, seconde of that name, kynge said...**
 Nowe do wee commaund our Sheriff of Disshire to releasen, setten free, and
 quitten the ladye Sally who hath most piteously appeled for the royalle mercie.
 Besides, the Tower hath nat yet wheelchair access.
 Ricardus, Rex Angliæ
jeudi, 29 juin, 2006
- (13)  **Geoffrey Chaucer said...**
*Nowe do wee commaund our Sheriff of Disshire to releasen, setten free, and quitten
 the ladye Sally who hath most piteously appeled for the royalle mercie.*
 Grant merci, my trespuissant Lord,
 I, Geoffrey Chaucer, shall serue as mainprise for Sallye that she shal not do or
 saye eny thinge that shal be judged detrimentale to yower royal honor.
 GC
jeudi, 29 juin, 2006

As sample (10) displays, the blogger personifying Richard II performs his fake identity carefully and thoroughly: graphemic clusters such as <au> in “commaunde” and the constant representation of <u> as <v> (cf. “tresovn”, “vnto”; but: “imprisoun”),²⁵ are supposed to reflect his French or rather Anglo-Norman vernacular. Additionally, postpositioned adjectives, as in “art literaire”, as well as Latinisms (“Galfridus”, “Ricardus, Rex Angliæ”), the use of the *pluralis maiestatis*, and the capitalization of

25. Vice versa, the occasional and unsystematic spelling <u> instead of <v> was chosen (e.g. “deliuered”, but: “Given”).

the respective pronouns “We” and “Owre” in (10) keep up the royal tone. In (12), which responds to Sally’s Life’s Modern English post displayed as (11), Richard II slightly breaks character by spelling the self-referential personal plural pronoun in lower case (“wee”) and, of course, by the comment “Besides, the Tower hath nat yet wheelchair access”, certainly irrelevant to a king.

LeVostreGC’s response in (13) is brief, but overtly elegant, thanking Richard II in pseudo-French (“Grant merci”). Three instances of *shall* are inserted to persuade the king of the reliability of his guarantee to watch over Sally’s attitude. Not only the brevity of the comment itself, but also the unmodified initials “GC” representing the parting formula, suggest that the blogger Bryant needed or even wanted to keep his response short.

5. A brief conclusion regarding intentional frame breaks, or: Blogging for one’s own fame after all (?)

Chaucer’s Blog is definitely not less ‘blog-like’ than other weblogs. This has been argued based on numerous examples pertaining to general motives for creating blogs, the visual arrangement of the blog components, the blog’s contents and the types and authors of the contributions. However, it has also been shown that *Chaucer’s Blog* is a highly special exemplar within medieval blogs in that it is both a blog about the Middle Ages and a medieval personal blog at the same time, pretending to share the 14th century poet Geoffrey Chaucer’s thoughts and opinions with his followers. *Chaucer’s Blog* was bound to be fictional from the beginning. It may have been Bryant’s convincingly pseudo-medieval simulation and the thrill of anticipation in the idea of communicating with Chaucer that attracted other contributors and commenters, many of whom inspired to enter the blogosphere as historical personae performing fake profiles, too.

The small excerpts from *Chaucer’s Blog* presented here illustrate how Bryant, despite the enthusiasm he puts into performing his fake self, constantly breaks the frame of his role by inserting peep-holes through which his audience may see facets of his non-virtual self. Sample (1), taken from his Kalamazoo-post in 2006, the linked utterances “*Buye The Booke of the Blog*” and “*Ich do Tweet*” in Figure 5, as well as Figures 6, 7 and 8, which were inserted after the publication of his ‘all-revealing’ book, are clearly self-advertising and self-promoting. In other words, they all refer more or less directly to Bryant as the creator of and man behind the pseudo-identity of Chaucer’s within the blogosphere.

At the point of launching the blog, it was primarily “fun” Bryant felt as his motivation, as he stated himself. As has been argued, this pleasure on Bryant’s and certainly other participants’ part also can be assumed to have been heightened by

the playful zooming-ins and zooming-outs between the two selves that Bryant was performing. The personae of *LeVostreGC*, “Lytel” Lowys and Thomas Favent, who have all emerged from Bryant’s pen, all reflect their creator’s self, i.e. for instance Bryant’s profession as a medievalist, his fascination for the Middle English period and its linguistic dynamics.

Bryant’s blog and the CoP it has attracted certainly provides a platform for like-minded medieval enthusiasts, offering them an anonymous sphere in which they may act out those characters they would normally rather write and research about. *Chaucer’s Blog* and similar sites clearly promote the potentials medievalists see in keeping their passion and profession up-to-date and desirable and thus making themselves look ‘coole’ and ‘fun’. Shirts like the one displayed in Figure 17, offered on zazzle (URL 21; cf. the link “*Buye The T-Shirtes of the Blog*” in Figures 2b and 5 above) may help accomplish that goal.

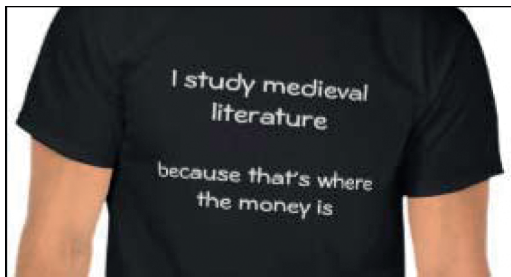


Figure 17. Printed shirt offered by zazzle (URL 21)

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Constructing personal identities online

Self-disclosure in popular blogs

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The current study aims to discern how identities are built within a sample of ten popular personal blogs and to depict the varieties of identities that emerge. The focus is placed on the diversity of topics disclosed by the bloggers (the breadth of self-disclosure) and the context-bound personal identities that are constructed through this process. The material employs Gee's (2011) classification of I-statements and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005, 2008) theorization of interaction and identity. The analysis shows that the topics disclosed in the blogs elucidate facets of online identity supported and created by interaction with the audience, and that a close examination of self-disclosure provides a fruitful approach to studying online identity construction.

Keywords: digital discourse, identity, self-disclosure, I-statements

1. Introduction

This study examines the construction of personal identities by focusing on self-disclosure in the digital world as expressed in blogs.¹ Identity is investigated through discourse analysis with the spotlight on language use: the language composed by individuals when they are communicating information on and about themselves.

Dynamic and shifting personal identities which can be taken on in different social contexts (Edwards, 2009) are accessible for linguistic research. These personal identities comprise social and ideological values disclosed by the participants. Following Bucholtz and Hall's (2005, 2008) theorization, identity can be

1. *Blog* is an abbreviation of the term *weblog*. It denotes an online webpage where a blogger can publish entries which appear in reverse chronological order. Crystal (2006, p. 240) defines a blog as a "web application which allows the user to enter, display, and edit posts at any time". Bloggers also commonly include links to other sites, and pictures, sound and video can be added to the text in a blog (Myers, 2010a, p. 2).

understood as a product, rather than the source, of discourse, giving importance to the context of identity work. Instead of focusing on certain, pre-determined types of identity, the emphasis can be placed on the production of identity and its different facets in the discourse. Personal identities are explored in this study through *self-disclosure*, the process of revealing personal information relating to oneself (Jourard, 1971; Walton & Rice, 2013). This topic is examined through self-reference, namely *I-statements*, defined as utterances where the user refers to him/herself, using first person pronouns (Gee, 2011, p. 153). I-statements include phrases such as *I feel happy today* and *I do not want to go the party*, and can be used to carry out meanings in terms of attitudes, intentions, emotions and actions, for example. As Palander-Collin (2011, p. 84) points out, “[s]elf-reference is one type of a linguistic choice where the identity and relational functions of language become visible”. In this way, identity work can be linguistically explored by inspecting what the speakers disclose of themselves, demonstrating how self-disclosure can be examined as a part of (online) identity construction.

2. Theoretical background and research aims

Blogs are characterized as having a high degree of self-disclosure (see e.g. Chen, 2012; Herring et al., 2005). Self-disclosure may serve different purposes within blogs, such as relationship maintenance (see e.g. Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006; Jorgensen & Gaudy, 1980) and identity mediation (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004; Stefanone & Jang, 2007). According to Holtgraves, “self-presentational concerns will *always* be operative during a disclosure episode, regardless of what higher-level functions may also be served” (1990, p. 197; emphasis in original), suggesting that self-disclosure is by definition intertwined with identity construction. In the present study this connection will be analysed within the context of the digital world by examining personal journal-type blogs.

Given the choice of the material and the topic of identity, the theoretical background for this study draws on several fields of linguistic research. In the broadest sense, the research conducted on *digital discourse* (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011), which Herring (2004) has titled *computer-mediated discourse analysis* (CMDA), serves as the basic foundation of this study. I also make use of research carried out in the fields of sociolinguistics, pragmatics, social psychology and interactional linguistics, which are all important to gain an understanding of how bloggers use language to construct an identity online.

The current research is focused on the creation of online personal identities as they are understood from the discourse itself. An identity enacted in a blog might or might not be reflective of a ‘true’ offline identity. Nonetheless, what is

of interest and under investigation in this study is the identity/identities that the bloggers construct with the discourse present in their blogs, focusing specifically on self-disclosure. Identities are constructed in blogs also through other means, both visual (e.g. the pictures included, the layout of the blog site, font type), and discursive (e.g. self-reference through generic pronouns, proper names etc.; for a full discussion on linguistic manifestations of self-reference, see Jaszczolt, 2013). A complete discussion of all the methods through which personal identity can be constructed is beyond the scope of the present study; hence the focus is placed specifically on self-disclosure exhibited through I-statements.

Self-disclosure is a multifaceted process that can be examined for example in terms of *breadth* and *frequency*, i.e. the range and diversity of topics disclosed (Altman & Taylor, 1973, pp. 15–19). These two facets of discourse will be focused on in the present study, as they shed light on the way identity work can be carried out in the material chosen. Greene et al. (2006, p. 409) observe that “self-disclosure, depending on reactions of relationship partners, also plays an important role in validating self-worth and personal identity”, demonstrating one role that self-disclosure plays in identity development, and showing how it is intertwined with interaction. When revealing personal information about ourselves to others, we are at the same time reporting what we consider important aspects of our identities, what we want others to know about us and how we wish to present the information. Examining the discourse of self-disclosure can simultaneously shed light on the socially situated identities as they are constructed in the digital environment.

Several researchers working in the field of linguistics have approached the issue of self-disclosure in digital discourse. For example, it has been studied in connection to chat (e.g. Cho, 2007), online games (e.g. Choi, Yoon, & Lacey, 2013), Twitter (e.g. Walton & Rice, 2013) and Facebook (e.g. Ledbetter et al., 2011). Self-disclosure has also been examined in blogs (e.g. Bronstein, 2013; Jang & Stefanone, 2011; Qian & Scott, 2007; Tang & Wang, 2012). One characteristic that the previous studies on self-disclosure in blogs have in common relates to methodology, as online surveys were used in the studies as the method of gathering data. Therefore the studies have approached self-disclosure as behaviour understood from the individual’s perspective, rather than examining the linguistic realization of self-disclosure itself (i.e. *how* and *what* individuals self-disclose). This type of self-report data, where the language users themselves shed light on their use of discourse, provides insight into the individual’s understanding of the topic studied. However, there seem to be some discrepancies between self-report and actual self-disclosure (Schiffrin, Edelman, Falkenstern, & Stewart, 2010, p. 304), indicating that self-disclosure in the digital world ought to be explored using other methods as well.

Another question related to previous research on the topic of self-disclosure in blogs concerns the response rates of participants answering online surveys. For

example, Bronstein (2013, p. 166) notes that a response rate of 30% is typical in studies on blogging, where the respondents are asked to answer online surveys. While a large amount of data can be acquired even with a small response rate, the question of who constitutes the sample population remains. In order to obtain an accurate picture of the blogs and bloggers that crowd the Internet, it is essential to also study those who are not actively interested in participating in research surveys.

In my study, I wish to extend the current literature by approaching the topic of self-disclosure from a discourse analytic perspective. Instead of asking the participants to evaluate the breadth of disclosure in their blogs, I investigate it by examining the linguistic content of their blogs. Using this method, it is possible to exclude potentially confounding variables relating to a social desirability bias, as well as potentially problematic interpersonal variables inherent in a self-report survey approach. For example, the concept of self-disclosure itself might be apprehended diversely by the participants, leading to subjective differences in estimations. By focusing on discourse, I can produce a more objective account of self-disclosure in blogs. The ethical considerations that arise from this approach were addressed in that the participants in this study were given the right not to participate, while making it easy for them to decide otherwise (the participants were able to take into consideration the method employed, in which active participation in the research is not 'necessary'). By combining these ethical, methodological and theoretical elements this study provides a multifaceted approach to identity construction in blogs.

This study has two main goals: firstly, to investigate what bloggers in this material disclose about themselves, and secondly, to link this self-disclosure to the wider framework of identity construction. Thereby the first part of the study uses a quantitative framework and the second part a qualitative approach to the study of online identities in blogs. The first objective is addressed making use of a model presented by Gee (2011), which provides a clear framework in which to study I-statements that is suitable for discourse analysis. His classification system divides I-statements into *cognitive statements* relating to thinking and knowing; *affective statements* connected to desiring and liking; *state and action statements*; *ability and constraint statements*; and *achievement statements* which relate to activities, desires, or efforts connecting to "mainstream" achievements or accomplishments (Gee, 2011, pp. 153–154). This categorization system is used as a starting point for this study, as the categories outlined by Gee are used as tools, not as an end product, thereby allowing for other categories to arise from the data. What this means in terms of the analysis of the data is that firstly all I-statements were gathered from the material, after which they were categorized according to Gee's (2011) classification system. Those statements which could not be fitted into any of the categories were examined on their own to see if they had any common characteristics which might shed light on the breadth of self-disclosure.

As suggested by Bucholtz and Hall, “we need to start with what speakers are accomplishing interactionally and then build upward to the identities that thereby emerge” (2008, pp. 153–154). Therefore, the second objective of this study, namely examining the instances of self-disclosure as being part of the discursive construction of personal identity, is addressed through a microanalysis of what kinds of specific personal identities are constructed through these I-statements. Here, in the second part of the study, I make use of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005, 2008) theorization in terms of examining identity as a dynamic process within interaction, targeting identity with analytic delicacy rather than trying to fit it into predetermined categories. These theoretical and methodological elements are the building blocks used for the present study.

3. Material

The blogs chosen for the material are single-authored personal journal-type blogs in which the bloggers mainly discuss their life and experiences. They are also ‘popular’ blogs; they were selected from websites which identify acclaimed, widely read blogs: Blogger’s *Blogs of Note*² (Blogger, 2014) and *TIME* Magazine’s “25 most popular blogs listings”³ (*TIME* Magazine, 2014). These kinds of listings are one of the ways⁴ in which the popularity of blogs can be determined, as outlined by Herring et al. (2005). Popular personal blogs were chosen for the study as in them it is likely that self-disclosure is deliberate. All bloggers were informed that their blog had been chosen for this study, and they were given the right to withdraw from it (a choice which none of the bloggers resorted to).⁵

2. *Blogger* is a free online blog-publishing service. It has a website called *Blogs of Note* where “interesting and noteworthy Blogger-powered blogs” (Blogger, 2014) are listed. When a blog is chosen for this list, the blogger receives a notification, and links to her/his blog are added to the *Blogs of Note* site.

3. *TIME* online (*TIME* Magazine, 2014) lists 25 of the most popular blogs on a yearly basis. The bloggers receive a notification of having been selected for the list, and links to their blogs will appear on the article site devoted to this in *TIME*.

4. Popularity can also be seen through “services that track and allow subscription to blogs and RSS feeds” and “services that track the spread of ideas across the blogosphere” (Herring et al., 2005, pp. 2–3).

5. For a discussion on ethical considerations related to researching online data, see e.g. Bolander and Locher (2014); Ess and the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (2002); Eysenbach and Till (2001); Markham, Buchanan and the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (2012).

The material consists of ten blogs, from each of which 15 blog posts were selected. Altogether, the material therefore contains 150 blog posts from ten different writers. The comment sections are utilized in the qualitative part of the study. The blogs chosen for the study are: *A Southerner in San Francisco*, *Average Girl*, *Bitchy Waiter*, *Divine Secrets of Domestic Diva*, *Djenne Djenna*, *Menopausal Man*, *My Husband is Annoying*, *Pole to Sole*, *The Everywhereist* and *Woogsworld*. All the blogs selected for the research are English-language blogs, even though the writers do not necessarily speak English as their first language.

The popularity of the blogs is evident in many ways: for example, the bloggers have won numerous blogger awards, and some have been interviewed for magazines and have appeared on TV shows; two bloggers have written books inspired by their blogs. The number of comments written on the blog posts is also an indicator of a wide audience (the 150 posts analysed inspired 3,112 comments altogether). Given the large number of potential readers that these blogs have, the role of the audience in the process of enacting personal identities is vital. Popularity reflects also on the levels of self-disclosure, especially when it comes to its depth. Sharing intimate information about oneself with an online audience that is assumed to be large and is unknown for the most part raises questions related to anonymity, privacy and safety. For example, sharing one's full name or a personal photograph presents identifiable information, which may lead to a violation of privacy. However, within this sample I argue that the bloggers have an awareness of the potential audience, as all the blogs are of the acclaimed, popular type, and the authors know about the popularity of their blogs. Therefore, the decisions made in terms of anonymity, impression management and self-presentation are rather explicit and deliberate. Due to the publishing medium, the fact that the blogs are freely accessible online (and not, for instance, aimed at a specific audience of subscribers) and the popular nature of these specific blogs, it can be argued that these are public blogs. Then again, as they are still categorized as personal blogs, the issue becomes less clear-cut; the self-disclosure in these blogs shows that they are of a personal nature. Below is an example⁶ from one of the blogs used as data for this study, demonstrating a personal, even intimate, style:

- (1) I was a victim. My dad split when I was two, I was abandoned. My step-father was an ass. I was abused. I numbed my shit, I am an addict. I traded my sexy for power, I was a stripper. This is part of who I am – but it's taken me countless hours and truthful tears to learn – it's never going to be all that I am.

(*Pole to sole*)

6. All examples presented here were taken directly from the research material without any editing, unless stated otherwise.

Example (1) is a powerful instance of very private and detailed information of the blogger shared with an unknown audience on a public platform, (the example will be discussed in detail in Section 4.2.3.). This apparent contradiction in terms of publicness and privacy is also of importance considering the identities that are constructed. The motivations behind blogging seem to vary from the diary-type “sharing one’s thoughts and feelings” to the more political sphere of using blogs as an outlet for expressing opinions and making a difference, a “way to shape democracy outside the mass media and conventional party politics” (Nardi et al., 2004, p. 41). It can be argued that blogs are by definition an intersection between the audience and the blogger, a joint discursive creation, where the audience also stimulates the production of the blogger’s online identity. Personal identity construction in blogs should thereby be viewed as an interactional process taking place at the crossing of the private and the public sphere.

4. Analysis

The analysis of the variety of topics was approached using the analytical tool presented by Gee (2011) (see Section 2). As in any categorization involving human discourse, it is understood that not all utterances can be classified neatly into one category over another; consequently, the analysis allows for multiple and even overlapping categorizations. A preliminary look at the material also indicated that the linguistic realization is not always a prototypical I-statement, and instances of preposition dropping (writing *Went to the mall today* instead of *I went to the mall today*) were still included in the analysis. This naturally brings subjectivity into the analysis process, but the choice to use this approach helped to capture the richness of the material and the phenomenon explored.

The basic starting level for the identification of the utterances takes place at the referential level of analysis, but the more detailed analysis also considers the attitudinal and emotional levels of utterances, allowing for a richer perception of the topic. As these levels are often realized simultaneously, it is not always possible to discern the differences; the context of the utterances is therefore used as the main guiding device throughout the analysis. The categorization made use of the context in which the sentences appeared in order to make the classification as accurate and reliable as possible. Those I-statements that could not be attributed to a certain category presented by Gee (2011) were examined independently, and ended up forming their own category (see Section 4.1, *self-descriptive statements*) based on their linguistic characteristics.

4.1 Breadth of disclosure

All 150 blog posts contain 2,352 I-statements altogether. The largest number of these statements fall under category C: state and action statements (a total of 55% of all the statements). The second largest category, with 22% of all I-statements, is cognitive statements (category A). The third most common type of I-statements in this material is affective statements (category B, 11%), and the fourth most common is category D, ability and constraint statements (7%). The analysis revealed no instances of the category of *achievement statements* in the material.⁷ Furthermore, an additional category was developed based on the data. This category entails utterances under the label *self-descriptive I-statements*, which make up 5% of all the I-statements in the material. Figure 1 below gives an overview of the different categories.

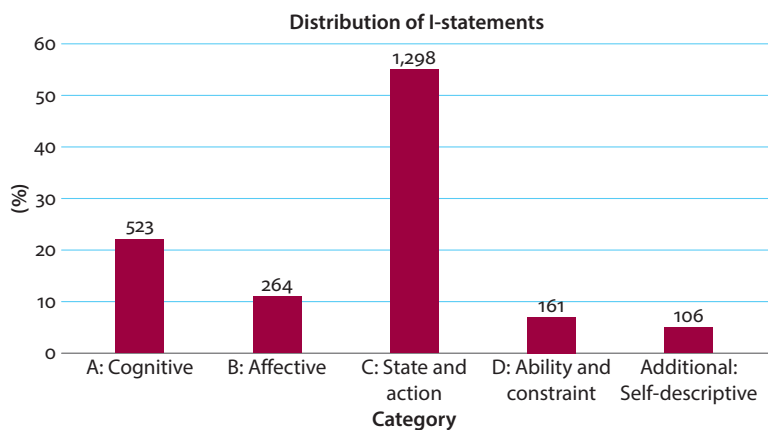


Figure 1. Quantitative distribution of I-statement categories in the blogs

This initial categorization of the I-statements illustrated in Figure 1 shows that in more than half of the instances, the bloggers disclosed information about what they had done, were doing, or were planning to do, that is, used a state and action I-statement. This is in itself an important discovery, as one might have assumed that cognitive statements related to thinking and knowing would have been in the majority, given that blogs are places where bloggers can share their thoughts, similarly as in traditional diaries (Stefanone & Jang, 2007, p. 125).

7. The lack of achievement statements is presumably due to the difference in the type of material, as Gee (2011) used transcripts of interviews as his linguistic material and my study focuses on online blogs. The participants are also different in that Gee (2011) investigated adolescents, whereas the participants in my material are all adults.

Due to the high number of I-statements in the category of state and action statements, I decided to subdivide the utterances into subcategories based on the kinds of actions disclosed by the bloggers to allow a more fine-grained analysis: (1) state I-statements; (2) motion I-statements; (3) communication I-statements; (4) physique I-statements, and lastly (5) I-statements related to living and life-style.⁸ The first italicized utterance in Example (2) is categorized as referring to communication, and the second to the state of the blogger; the utterance *I reassured myself that I must be succumbing to paranoia* in Example (3) also illustrates a state statement:

- (2) *I thanked him profusely as I became suddenly aware about my appearance.* Dressed in an old MBNA tee shirt, fancy striped capri pj pants, no bra, hair sticking straight up, and breath probably worse than the trash, the sanitation worker very kindly dumped my trash can and told me to have a nice day. (Divine secrets of domestic diva; emphasis added)
- (3) As I read the menu, I could not help but notice the reactions of other customers to me, Billy-no-mates, sitting alone. Two young women exiting the toilet seemed to stare at me as if I was a reincarnated version of Ted Bundy. *I reassured myself that I must be succumbing to paranoia*, and that it was all in my imagination. (Menopausal man; emphasis added)

In Example (2) the blogger is referring specifically to her awareness (*I became suddenly aware*), and in Example (3) the blogger uses what could be termed inner talk and discusses the (psychological) state of *paranoia*. Example (3) highlights how state I-statements can be used to describe the mental state of the blogger without being self-descriptive as such. In other words, the blogger is discussing his inner state from what seems like an outsider's perspective, even though he is using the first person singular pronoun *I*. The blogger does not state explicitly that he must be succumbing to paranoia, but instead depicts this notion as a discussion. *I must be succumbing to paranoia* would have been a direct reference to one's mental state, whereas *I reassured myself that I must be succumbing to paranoia* serves as a marker of position and detachment. This style of discourse might be indicative of the qualities of the medium itself, as the lack of privacy on the Internet may encourage a distanced approach in discussing one's mental state(s). The example also captures the levels of analysis employed: if we examine only the propositional level, the interpretation is somewhat different in terms of nuances than when we take into account the context and the emotional level as well. The language used in the paragraph aims to meet the demands of the medium in terms of being entertaining,

8. This categorization is based largely on the types of sentences that emerged from the data, but I also made use of a categorization offered by Vinson and Vigliocco (2008), whose article is loosely based on the first semantic categorization of English verbs by Beth Levin (1993).

in describing a mundane incident using exaggerated words and utterances to make it more interesting or humorous.

Cognitive statements are the second most common type of I-statements (with 523 instances). This finding means that these blogs are, in essence, a way for the bloggers to describe not only their physical actions, but also their more internal experiences. Examples (4) and (5) illustrate the category of cognitive statements relating to thinking and knowing:

- (4) Also, dear customer, when I am reaching across a table with a martini glass filled to the rim with the sweet luscious nectar called vodka, let me put the goddamn glass down before you try to grab it. *I know* your greedy alcoholic ass can hardly wait to put your lips on the glass and suck down some love, but gimme a goddamn minute to set it on the table, will ya?
(Bitchy waiter; emphasis added)
- (5) He insisted that we had spoken yesterday- *I remembered* vaguely.
(Djenne Djenno; emphasis added)

These examples show that cognitive statements are a rather unmarked way of writing a blog, and that the sharing of one's thoughts and knowledge does not have to be an assertion as such. This notion mirrors Myers' (2010b, p. 269) findings on the use of cognitive verbs in a blog corpus. In terms of identity construction, the sentences in the category of cognitive I-statements are an important gateway into what the bloggers reveal of their own thoughts, ideas and perceptions. However, the bloggers also make use of cognitive I-statements to hedge their own standpoint rather than to strengthen it, as in the following example:

- (6) *I'm not sure* whether this is a difference between men and women or it's just one of my husband's more annoying traits: apparently he's keeping score.
(My husband is annoying; emphasis added)

Cognitive statements provide, by default, access to what the bloggers think and know, or at the linguistic level, what they write in connection to thinking and knowing. As Myers points out "the actual arguments made can become secondary to the elaboration of how one's own position fits in the terrain" (2010b, p. 274), indicating how cognitive statements can serve different functions in (blog) discourse.

It seems that the bloggers do describe their emotions in this public online environment, but definitely not as much as their actions or even their thoughts: affective statements are only the third most common type of I-statement in the material (with 264 instances). Even though sentences describing desiring and liking are included in this category, as suggested by Gee (2011), the majority of this kind of statements relate to describing one's feelings. Collectively, the utterances in the category of affective I-statements offer insight into how deeply and broadly the

bloggers discuss their feelings, emotions and desires. A closer examination of this category indicates that although all bloggers use affective I-statements, their use is most often connected to everyday 'trivial' occurrences rather than intimate, deep emotions, as exemplified here:

- (7) Everybody I know has some odd idiosyncrasies. Mine is the fresh and never been handled magazine. *I love them, I love their smell, their feel, their glossiness,* and the fact that I am the first to touch their clean pages is utterly exhilarating.
 ...
 They were shiny, new and most of all clean. *Many years later and I still feel the same way.* (Average girl; emphasis added)

Example (7) demonstrates how affective I-statements can be used in a blog post without making specific reference to particularly deep, personal aspects of oneself, as the object of love is here something mundane (a magazine).

The two smallest categories, namely ability and constraint statements (category D) and the additional category of self-descriptive I-statements, are both, despite their modest size, important for the overall understanding of identity construction. Ability and constraint statements include utterances relating to what bloggers believe they can or must do. Being able to do something and having to do something can be very similar in content, and are therefore discussed as one category rather than separately. The following example clarifies how they can be used in conjunction:

- (8) *I have got to believe that I would have made an amazing artist as I have been blessed with the ability to see the beauty in so many things that most people take for granted.* (Average girl; emphasis added)

This example shows how ability and constraint can be intertwined; in this particular instance, the utterances *that I would have made an amazing artist* and *I have been blessed with the ability to see the beauty* can be seen to refer to Average girl's abilities, but then again *I have got to believe* describes constraint (in the sense that there is no choice but to believe). Together, the utterances seem to imply that the blogger herself is not an active agent as such when it comes to the topic she is discussing, and that she finds it hard to accept this fact; instead, she *must* believe that she *would have made an amazing artist*. In this way, ability and constraint I-statements are used to describe actions and features that are out of the control of the blogger as well as those which are tentative, referring to the potential future and accounting for intended behaviour. These notions are important in communicating identity, since they provide insight into what one can do, and what one wishes one could do. This relates to the concept of *self-efficacy*⁹ (Bandura, 1977), which in social psychology

9. Self-efficacy can be defined as a person's belief in his/her capacity to succeed in something (Moore, 2004, p. 500).

is understood to be a key element in behavioural motivation, and is therefore of importance when discerning self-disclosure as well. Examined on the emotional level, the identity that is being carved out here, making use of ability and constraint I-statements, consists of values in terms of artistic expression, beauty and harmony. All of these attributes can therefore be seen as being part of the identity that the blogger is communicating.

The final category which emerged from my data is what I have termed *self-descriptive I-statements*. These statements did not seem to fit any of the categories presented by Gee (2011) and are therefore examined as their own class. In these statements the blogger reveals personal information about their personality and character, as in the example below:

- (9) Don't get me wrong, *I'm not an overprotective dad* who strives to control my kids' lives or to deny they are now grown-ups.

(Menopausal Man; emphasis added)

In Example (9) the blogger is describing himself, or his identity as a father, through explaining what kind of a father he is not. This statement is, in my understanding, an intentional way of constructing an identity, in that it can be used to create the particular image the blogger wishes to convey. In Example (9), the blogger previously stated something which might be understood as the behaviour of an 'over-protective dad' – however, he does not see himself this way, nor does he want his readers to mistake him for one. The self-descriptive I-statement serves to explain previous (discourse) behaviour. This post, in its entirety, inspired four comments; the comments themselves supported the identity described. In the following example the commenter is both endorsing and applauding the content of the post and the disclosure it entails:

- (10) Awwwww...I love this post! I can totally relate – three of my four have flown from the nest and only one child left to go (Menopausal Man; Comment 3)

Overall, the findings from the categorization of self-disclosure through I-statements in this material indicate that a great variety of topics is disclosed in these blogs, as instances of cognitive, affective, state and action, ability and constraint and self-descriptive statements were found within the material. The findings additionally demonstrate that these types of sentences are used in ways typical to the qualities of this medium of language use. It also seems that self-disclosure is a gateway to examining identity. The last point will be explored in detail in the following section.

4.2 Constructing specific identities through self-disclosure

In order to relate the findings from the previous section to the framework of discursive identity construction, this section presents a fine-grained analysis of the specific kinds of identities that seem to be constructed through the use of self-disclosure. The quantitative analysis showed that I-statements are common and diverse in the material, thus making a qualitative analysis both necessary and potentially fruitful. Analytic delicacy is pursued in this part of the study by giving more room to the linguistic examples from the data and providing more linguistic context on the analysis. Consequently this part of the analysis focuses on three blogs from the material that were chosen for detailed examination. The approach here is of a qualitative nature, keeping in mind the analytical framework offered by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 2008).

4.2.1 *Average Girl and a blogger identity*

Average Girl. This particular blog was selected for careful analysis as it has many qualities that make it unique in the material. The analysis of I-statements in this blog reveals that it has the highest number of statements in the categories of affective statements and self-descriptive statements. Affective statements, as discussed in Section 4.1, offer a viewpoint on *how* feelings, emotions and desires are discussed. Self-descriptive statements, on the other hand, indicate how the blogger wishes to be seen by the audience.

Throughout the blog, the blogger uses many instances of affective language to describe her life and experiences. Furthermore, the blogger explicitly describes her emotions on several occasions in the fifteen blog posts analysed. The blogger herself also discusses the frank way that she has of sharing her emotions and other personal information in her blog. In Example (11), she discusses the role that blogging serves and has served in her life, and explicitly states that sharing her soul is in fact something she has done in the blog:

- (11) *It was funny because just as I was contemplating if my time was up here as well, I read a comment from Chris at Tilting at Windmills. He wrote on Bouncin Barb's blog as she bid her final adieu, the following words verbatim: "A lot of people blog to releave life stress- and when the stress eases, it's a time taker they no longer need. Go forth, enjoy life."*

I stared at his words for such a long time as they resonated deeply within me. I had started my blog, as you well know, because I was in an unhappy place in my life and I was deep into soul searching, grasping at loose ends and trying with all my heart to find joy.

...

As a blogger, I had lost all sense of decorum and had absolutely no problem whatsoever sharing with the world my life of flatulence, wedgie wars, saggy boobs, hair growth and dimply asses.

...

So where does that leave my blog and I? Well I am not ready to throw in the proverbial towel so to speak, but I am ready to start a new chapter in my writing.

...

So I am, in a sense, saying goodbye to the old Average Girl and the old look of the blog. She's been there and done her time and now needs to be retired. Because, in all honesty, this Average Girl has long since changed. She no longer needs to be up at the top of the page dressed in hot pink looking a bit bored and uninterested.

...

She feels light and happy and wishes to reflect that in all aspects of her life, including this blog page. What does that mean for my writing? Well, I have no idea. I suppose it will be an adventure to see what spills out of a less pain filled Average Girl.

...

One thing for sure is that this Average Girl is feeling downright joyful. One could even say, that his Average Girl is, for lack of a better phrase, fresh as a daisy (hence the new look!) (Average Girl; emphasis added)

This example illustrates the function that I-statements and self-disclosure serve in the construction of identity, but it also demonstrates the interaction inherent in this medium, indicating relational work. Not only is the interaction taking place between the blogger and her audience, but also between other blogs and their audiences. In the above example, two statements refer to the audience: first, the utterance *I had started my blog, as you well know, because I was in an unhappy place in my life* indicates that the blogger assumes the audience knows who she is and has followed her journey from the very beginning. Then again, the utterance *I had lost all sense of decorum and had absolutely no problem whatsoever sharing with the world my life* seems to indicate an awareness of a vast, and therefore perhaps also unknown, audience. Example (11) also shows how constructing a blogger identity can be done explicitly and deliberately. The blogger is in fact referring to her old blog (identity) as a separate person (*Average Girl has long since changed. She no longer needs to be...*), making a distinction between 'I' and 'Average Girl', which is intriguing from the point of view of self-reference. The I-statements refer to the 'new' blogger, whereas 'Average Girl' is adopted to refer to the 'old' blogger. Then again, the blogger also draws clear links between the old, the new and the offline: *She feels light and happy and wishes to reflect that in all aspects of her life, including this blog page. What does that mean for my writing? Well, I have no idea. I suppose it will be an adventure to see what spills out of a less pain filled Average Girl.* The first person reference is reserved for what can be understood as the new blogger and/or

the offline persona, yet the references made to the third person ‘she’ can also be interpreted as referring to the ‘new’ blogger. The identity that is constructed is closely connected to change – which is portrayed through this choice of words used to refer to herself, as well as the choice of verb tenses. The interaction between the private and the public spheres of identity are also considered explicitly (*As a blogger, I had lost all sense of decorum and had absolutely no problem whatsoever sharing with the world my life of flatulence, wedgie wars, saggy boobs, hair growth and dimply asses*), indicating that the blogger identity was perhaps no longer in control of the offline persona, that the blogger had to some extent lost perspective on what is private and what is public and where her blog lies on the spectrum. Thereby what the blogger is here describing is not one identity as such, but rather, the interaction of different identities within the public medium.

Altogether, the self-disclosure in this passage reflects deliberate and even careful blogger identity creation accomplished via metapragmatic and self-descriptive tools. The example illustrates not only how I-statements can be used to access the identity constructed, but also how in some cases, even from the writer’s perspective, it might be unclear what the offline identity is and what is online, and what happens when one or both of these change. Below are three comments on the blog posting. These comments demonstrate how the audience reacted to the post, and how they understood the complexities of the blogger identity described:

- (12) I’m totally loving the new fresh look Tracy! Also the new flower photos.... VERY COOL!!! You might find that writing and blogging becomes a bigger part of you in Autumn/Winter, as your indoors more, and photography all year round, but becoming bigger in Spring/Summer. Go with the flow, and don’t put pressure on yourself. When it feels good do it! I’m delighted you found your groove again! ☺)
(Average Girl, comment 3)
- (13) As I let go of the breath I was holding I am smiling, because selfishly Int want to lose you from here in Blog land. Love the new look of the blog. So fresh and beautiful. You have never been “average”, you have always been awesome and inspiring.
(Average Girl, comment 4)
- (14) *WHEW* For a moment there, I thought you were going to leave me. I mean, um, blogging. Yeah, blogging.; o)
I’m LOVING the new look of your blog. As our lives change, so do our tastes. And all that is reflected in our blogs. I’ve noticed the blog-leaving trend, too, and it’s sad. Perhaps its just a phase in people’s lives.
(Average Girl, comment 10)

These three comments show how the identity constructed in the initial post is acknowledged, elaborated on and accepted by the audience. The comment in Example (12) supports the changes made in the blog and comments on the seasonal changes that might account for the differences in writing described by the

blogger. The commenter also takes the perspective that blogging is in fact a part of the (offline) identity of the writer. Example (13) supports the change described in the initial post, targeting specifically the self-reference made (*you have never been 'average'*), and Example (14) demonstrates how the online and offline lives are seen as intertwined, not just by the blogger but by this member of the audience, too. All of these comments are directed at the blogger and comment on the blog (especially the visual style) and the changes made; together they support the construction of the blogger's identity. This glimpse into the reactions of the audience, analysed in connection with the initial post, indicates that in this case, identity construction is a joint project between the audience and the blogger, manifested in the discourse. It shows how the public medium allows self-examination, identity variation and development to occur, yet synchronously takes part in all of these processes.

4.2.2 *Bitchy Waiter and situational identities*

Bitchy Waiter. The Bitchy Waiter is one of the most popular blogs included in the material of this study. Two very different kinds of examples from this blog illustrate not only that different kinds of identities can be taken on by the same blogger in different contexts, but also how the same writer can use different mechanisms of self-disclosure to exhibit these identities. The first example post illustrates the use of ability and constraint statements:

- (15) I have noticed lately that more and more people feel perfectly fine bringing in their own cups of coffee to my restaurant. Do they not get how incredibly rude that is? We sell coffee. *I have to French press it every time it's ordered* so it's not like it's some skanky ass sludge that we call coffee and then overcharge for it. We charge two bucks for good premium coffee that we make to order. But every day some whore comes in straight from the Starbucks across the street with her grande mocha frappe fuckacino and sits in my station.

...

What I hate most about it is if a bitch brings in her own coffee, when am I supposed to spit in it? A couple of weeks ago, when I brought the food to the table one lady was not there anymore. Her friends said she would be right back but she had to run an errand. Bitch showed up two minutes later with three cups of coffee from Dunkin' Donuts. What? For real?? *I should have sold those three cups of coffee*, increasing the check by \$6.00 and therefore increasing my tip by a dollar. THEY ARE STEALING MY TIPS. *Maybe next time I should just ring their food in to go and tell them I assumed they wanted to go eat it somewhere else.*

(Bitchy waiter; emphasis added)

This post, and in fact the whole blog for the most part, is written with a humorous tone, making a careful analysis of the utterances essential. In this example, the blogger is using ability and constraint I-statements to convey frustration about

the situation he describes. When analysed on the referential level, the utterances all indicate the ability to do something, yet demonstrate a lack of control over the choice to do so. In the example, the ability and constraint statements are used in two different ways: the first (*I have to French press it every time it's ordered*) refers to constraint in that there is no choice but to do something. The second (with the utterances *when am I supposed to spit in it, I should have sold those three cups of coffee* and *Maybe next time I should just ring their food in to go and tell them I assumed...*) refers to the act of wanting to do something, but not being able to do so. What these sentences have in common in terms of function is the expression of the lack of control over events; in other words, they are concerned with the heteronomous regulation of the blogger's actions. The identity portrayed through these ability and constraint statements is of an impatient waiter, which seems to fit in with the choice of using these I-statements as an outlet for this description. The 'about me' page of the Bitchy Waiter blog supports this interpretation:

- (16) The Bitchy Waiter lives and works in New York City. When he was a little boy, he used to play "waiter" with his brothers taking their orders and serving them lunch. Sadly, his playtime has become a reality and he has been wearing an apron pretty consistently since 1990, working in restaurants in Denver, Houston and New York. In 2008, he started a blog as a way to release the frustrations that come with being in the world of food service. Writing stories on the Internet about annoying customers was better than poking the annoying customers in their eyes with forks. (Bitchy Waiter)

The function behind the discourse elements present in the blog seems to be to 'release frustrations' or to give the impression that this is what the blogger wishes to do. However, taking a more critical stance towards the interpretation, I would argue that such kinds of stories as depicted in Example (15) are more or less deliberate acts designed to create an identity consistent with the description mentioned in the 'about me' page. Based on what he is disclosing within this post, the I-statements in Example (15) show that the blogger is distancing himself from the authorship by using the personal pronoun 'we' instead of 'I' and a humorous tone instead of a more serious one.

On the other hand, Bitchy Waiter contains instances of specific, personal and even political stances; these are exemplified here:

- (17) *Oh, boy, look what I found: hatred against gay people in a restaurant.* A restaurant/live bait shop called Big Earl's (Of course it's called Big Earl's...) in a sad little town called Pittsburg, Texas is making news because a waitress told two gay men, Collin Dewberry (best name ever) and his partner Kelly Williams that they were not welcome to come back because they "don't serve gays."

...

Collin and Kelly have lived in East Texas their whole lives and they say they have never had that kind of hatred directed at them. *Having grown up in Texas and also spending my fair share of time in East Texas, I have to say that I am amazed this is the first time it's ever happened to them. When I was teenager, my nickname in high school was pretty much "Fag."* It was a good day if it went by without someone yelling that to me in the hallway or in the cafeteria. *I regularly saw my name written on the bathroom walls calling me "fag."*

...

I have held on to this post for a few days because Big Earl took down his Facebook page after it was bombarded with comments from smart people who know that love makes the world go 'round. I wanted to wait until their page was back up again so we could all contribute our thoughts to the story, but in the meantime, [here is their website](#). Go check it out. You can also see their Yelp page which is full of great reviews. If and when their Facebook page is up again, you can count on me to let you know. (Bitchy Waiter; emphasis added)

Example (17) is situated in the intersection of the private/public sphere. Here, the blog is used specifically to recount societal problems, and this is done with the help of self-disclosure. It also exemplifies how blogs can be used as influential means of persuasion. Here, the blogger is constructing a personal identity through the attitude that he shows and the self-descriptive statements that he uses. Attitude can, for example, be found embedded in the statement *I have held on to this post for a few days*, and self-description and self-revelations are encapsulated in the section where he describes his childhood (e.g. *When I was teenager, my nickname in high school was pretty much "Fag."*). I would argue that the identity being constructed here, interpreted within the sociocultural context, portrays a very different kind of blogger than the 'Bitchy Waiter' identity portrayed on the 'about me' page (Example (16)). Here appears a more serious and determined persona, a blogger who knows the power that he has in his hands through this blog discourse. All of the 16 comments on this post discussed either Big Earl or homophobia; two of those comments entailed instructions on how to write spam messages to the company's e-mail address. All also supported Bitchy Waiter's standpoint on the topic. What this indicates is not only power in terms of opinion leadership, but also the like-mindedness of the audience and the blogger. This is an important perspective through which to understand the context in which online identity construction takes place.

4.2.3 *Pole to Sole and a survivor identity*

Pole to Sole. One of the most distinctive blogs in this material, in terms of the content shared through self-disclosure, is the blog titled *Pole to Sole*. This blog is what I would term a 'survivor' blog, where the blogger reveals a rather brutal life story piece by piece throughout the posts. In terms of self-disclosure, the blogger makes

extensive use of self-descriptive I-statements. Example (18) was already introduced in Section 3, it is reproduced here:

- (18) I was a victim. My dad split when I was two, I was abandoned. My step-father was an ass. I was abused. I numbed my shit, I am an addict. I traded my sexy for power, I was a stripper. This is part of who I am – but it's taken me countless hours and truthful tears to learn – it's never going to be all that I am.

(Pole to sole)

Here the blogger discloses very personal information about herself, mainly by using self-descriptive I-statements. Even though she is exposing delicate aspects of herself, the general style of this paragraph seems to be rather outspoken. This might mean that this kind of identity building is in fact deliberate and carefully manufactured. However, the paragraph depicted in Example (18) is not a typical instance from the material, but a rather powerful one. The larger context makes the specific function apparent. As outlined in the blogger's 'about me' page, one of the purposes of the blog is to share the "journey to self-worth to inspire others to do the same" (<http://poletosole.me/>). In this way, the paragraph can be seen as an essential part of this journey. Disclosing these kinds of experiences can help in terms of survival. In general it is understood that verbalizing upsetting experiences allows them to surface and in this way one may begin to attend to them, organize them and even find meaning in them (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2009, p. 630).¹⁰ In this blog the purpose of sharing these stories is actually connected not only to the blogger's survival, but also to helping others survive and heal after traumatic life events. Considered from this perspective, this blog contains elements of societal significance and discursive power, manifested via self-disclosure.

5. Conclusions

The study outlined above illustrates one way through which self-disclosure can be realized in blogs and provides a representation of a nuanced conceptualization of identity within the material investigated. The analysis of the 150 blog posts reveals that the discourse strategies used in blogs are indicative of the qualities of the medium itself. These strategies illustrate the shifting and changing nature of identities within the linguistic and social context. The method employed in the study captures the richness of the different types of statements. It shows that the majority of I-statements in the material are state and action I-statements (55% of

10. The authors also emphasize that the benefits of writing about emotional upheaval are not automatic and do not benefit everyone (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2009, p. 630).

the 2,352 statements analysed), the second largest category cognitive statements (22%), followed by affective statements (11%). These data represent the way in which the material is constructed and give insight into the use of I-statements; what is being shared in these blogs is for the most part related to actions, more so than thoughts or feelings. Another important finding from this study is the existence of self-descriptive I-statements, which emerged from the data as one means through which identity can be constructed. These statements provide fruitful access into the careful and deliberate creation of a blogger identity.

The findings displayed how the publicity and even fame of these blogs manifests itself within the material. The way in which the bloggers had approached the dichotomy inherent in blogging between the private and the public sphere was showcased in the material. This was seen specifically in the blog *Average Girl*, where in the process of identity construction the blogger admitted awareness of the constructed nature of her identity and acknowledged the role that blogging played in her private identity. Blurring the boundaries between these two spheres of the private and the public is demonstrated in self-disclosure, by bloggers resorting to ways of distancing themselves from authorship, even when disclosing information on oneself, as exemplified in *Bitchy Waiter*.

The role of the audience is of importance in terms of identity construction. The analysis showed how it is not only the interaction taking place between the blogger and their audience, but also between other blogs and their audiences that is significant. Support, encouragement and like-mindedness seem to characterize the role of the audience in terms of the identities portrayed in these blogs. Additionally, in two of the blogs analysed (*Bitchy Waiter* and *Pole to Sole*), these elements of audience awareness and publicity were exploited, as there were clear instances of influencing the audience. Some of the posts were used to make a difference, as a means of discursive power. In connection to these findings, future research could disentangle the mechanisms of audience activity and influence in blog discourse, and explore the ways in which self-disclosure interconnects with other means of online identity construction.

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The development of identity in *Batman* comics

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This chapter analyses dialogues in the American comic book series *Batman* for constructions of identity in fictional interaction. Far from remaining static, the characters develop as the plot progresses and their language reflects these changes. Although there are linguistic expectations for the members of Batman's team, these are not fulfilled by every character all the time. The analyses show how characters do or do not meet them. The identities are continuously shifting in reaction to the ongoing talk and one part of a participant's self is usually foregrounded in any given exchange. Even though some comic book issues in my data were published over a decade apart by different staff, each character is linguistically consistent enough to be recognizable, but simultaneously refashioned enough to befit the new identity.

Keywords: Batman, comics, conversation analysis, fiction, identity, interaction, membership categorization, relationality, superhero

1. Introduction

Comic book store shelves are teeming with heroes and heroines of nearly every kind. Some have supernatural powers, others are the kids next door and then there are those with extraterrestrial origins and forms. This is important to the success of the industry because many readers make purchases based on character likeability. Genre, movie merchandising and favourite authors and artists are also common motivations for first-time purchases, but the plot, carried to a great degree by the fictional cast, often determines whether the comic reader-viewers stick with the series and buy related (spin-off) titles. The general affinity to and identification with the story leads intensifies the reading experience (or viewing or listening experience or combinations thereof, depending on medium). Readers who like the story and identify with the characters have a more intense reading experience and are thus more likely to stay immersed in the fictional world (Hunt & Lenz, 2003, p. 9; Mandala, 2010, p. 119; Schlobin, 1982, p. ix; Stockwell, 2000, p. 213).

Because they contribute immensely to the consumer's experience and enjoyment, characters and the details of their identities deserve scholarly analysis. Literary characters often seem more definite than real-life people (living or deceased) because readers have the feeling that they know them in and out (Forster, 1985, p. 57). The *out* applies to comic book characters in particular because they are drawn and their stories are often published regularly over decades. Their identities are complex structures which are continuously shaped by artists, writers, editors and readers who evaluate not only explicit comic content, but also the many scenes in the story which are neither directly shown nor described.

The character in focus in this chapter is Stephanie Brown, who is part of publisher DC and artist-creator Bob Kane's *Batman* universe. By tracking linguistic markers of identity, I analyse how she performs her identity verbally and how that performance changes as her identity develops. Stephanie's self is shaped and re-shaped in interactions with other characters and this, in turn, affects the identities of her interlocutors. The interactions between Stephanie Brown and Bruce Wayne are particularly revealing, as they adjust their language when assuming different situational roles. They disagree over some identities and show legitimization or rejection of the identities in play in specific exchanges.

This paper aligns with the idea that identity is created and shaped in interaction instead of being a fixed concept prior to the conversation (or any kind of interpersonal interaction) (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005a, p. 588; 2005b, p. 376). Language is thus an essential tool for establishing identities (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005b, p. 382); however, it has not received its due attention in superhero scholarship. For example, Coogan (2009) and Ditschke and Anhut (2009) explore what constitutes a superhero, yet a style of speech does not figure into their depiction. The two concepts are linked very few times in the anthology *Superheroes and Identities* (Gibson, Huxley, & Ormrod, 2015), and never in a way that credits language as being a fundamental device that is in constant use. To my knowledge, talk in interaction has never been analysed in comics. It takes more than a codename or costume to make a superhero(ine) because this identity is only solidified once it is recognizable in the language, as my analyses show.¹ Identity and identity change are clearly marked by modifying language in the talk balloons to reflect the current state. Modifications are not limited to vocabulary, but also include the composition of verbal contributions such as length and grammatical form (e.g. interrogatives) and their appropriateness for

1. Writers can be attuned to language and identity connections as evidenced in an interview with Grant Morrison, who most notably shaped the character Damian Wayne (incidentally the current Robin). The Scot gives him an aristocratic air in his dialogue and laments that it is regularly dropped by other writers for "bratty" U.S. West Coast talk (Brooker, 2015, p. 47).

different identities, as well as the types of pragmatic turns (e.g. illocutionary acts such as disputing or commanding) acceptable for each rank.

Throughout this paper, I offer a simplified paraphrase of the transcribed comic book text to allow for sentences like *Batgirl told her she had everything under control*. A retelling which marks the cut between the story setting and publication world would be *The author and penciller and inker and letterer had Batgirl tell her she had everything under control*, but this is very tedious and can obscure the research findings. Although any character in the comic is, of course, directed by the team that produces the comic, my descriptions might often evoke the feeling that characters are identical to living and breathing people and speak of their own volition. While this simplified description allows a focus on the level of interaction between the characters, the interaction is best described as pseudo-interaction as it unfolds in the reader's mind from cues in the comics which are accessed by turning the pages.

My research corpus is a collection of American comic books, mostly from the series *Detective Comics*, *Robin* and *Batgirl*. To isolate the language from the art, in keeping with this paper's linguistic focus, the contents of talk balloons were transcribed before analysis. The text of comic book speech balloons possesses many traits of fictional dialogue (Section 3) but also reflects the special constraints of the medium (Section 4). Furthermore, as this particular character – Stephanie Brown – develops more and differently from many other characters, her specific situation as a character is elaborated in Section 5. Section 6 reviews frameworks for data analysis before applying them to my examples in Section 7. This is where I trace the linguistic development of this one character as she takes on three different superheroine identities over the course of 19 years of publication.

2. Data and methodology

The comics I use as data were published between 1992 and 2011 and feature the three Stephanie Brown super identities Spoiler, Robin and Batgirl. Each series released one issue monthly, but sometimes Stephanie teamed up with associates and appeared in more than one comic in a month. To facilitate comparisons, I selected the scenes which show Bruce Wayne's first interactions with each of her three incarnations (Bruce being the civilian who operates as his alter ego Batman). Spoiler's introduction stretches over two instalments, whereas Robin and Batgirl are each introduced in a single issue.

In general, time passes slowly in comics and one month's issue is often a direct continuation of the publication before it. Stephanie starts as a high school student and is a college freshman of about 19 when *Batgirl* ends. Her first masked crime fighter phase as Spoiler lasts longest: most of the 17 years between 1992 and

2009. She is most prominently pictured in the 183 issues of *Robin* and occasionally crosses over into other titles. The only interruption occurred between July 2004 and September 2004. In this period, six comics were published which showcased Stephanie as the first canonical female Robin (the name always given to Batman's mentee sidekick). This chapter in her history ends with her being fired by her mentor. It lasts 71 days in story time, although she is inactive during the last three weeks in order to physically recover from battle. Stephanie resumes her vigilante lifestyle immediately after being fired and appears as Spoiler the same month she was let go as Robin, albeit in another series (*Batgirl* 54, September 2004). She dies in December 2004 and is re-introduced as Spoiler in January 2008. Stephanie maintains this guise until the 2009 series, when she assumes the mantle of *Batgirl* and keeps it for the next two years. She takes the lead role in the 24 issues of *Batgirl* and makes guest appearances elsewhere. In 2011, the publisher DC discontinued *Batgirl* and Stephanie appeared as *Batgirl* only a few times in retrospective comics published after the discontinuation.² Except for the Robin phase, where Stephanie keeps a detailed journal of her adventures, it is not possible to determine how long each identity is active on the plot level.

The base of my research is formed by Bucholtz and Hall's (2005a) five principles for analysing identity in linguistic interaction: emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality and partialness. Their relationality principle, i.e. the assumption that identities are never autonomous and co-constructed with other social participants (ibid., p. 598), is most important to my approach. In *Batman*, superhero(ine) personas cannot be installed by anyone, but must be approved by Batman.

Following Bucholtz and Hall (2005a/b), I regard identity as emerging in talk – talk which can show different kinds of identity simultaneously, e.g. belonging to a general demographic group and a temporary one tied to a given exchange. Identity can be verbalized through many strategies including direct mention, implicatures and indicative vocabulary. Furthermore, identity is created through relations based on similarity, genuineness and authority and their counterparts. Because it is relational and context-dependent, a display of identity is always necessarily partial, never complete. The aforementioned framework is supported in this chapter by insights from conversation analysis (CA) about the relevance of speaker turns and their order (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

In the world of this comic book story, Batman authorizes identities of individuals who aspire to become sidekicks or independent hero(in)es. Stephanie Brown is such an aspiring individual and seeks to signal adherence to his heroic team through language use (cf. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005b, p. 377). As Spoiler and Robin,

2. These issues are not part of my data.

Stephanie tries but fails to adjust her language and attitude to meet the standards set in the narrative by Bruce Wayne as Batman (which in reality, are set by the publishing team to reflect how they believe their hero(ine) should speak). Her non-conformist style at this point is perceived as a weakness and failure and leads Batman to position her as a non-group member (*ibid.*, p. 372). Batman only grants Stephanie the superheroine identity she covets once she operates as Batgirl.

3. Fictional dialogues and worlds

Although comic book language has special features, it shares many features with narrative and scripted language that appears in other genres, such as novels or TV shows. Scripted language for television can be perceived as a “surrogate for speech in real life” (Richardson, 2010, p. 106) because it imitates it, but adjusts and abridges it in order to adapt it to the medium. Since the audience cannot ask for repetitions and immediately replaying scenes for clarification is undesirable, if not impossible (depending on how the movie or show is viewed), the talk needs to be enunciated and unambiguous unless the opposite is desired for the sake of the plot. The screen time is limited and thus most disfluencies common to naturally occurring spontaneous speech (such as false starts, hesitations, overlap, longer pauses, etc.) are omitted (*ibid.*, p. 45). Screenwriters generally follow the maxim that “no dialogue should be included that does not advance the plot. Characterization through dialogue is allowed only to the extent that it respects this principle” (*ibid.*, p. 82).

Considerations about the effective implementation of talk also apply to comics. Where movie directors gauge time, comic book editors have to manage limited page space. To ensure comprehension, any language disfluencies or nonstandard spellings (perhaps to imitate an accent, drug-induced ramblings, talk by a computer etc.) must be introduced cautiously. The 24 issues of *Batgirl* (the third DC *Batgirl* series) replicate many features of spoken language, often through playful use of font and talk balloons (such as balloons with multiple mouthpieces (also called *tails*) leading to different characters to represent identical, simultaneous speech). This creative use of font is rare in novels, short stories or related forms of literature. One can imagine using different sizes of font for whispers or shouts and then omitting or adjusting certain verbs to report direct speech, but this is uncommon, even in children’s literature,³ and these graphic representations of orality remain practically unique to comics.

3. Jeff Kinney’s *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series is a mix of comic book and diary. It includes many comic book panels and uses conventions such as capital letters for emphasis even in the text that is outside of talk balloons. Similar conventions are also used in online written communication.

The dialogue of any fictional text is constructed with a goal in mind, such as plot or character development. The talk needs to be appropriate for the fabricated world and the fabricated situations and speakers within it. It is therefore not necessary that it be an exact replica of naturally occurring talk. More than passively mirroring it, the language of fiction actively “constructs a particular version of language and the world” (Stamou, 2014, p. 123; also Stamou, 2017, p. 1). Because the world of *Batman* imagines extreme depictions of how crime is committed and fought, some aspects of this constructed world will be relatable to audiences and others will not. The language in comics is best situated somewhere in the middle of a continuum which has fictional language use as a mirror of reality at one end and language use as a meaning-making process at the other end (Stamou, 2014, p. 122). Readers piece together the information transmitted via words, images and sequence to understand the rules of the fictional world and how characters operate in it.

This world of the text is called the *storyworld* by Kukkonen (2010, p. 40). It is a mental model based on cues from the pages which locates the events, characters and settings which are described (ibid., p. 47; Kukkonen, 2013, p. 19). Readers “use the mental model to draw inferences about what has happened in the story and to project what is going to happen” (Kukkonen, 2010, p. 47). Their attention is turned to this storyworld and any inferences made pertain exclusively to it (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 19). Each model has its own possibilities and probabilities (ibid., p. 24). The comic in hand (or other work of fiction) is part of the consumers’ and creators’ real world, but the characters and happenings detailed therein exist only within the storyworld.

4. Reading for character and identity construction in comics

Most audience members have, to some degree, been conditioned to evaluate fictional dialogue and they hear or read the dialogue as identity construction (Richardson, 2010, p. 127). In comics in particular, characters are never truly a blank slate, as their appearance (hair or costume colours, for example) already suggests early judgments about their personalities and/or affiliations as hero(ine) or villain. Eder, Jannidis and Schneider deduce that as readers/viewers, we not only “make use of our knowledge about persons in understanding characters, but also our knowledge about character types, genres and the protagonists they typically feature, and the rules of specific fictional worlds” (2010, p. 13; also Culpeper, 2001, p. 105).

A superhero(ine) from the publisher DC comes with expectations and audiences anticipate a certain level of physical fitness, intelligence, moral orientation and probably even a sorrowful character biography. Many of them are known to people who have never read a comic because of their successful story retellings

in movies, television shows, video games, theatre performances, music and pop culture in general. With such wide-spread impact across media, countries and demographics, they might even be said to lead lives of their own that cannot be traced back to any one incarnation.

When reader-viewers piece together the identity of a fictional character, they do not arrive at a complete picture based on literature information alone. If details are unaddressed in the literature, then that is a gap that cannot be filled in a definitive way that makes it a canonical part of the character's being (Eder et al., 2010, pp. 11–12). The readership can fill in these blanks based on past reading and personal experiences and it is at this point at the latest that different readings and interpretations ensue. These tend to affect the internal properties related to the personality of a character, rather than external properties which comprise historical properties about the writer-artist's creation of the character (Reicher, 2010, p. 125). Reicher points out that the first set of properties may be the result of author or artist intention or "are determined by cognitive processes within particular readers or viewers" (ibid., p. 121).

The aforementioned gap-filling process is particularly important in comics, where it is called *closure* (McCloud, 1994, p. 63). It happens whenever a reader-viewer mentally completes a part of the story which is not directly presented. For example, one comic *panel* (i.e. picture) may show a character twice with so-called motion lines in between the two representations. The audience, by way of closure, is encouraged to deduce that the character ran from one place to the next. The same holds true for a journey of which several moments are shown in adjacent panels. The reader-viewer will suppose that a certain amount of time has passed and a certain distance was travelled and that much in the story took place in between the pictures in the *gutters*, i.e. the (usually white) spaces in between panels. Such artistic conventions (motion lines, or star-shaped art around a head to show surprise or around a hand to represent the force of a punch) belong to the repertoire of comic books. They are used in particular to visualize abstract phenomena such as time or emotions and the comic staff relies on the readers' ability to understand the conventions very quickly. The staff tries to appeal to as large an audience as possible and thus the stories are so constructed that most consumers will agree on most interpretations of the contents (Forceville, El Refaie & Meesters, 2014, p. 486). Unconventional images, though, like rare talk balloon shapes, allow for a wider range of interpretations. Details mentally added by individual readers like the speed of the movement, voice qualities, or what was done in what way on the journey will impact how they perceive the character performing the acts. The closure is performed via the cognitive processes Reicher (2010, p. 121) referred to. Here, the creators have much less control over the interpretation of the art and how this in turn effects the perception of the character. They strive for consistency

so that each character is viewed as the same in different issues and series, but that cannot be guaranteed. The readers' thoughts show immersion in the text by adding plot details which are not shown. Sometimes making a connection from one scene to the next will require effort and it is this constant interpretation of the material (composed of pictures, words and blank spaces) that differentiates comics from other media (McCloud, 1994, p. 92). Some (pages of) comics do not employ white gutters, but the sequential element remains. That is an argument for instead viewing words, images and sequence as the elements used to tell stories, as proposed by Kukkonen (2010, p. 43).

Considering the often decade-long span of some comic series and the many artist and writer changes throughout, one must question the impact that this has on the characters. Each comic team aims for consistency and does not recreate characters for each story or issue.⁴ Readers who are not familiar with all appearances (like guest appearances in another series) do not experience drastically different characters.

Reicher (2010, p. 120) analysed the character identities in three types of narrative setups:

- i. identity within a work or story;⁵
- ii. a. identity across different works or stories; and
 - b. identity across different episodes of a series (or across an individual work and a sequel of it).

Characters in serialized comics fit into the second and third categories. A character like Batgirl may well appear in other works such as *Birds of Prey* and, because she still has her own series, can appear in several issues altogether each month. Each issue of an ongoing series constitutes an episode of a larger plot, thereby making the last category (iib) applicable.

Reicher deduces that a character remains the same even if the team creating it changes and that internal properties are decisive. The identity changes continuously

4. Characters can be drastically changed when the publisher redoes an entire comic series and deems earlier tellings of the story obsolete. Their histories are often erased and may not unfold the same way in the new story version.

5. A *work* is defined as having three parts: the element of the represented world which includes plot, characters, places etc. – (the *story*); the mode of presentation such as cinematographic or literary format and the individual components and the use thereof; and the element of the intended experience which includes the experiences the author(s) intend for the audience to have after exposure (be they emotional, cognitive or sensual). The same story might appear as different works, such as a play as a script or a theatrical performance or taping thereof (Reicher, 2010, p. 115).

in the story (at the very least, aging with the passing of time), but slowly enough that it is still the same character and recognizable as such (Reicher 2010, pp. 131–132). According to Reicher, each character can be analysed from two separate, but related viewpoints. One can analyse and describe the maximal character which is the version that “has all those properties as internal properties that [a character] exemplifies according to a given story” (ibid., p. 129). It is the more complete variant and is the character which the many individual appearances amount to. The maximal character is a combination of many sub-maximal characters. These portray a particular side of the character because each sub-maximal character has a subset of its internal properties in the story (ibid.). All sub-maximal canonical appearances make up the maximal character and reader-viewers see it from different angles. For example, Stephanie Brown is a brave soldier, a reckless fighter, a devoted daughter, a reliable friend, etc. These traits total her maximal character, but all traits are not shown in one issue. Instead, one or a few of them are foregrounded in an issue and that is then a sub-maximal Stephanie. By reading more work featuring her and discovering how the character acts and reacts in different situations, a reader meets more sub-maximal versions and arrives at a more complete picture.

The concepts of maximal and sub-maximal character correspond to Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005a, p. 605) partialness principle, which to them is fundamental in the study of identity. Their claim is that identity constructions are always partial because of the influences of other parties involved, the context and ideologies at play (ibid.). This fractured nature of identity becomes evident in the different degrees of conscious intentionality and subconscious habit which shape the display of identity (ibid., p. 606). In real life, the self that one wishes to present and the identity that is perceived by others may be very different. This influence on identity from several parties is also apparent in a comic storyworld. Circumstances can be mirrored by the fictional cast in their pseudo-interactions as they negotiate and renegotiate their roles. The dialogues are of course scripted, but the writers are disregarded by the engrossed reader.

5. Characters in the DC *Batman* universe

The *Batman* stories operate on several conventions that are uncommon to other superhero series. These will be outlined as they are important to understanding the identity dynamics. One such convention is a unique rule which assures Batman immense power and influence over all characters in the *Batman* universe even if he is not present. Having conducted much research on language and identity, Meyerhoff and Niedzielski (1994)

do not believe that the ability to negotiate speaker identity in a communicative event is shared equally by all participants. In most communicative situations, [...] it is quite obvious that subordinate speakers are not as free as superordinates to negotiate their own or the other interactant's identity. Generally speaking, every communicative event incorporates some power imbalance (e.g. knowledge, status), and the person with greatest power has the greatest ability to define subordinates' roles and identities. (Meyerhoff & Niedzielski, 1994, pp. 317–318)

Batman is the character with the greatest power and this circumstance impacts Stephanie Brown's development substantially. In my data, Batman is a "[structure] of institutionalized power and identity" which Bucholtz and Hall (2005a, p. 603) identify as an integral part of their relationality principle. Batman represents such a structure in the storyworld and has the power to affirm or dismiss identities within it. He alone has the power to bestow upon Stephanie one of the coveted titles and declare her venture a success. She is aware that she needs Batman's sanction to patrol Gotham City and always (though more or less explicitly) tries to earn his approval. Until she receives the sanction, she has three superheroine identities as Spoiler (the rejected vigilante), Robin (a failed sidekick) and finally Batgirl (an accepted heroine). These different identities are reflected in pseudo-conversations with Batman.

Their relationality principle in general describes the assumption that identities are never autonomous, but are co-constructed with other social participants (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005a, p. 598). It is of particular importance in the *Batman* universe because a superhero identity in Gotham can only be co-created with the authority Batman. He chooses the members of the team with whom he shares his territory and any rookies have to adhere to his rules – which, significantly, include conversational etiquette. As Benwell and Stokoe (2006, p. 126) point out, discourse identities come with category-bound obligations. The *Batman* universe is different from many superhero series in that the super-identities are roles and categories which can be assumed by anyone deemed fit by Batman. Since the individuals have no supernatural powers,⁶ theoretically anyone could become Batman if he himself loses or relinquishes the role. This explains how a superhero(ine) title like *Robin* can apply to different characters at different points in time. For example, there were five canonical Robin characters in 2011. The same character can also be granted different masked identities (as in the case of Stephanie Brown). The roles along with their attached duties must be executed correctly, though, or the characters are met with opposition by others and pressured to give them up.

6. More precisely, the members of Batman's inner circle do not have supernatural powers. Villains regularly have such exceptional skills because, e.g., they were victims of scientific experiments.

6. Conversation analysis and the comics data

Batman's team has a common language that is essential to its work. Any rules, responsibilities, goals, and strategies are communicated clearly to ensure order within the group so that missions (usually revolving around protecting Gotham City) are successful. Much is revealed about this language by applying CA. By looking at the order and nature of speaker contributions, CA shows the step-by-step creation and detail of a text. It provides insight into indexical signs of identity development with its turn-by-turn scrutiny of talk in interaction. I use it to show that identity is dynamically moulded in specific turns of the dialogue. CA is traditionally applied to naturally occurring talk. Since the comic book text is heavily scripted rather than spontaneous, my work is CA-informed instead of being a puristic example of such research. However, I want to encourage the application of frameworks to uncustomary data. Stamou (2017) does the same when analysing television sitcoms with the methodologies of critical discourse analysis and language ideology. As she states at the end (*ibid.*, p. 8), different approaches, if circumspectly applied, can yield new insights and highlight the complexity of the data. In this paper, CA tactics uncover how fantastic superheroes and superheroines are fleshed out in pseudo-interactions.

In some ways, comic book data are easier to analyse than natural conversation because the discussion topics are often stated overtly to illuminate the real-life reader who, rather than the fictional story cast, is the intended audience. The characters have no real-life equivalents and the audience cannot make many inferences based on personal experience. The text therefore incorporates extra cues to guide the reader.

Sacks (1989) developed an additional framework to support CA research, namely membership categorization analysis. It is "concerned with the organisation of common-sense knowledge in terms of the categories members employ in accomplishing their activities through talk" (Francis & Hester, 2004, p. 21). The categories in a society are inference-rich and contain information and ideas about the category members which are shared by that society as a whole (Sacks, 1989, p. 272). The approach is an effective way of broadening CA which has been criticized for largely ignoring social context because it only works with the spoken words. In its most conservative application, CA only factors what is said overtly into the data. Example (2) (Section 7.1) includes a strong membership category orientation which is not mentioned specifically, but can be inferred. In this example, a character sees herself as a member of the superhero category, but her talk reveals her to be so firmly rooted in a more common category that she is not granted the transition into her desired group by Batman and cannot assume any of the identity traits that come with the membership (Sacks, 1989, p. 279).

7. From Spoiler to Robin to Batgirl

A character that undergoes substantial development is Stephanie Brown. She is introduced as a supporting cast member and eventually stars in her own comic. Stephanie starts out as an underdog who never quite succeeds at superheroing and finally turns into an autonomous heroine who is respected by all. This transformation is evidenced linguistically in her interactions with other characters, as can be outlined with Bucholtz and Hall's framework (2005a/b).

7.1 Phase 1: The mutual construction of the Spoiler identity

In their first meeting (and the first panel in which they are shown to interact) Spoiler and Batman (who Spoiler does not know is Bruce Wayne) immediately discuss identity, thereby making it explicitly relevant to the discussion. They ponder the identity of a corpse (Example (1), line 1) and, more importantly, seven lines later Batman asks the newcomer about her self-selected superhero moniker, wondering who he is discussing the crime with.

Example 1. *Detective Comics* 648, August 1992

| | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 1 | Bruce | THE AUTOPSY FAILED TO COME UP WITH AN IDENTITY OF THE BLAST VICTIM. BUT IT WASN'T ARTHUR BROWN. |
| 2 | Steph | I'M BETTING THEY USED THE BODY OF CUTTER STARK. HE WAS THE LEADER OF THE GANG UNTIL MY FATHER KILLED HIM. |
| 3 | | THEY MUST HAVE REALIZED I WAS LISTENING IN SO THEY ONLY LET ME HEAR ENOUGH OF THEIR PLANS TO THINK MY FATHER WAS GOING TO KILL BATMAN. |
| 4 | Tim | SO THEY WILL BE PULLING OFF THE ROBBERY TOMORROW NIGHT. |
| 5 | | SHE SAYS THEY'RE GOING TO WAIT UNTIL ELEVEN O'CLOCK AT THE CLIMAX OF THE TELETHON. |
| 6 | Bruce | THAT'S WHEN THE MOST CASH WILL BE ON HAND. |
| 7 | | AND THE MOST PEOPLE CROWDING THE MALL FOR A DIVERSION. |
| 8 | | WHAT DO YOU CALL YOURSELF? |
| 9 | Steph | WELL... |
| 10 | | ... THE SPOILER. |
| 11 | Bruce | I LIKE THAT. |

Batman behaves as is expected of him by presenting himself as undisputed leader and boss. Befitting his reputation as a brilliant scientist and the world's greatest detective, he reports autopsy results (line 1) and explains the reasoning behind the criminals' plans as explained by Robin (Timothy "Tim" Drake, lines 6–7). He also expresses an interest in his new potential (at least temporary) colleague (line 8) and

then approval upon hearing the name she has chosen (line 11). The characters are getting on well at this point in the tale and Stephanie is on her way to becoming an ally by helping Batman and Robin prevent a crime.

In the next example, Stephanie as Spoiler wants to present herself as the superheroine she believes she is. This view of herself is initially confirmed by Robin (line 13) who addresses her by her crime-fighting name and asks her to take part in the ongoing discussion of the planned robbery and the thwarting thereof. The agreeable mood is shattered when Spoiler realizes that she is not their equal. Batman issues a directive with a brief explanation (line 15 *Make it fast. We'll need time to get there.*) and Spoiler acknowledges the pressure and agrees to comply (line 16). However, she interprets Batman's *We* to include herself. By virtue of his power to give orders, Batman performs the act of excluding her (line 17 *You're not going with us, Spoiler.*). It is mitigated by the declarative form and the use of her superhero name at the end functions as a softener to limit the damage to her face (Goffman, 1967).

Example 2. *Detective Comics* 649, September 1992; a direct continuation of Example (1)

| | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 12 | Bruce | THE CLUEMASTER STRIKES AT CASTLELAND PARK AT ELEVEN TONIGHT. THAT'S TWENTY MINUTES FROM NOW.* |
| 13 | Tim | HOW'S THE PLAN ON PULLING THIS ONE OFF, SPOILER? |
| 14 | Steph | I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I KNOW. |
| 15 | Bruce | MAKE IT FAST. WE'LL NEED TIME TO GET THERE. |
| 16 | Steph | THEN LET'S HAUL. I CAN EXPLAIN THE WHOLE SCORE ON THE WAY. |
| 17 | Bruce | YOU'RE NOT GOING WITH US, SPOILER. |
| 18 | Steph | SAY WHAT? I'M GOING TO GET MY PAYBACK AND THERE'S NO WAY YOU CAN STOP ME. |
| 19 | Bruce | THIS IS MORE THAN SOME PRIVATE VENDETTA YOU HAVE AGAINST YOUR FATHER. |
| 20 | Tim | BATMAN'S RIGHT. THINK OF ALL THE PEOPLE THAT COULD GET HURT BY WHAT CLUEMASTER WILL DO TONIGHT. |
| 21 | Steph | WHY'S HE GET TO GO ALONG AND I DON'T? I'M OLDER THAN HIM. |
| 22 | Bruce | I'M NOT ARGUING WITH YOU ABOUT THIS AND I'M NOT NEGOTIATING. IF YOU TRULY WANT YOUR FATHER CAUGHT THEN YOU'LL DO AS I SAY. |
| 23 | | REMEMBER, STEPHANIE, WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE UNDER THAT MASK. |
| 24 | Tim | IT'S THE ONLY WAY, SPOILER. |
| 25 | Steph | ALL RIGHT. |
| 26 | | HERE'S THE PLAN. |

* Note that the crime cannot possibly be scheduled 20 minutes from *now* if eight lines (that is, moments) before it was scheduled for *tomorrow 11pm*. This is not a copy error, even though the two issues were created by the exact same staff members.

The utterances in line 18 inflict the first wounds to the Batman-Spoiler relationship that eventually take years to heal (about four within the story and 18 in publication). The general sidekick or newbie hero identities come with obligations which Spoiler rejects. She questions, even challenges Batman's decision, and gives her agenda a higher priority than his. Batman immediately addresses this challenge and offers a brief explanation for his decision, that the current ordeal between herself and her villainous father, the Cluemaster, is more complex than a regular father-daughter dispute. Robin elaborates in line 20 by mentioning *all the people* Stephanie did not consider, but she dismisses all arguments in line 21. She tries to control the exchange by shifting the focus to Robin and a perceived age-related right. Batman is scripted as not playing along (line 22) and he maintains control of the development of the conversation. To elicit compliance, he appeals to the sincerity of her claim that arresting her father is her priority.⁷

Next, Batman increases the pressure on her to comply by using her civilian name (line 23). This is a subtle threat because it highlights his power to interfere in her private life. He knows her identity and even has support (*we* includes his mentee, Robin). Batman enjoys greater status and overall more knowledge than Stephanie (see Section 5), even though she knows some details he lacks about the current heist. By calling her *Stephanie*, he irrevocably assigns her the role of civilian rather than superheroine and try as she might, her character cannot re-negotiate it in this pseudo-conversation. She finally pretends to give in and reveals the necessary details of the crime. She resists the identity assigned to her by Batman and only feigns insight. She heads to the scene of the crime to confront her criminal father anyway.

On the page, it is ostensibly Batman who hinders or renders possible this identity change of Stephanie's within the storyworld. In reality, his character is used by the comic staff to insinuate that they have decided to slow or advance the plot by making these decisions. The entire storyline works like this, but other instances will not always be pointed out in the rest of this paper.

Stephanie tries to present herself as a new superheroine. The name makes a good early impression (Example (1), line 11), but she does not perform successfully in dialogue. It was her tacit duty to assume a position beneath the legendary Batman, but she is unruly and defiant. In the identities intersubjectively constructed here, Stephanie and Bruce cannot agree on the former's role. Even though he has the in-story authority to accept her, Bruce does not legitimize her super identity and instead foregrounds her civilian position. He strips her of her self-selected moniker,

7. She shared this goal of hers with Robin a few panels earlier and readers may assume that it was shared with Batman off-panel because this specific scene is not pictured.

uses her given name and reminds her of her everyday home life (Example (2), line 23). Stephanie's services are rejected and she is a failed vigilante.

Returning to Sacks's (1989) membership categorization analysis, I argue that Stephanie does not speak like a heroine, but instead reverts to the role of a complaining child (lines 18, 21). She is still developing her superheroine skills, and those include talking appropriately. She reverts to conversational patterns she knows from family interaction, and the talk about her father, the Cluemaster, may have triggered her reaction (e.g. line 21 *Why's he get to go along and I don't? I'm older than him*⁸). Bucholtz and Hall's (2005a, pp. 591–592) positionality principle highlights the fluidity of identity in interaction and such temporary identities (like that of a child) often accompany more stable identities. Her language generally reveals her belonging to the groups "youth" and "female", but her language is infantile in Example (2) and she projects the identity of a child. On the surface, Stephanie's backtalk may seem like a comical outburst (superheroes are rarely shown as whiney) or a strategic move (though unsuccessful), but a deeper look at the exchange reveals complex identity developments.

Ideas such as "older kids have more freedoms than younger kids" are pervasive in American society. The privilege to drive and the right to vote are also based on fixed ages, for example. These laws are mirrored in the storyworld, as evidenced by Stephanie informing Batman in a later issue that she is indeed old enough to drive (*Robin* 127, August 2004). She believes this age argument has a chance at success by pointing out an incongruity between Batman's decision to enlist the (presumably) younger person's aid and common practice. This practice, though, is suspended here and her argument is unconvincing. The overriding framework here is not based on age, but on the degree of Batman-supervised tutelage. Batman's style is adjusted to Stephanie's (it should have been the other way around in order for the young vigilante to appear professional) and he temporarily projects a parent identity. His response *I'm not arguing with you about this and I'm not negotiating. If you truly want your father caught then you'll do as I say* (line 22) is reminiscent of parent talk, a way of expression that seems to be more successful than the statement *You're not going with us, Spoiler* (line 17) considering its recipient.

Instead of appealing to Spoiler's knowledge that she is ill fit to fight, and because she has not accepted Batman as the ultimate authority, his is the language of a family head and an adaptation to her argumentation style. He dismisses her question, refuses to justify his decision and thereby evades Spoiler's attempt to direct his actions and the flow of the conversation. In Batman's estimation, Stephanie is not

8. It is unknown if this age comparison is correct and how Stephanie would know. She may be an unreliable informant. By way of closure, readers may assume Tim told her, but sharing such identity-compromising information seems out of character for Tim.

ready to transition out of the membership category of (unruly) child and civilian. Her argumentation displays a lack of maturity needed to work with him the way an assistant would. He does not admit her to the category of superhero(in)es and is wary of controlling membership. The behaviour within his inner circle shapes the image of the category held by its members and outsiders (Sacks, 1989, p. 276) such as civilians, other crime fighters and villains. Seeing as she already has father issues, it is no surprise that she ultimately denigrates and rejects Batman as helmsman and follows him to the crime site. Batman's verbal accommodation works for a short time, but he and Stephanie are fated to disagree on her position among the super-gifted actors. Only when Stephanie exhibits mastery of the language of the team – reflecting the discipline and self-control of a superhero – is Batman prepared to admit her. When this admission is pictured in the comics, it is evidence that the writers have decided to alter her language and change Batman's stance to make the story progress fluently in adherence to the rules of the world they created.

7.2 Phase 2: The emergence of Stephanie's Robin identity

The next phase of Stephanie's superhero development is her failed Robin phase. The Robin from the first two examples, Timothy Drake, gives up his title and role. Stephanie Brown volunteers to take his place and Batman agrees. He had coached her as Spoiler for a while in episodic training sessions when other crime fighters were scarce. Although this can be seen as a transition into the sidekick identity, I only count the mere six publications when Stephanie actually wears the Robin costume and is addressed with that name. This phase ends with her being fired.

A quick note on these previous irregular training sessions. These happen relatively close to her debut as Robin.⁹ If one may assume that these stages were thoroughly planned by the writers, Stephanie will have signalled some superhero suitability to Batman in her verbal performance (*Batman Gotham Knights*, December 2001). *Performance* here is “highly deliberate and self-aware social display” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005b, p. 380) and in everyday speech it “involves an aesthetic component that is available for evaluation by an audience” (ibid., referring to Bauman, 1977). “In this sense, performances are marked speech events that are more or less sharply differentiated from more mundane interaction” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005b, p. 380). It is a process by which Stephanie conveys more than what

9. Her character debuted as Spoiler in 1992, the *rooftop express* example to be discussed is from 2001 and she becomes Batman's sidekick in 2004. Of course, the story time does not pass the same way as publication time. Some adventures may have been scripted as taking place closer together or further apart than the comic cover dates suggest.

the words mean literally (the semantic meaning), but she also shows her desired adherence to Batman's team via the pragmatic meaning associated with her vocabulary choice (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005b, p. 377; Stamou, 2017, p. 3). Over their communicators, Spoiler attempts to speak the way she has noticed the superhero crowd talk. She says, "OKAY, I TOOK THE ROOFTOP EXPRESS – I LOVE THE WAY YOU GUYS CALL IT THAT – "THE ROOFTOP EXPRESS" – I LOVE ALL THE LINGO. THOUGH I CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHY YOU SAY 'NEGATIVE' INSTEAD OF 'NO', SINCE 'NO' IS ACTUALLY SHORTER..." and later she reports, "I'M CONCENTRATING ON DISPARITIES, THOUGH, LIKE YOU TAUGHT ME. BY WHICH YOU MEANT "THINGS THAT SEEM KINDA TWEAKED," RIGHT?". Her text communicates her uncertainty about the correct language use to Batman (and simultaneously to the reader), as evidenced by her questioning of the vocabulary items *negative* and *disparities*. She puts on this performance to display her progress as a vigilante and to impress her trainer. Her linguistic insecurities reveal her immaturity (on Batman's scale of maturity as created for his character by writers) and obligate Batman to adjust his language or risk the consequences of incomprehension or misunderstanding on her part. Batman accommodates: "NEGATIVE. I MEAN, NO". Stephanie has not grown enough as a fighter to make it into Batman's inner circle, but such dialogue shows that her identity is noticeably developing in her favour prior to her in-story promotion to Robin. These cancelled training sessions again show a clash between the relations of authority and delegitimacy (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005a, p. 603). Spoiler wants her heroine identity to be approved, but it is disaffirmed once more.

Stephanie is as determined as ever to make it in *the Batman biz* (her name for it in *Robin* 127, August 2004) and adjusts her language to match her new identity (Example (3) below). Identity is topicalized in lines 7 and 8 when Stephanie corrects Batman's term of address and encourages him to use a new one, *Robin*. Batman initially still orients to her child identity as in Example (2), as evident from his use of the fatherly tone of his admonishment *This is ridiculous, young lady* (line 11). Stephanie has bestowed the Robin title on herself, but it is only made official when Batman sanctions it (lines 20–21)¹⁰ because he is the higher-status member in this interdependent relationship (cf. Meyerhoff & Niedzielski, 1994, p. 318) and legitimizing authority (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005a, p. 603) for all caped crusaders.

10. It is obvious that Stephanie is aware of the power of names not only here, but also in *Robin* 128 (September 2004) when Bruce severs their partnership. He uses her civilian name and she remarks, "YOU CALLED ME STEPHANIE, NOT ROBIN. I'M NOT SURE I LIKE THE SOUND OF THAT".

Example 3. *Robin* 126, July 2004; in the Batcave; lowercase font is Stephanie's private journal

| | | |
|-------|--------|---|
| 6 | Bruce | STEPHANIE? |
| <hr/> | | |
| 7 | Steph | NO, NOT STEPHANIE. NOT EVEN SPOILER. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 8 | | FROM NOW ON, YOU CAN CALL ME ROBIN. |
| <hr/> | | |
| [...] | | |
| <hr/> | | |
| 9 | | Robin's War Journal. Day One. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 10 | | I'm toast. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 11 | Bruce | THIS IS RIDICULOUS, YOUNG LADY. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 12 | | THAT HOMEMADE COSTUME WON'T DO. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 13 | Steph | REALLY? YOU MEAN -? |
| <hr/> | | |
| 14 | Bruce | AND WE MAY HAVE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR HAIR. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 15 | Alfred | BUT, SIR! |
| <hr/> | | |
| 16 | Steph | I made it! I'm in. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 17 | | THIS IS SO TOTALLY COOL! |
| <hr/> | | |
| 18 | Alfred | SIR, MAY I SPEAK TO YOU FOR A MOMENT? |
| <hr/> | | |
| 19 | | ALONE? |
| <hr/> | | |
| 20 | Bruce | DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING, ROBIN. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 21 | Steph | He called me Robin! Me! It's official! |
| <hr/> | | |
| [...] | | |
| <hr/> | | |
| 41 | Bruce | LET'S GET ONE THING STRAIGHT. YOU'RE ON PROBATION, AND AS LONG AS THAT'S IN EFFECT, YOU DON'T LEARN ANY BIG SECRETS. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 42 | Steph | CHECK. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 43 | Bruce | AND THE FIRST TIME YOU DISOBEY MY ORDERS - EVEN IN A MINOR WAY - IS THE PRECISE MOMENT YOU'RE OUT. NO SECOND CHANCES. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 44 | Steph | DOUBLE CHECK. |

It is obvious that Stephanie has learned self-control and shows deference to her mentor and leader. When he sets strict rules for their partnership, making her inferiority and limitations obvious (lines 41, 43), she produces minimal utterances of comprehension.

Although Stephanie's spoken language reflects a more mature, professional mindset, she regularly has vivacious lines such as line 17's *This is so totally cool!* This should not be evaluated as unprofessional verbal behaviour; she is a teenage girl living her dream of protecting Gotham as a member of the bat family. Expressing excitement immediately after being promoted to Robin is a safe outlet for that part of her personality. She signals her youth in other scenes when she confirms an order by answering with words like *gotcha*. The statements index her simultaneous positions in a demographic category (youth, female) and in the interactionally specific

context (sidekick) (Bucholtz and Hall's (2005a, p. 592) positionality principle). Behind the scenes at the publisher DC, the character Robin is meant to be a more lighthearted counterbalance to Batman (Dixon, 1991, p. 4;¹¹ Pearson & Uricchio, 2015, p. 22¹²). This is part of the character's external set of properties. Stephanie is part of the Robin tradition as she is the fourth person to take on that name, and she fulfils the expectations, as evidenced in her many cheerful and witty retorts. Being the new Robin, less serious dialogue is part of her sidekick category-bound discourse identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 126) as designated by the comic staff. The hope that Robin (who is always a child or youth) will bring some joyfulness into the bleak crime fighting business is sometimes expressed by the comic characters. Via these remarks in the panels, the creators shape expectations the readers have for the character and in the case under discussion, these expectations are met. In going along with Stephanie's quips, Batman is finally legitimizing her super identity as his sidekick Robin, even though it is undecided if this identity will definitely be granted.

As Robin, her response is much more measured and compliant than the fuss and challenge she makes in Example (2) (*I'm going to get my payback and there's no way you can stop me*, line 18) and she displays heretofore unseen obedience. She is willing to follow his lead in order to progress. In lines 20, 41 and 43 above, Batman adopts a hard-liner boss identity and only when Robin accepts his position of power does Batman take on a teacher identity when interacting with her. In a later comic, (Example (4) below) we find a school-typical exchange in which Bruce tests his new pupil:

Example 4. *Robin* 127, August 2004

| | | |
|-------|-------|---|
| 1 | Bruce | TAKE A LOOK AT THESE VICTIM PHOTOS. NOTICE ANYTHING FAMILIAR? |
| <hr/> | | |
| 2 | Steph | OH, MY GOD. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 3 | | THEY ALL SORT OF LOOK LIKE TIM. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 4 | | THE KILLER IS HUNTING TIM. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 5 | Bruce | NOT EXACTLY. |
| <hr/> | | |
| 6 | | I BELIEVE SOMEONE'S KILLING ANYONE WHO MIGHT BE ROBIN – THE PREVIOUS ROBIN. |

Batman never assumed this teacher identity with Spoiler. Example (4) shows a three-part initiation-response-feedback CA sequence as is typically found in classroom settings (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, p. 21). When Batman asks *Notice anything familiar?* he knows the answer, but is checking Robin's understanding. By acting like

11. Dixon is a *Batman* writer and created Stephanie Brown.

12. This is an interview with former *Batman* editor Dennis O'Neil.

a teacher, he positions Robin in the student role and Robin in turn affirms Batman's teacher self by responding the way a learner would. In this way, the two partners position each other temporarily in these roles (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005a, p. 594). The identities Batman displays are usually those of hero, leader or teacher, sometimes donning more than one simultaneously. In the six comics which feature Stephanie as Robin, it is the teacher identity which is most dominant.

Stephanie has matured considerably since their first meeting. She is now able to practice restraint. She finally accepts the linguistic obligations that come with her role and learns to submit to the hierarchy she wants to belong to. This brings Stephanie closer to being able to present a heroine identity that everyone recognizes and validates. By saying the right things or sometimes nothing at all in other scenes, she encourages Batman to teach and train her. Her appropriate (verbal) behaviour prompts Batman to engage her by asking questions and assigning her tasks in a way that helps her grow as a warrior. Stephanie's stint as Robin comes to an early end after a fight in which Batman takes a severe beating. Robin panics and engages the enemy without permission, leading to a termination of the partnership. Even though Batman has taught her and she has learned to talk the talk, her impulse control is still deficient. She has not yet internalized the identity of a sidekick – it is more temporary than it needs to be if she is to serve Batman well.

7.3 Phase 3: Constructing and legitimizing the Batgirl identity

After her time as Robin, Stephanie returns to acting as Spoiler and is eventually given the Batgirl costume by the then reigning (officially second) Batgirl, Cassandra Cain. Cassandra gives her the costume, but her title is not universally acknowledged, in part because Bruce Wayne is in hiding and has little opportunity to affirm or reject her "promotion". Her title is only sanctioned by Bruce later on and the conversation in which this takes place shows that Stephanie has mastered the "talk" of a superhero.

At their reunion in Example (5), Stephanie takes control of the flow of conversation early on (all in the issue *Bruce Wayne the Road Home: Batgirl* 1, December 2010). The two are alone and she delivers a monologue divided into 17 adjacent talk balloons and seven panels, dominating the conversational floor. The interaction is smooth for this reason and the content reveals finer details of the new identity which is described by Stephanie as "MY NEW LIFE". She says she used to worry about losing the Batgirl title and re-assigns speaker rights when she tells Bruce, "YOU DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT TO TAKE THAT AWAY FROM ME – BAT-SYMBOL OR NOT". Her monologue continues:

Example 5. *Bruce Wayne the Road Home: Batgirl 1*, December 2010

-
- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 | Steph AND FOR A CHANGE I'M NOT A) CHASING AFTER A BOY OR B) ACTING AS A PAWN IN ONE OF YOUR GAMES. |
| | [...] |
| 2 | BEING BATGIRL IS THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE I'M DOING THINGS BECAUSE I WANT TO. |
| 3 | BECAUSE I THINK THEY'RE THE RIGHT THING TO DO. |
| 4 | I'M TRYING TO LIVE MY OWN LIFE NOW, AND TRYING TO HELP PEOPLE IN THE PROCESS. AND I... |
| 5 | Deep breath!* |
| 6 | ... REFUSE TO GIVE UP BEING BATGIRL PERIOD. |
-

* The lowercase text indicates thought. The lack of spaces represents a faster pace of talk in the succeeding line.

She employs the relational tactics of both *authentication* and *denaturalization* (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005a, pp. 601–602). She describes her new identity as authentic and motivated by the best of reasons. She now has the status to openly criticize actions she dreads from Batman. By denying him any veto right, she subverts the rightness of his own perceived identity to include preventing her rise as Batgirl (*ibid.*, p. 602).

Setting the record straight on her motivation is very important for receiving approval from Bruce. Her first attempt to make a name for herself was unsuccessful because Bruce disapproved of her egocentric longing to take revenge on her father. In line 1 (Example 5), Stephanie describes Spoiler's "need to both please... and obsess" (as Bruce writes in his casebook later in that issue) because she wanted to impress Batman and date Robin. One might call her a creature of relation, augmenting her degree of likeness by downplaying differences to be more attractive to either member of the dynamic duo, a tactic Bucholtz and Hall (2005a, p. 599) term *adequation*. In a later issue of *Batgirl*, Stephanie puts her conviction to help others before any kind of title like *hero* (*Batgirl* 21, July 2011). In the scene which includes Example (5), Bruce literally lets her have the last say and although he does not call Stephanie "Batgirl" in this scene, he does so in his notebook (excerpts from which are shown on the last page of the issue) and commends her growth in his absence. He explicitly addresses the differences to the Spoiler identity and that Batgirl has changed for the better.

8. Conclusion

The proper language is a fundamental skill any *Batman* character must master in order to proclaim a super identity. The confidence and certainty Batman reveals in his talk solidifies his status as premier superhero. Being able to adjust his speaker role to manage working with people who have different agendas makes him a successful leader. There are linguistic expectations and privileges which accompany the characters depending on their status. Only independent fighters enjoy the power to give orders, whereas a recruit in training like Robin must show deference.

The many levels and layers of identity construction in comic book dialogues become visible by applying the framework developed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005a/b). Tracing the lengthy linguistic in-story history of just one character, in this case Stephanie Brown, reveals that all five principles play a role in shaping the projections of the story cast. The application of the framework exposes that identities are emergent in talk and a hero(ine) may speak like a parent or teacher as the situation requires. The speaker can position herself or himself as belonging to different groups at the same time. In this way, Stephanie's talk shows her to belong to the broad demographic groups youth and female because of her choice of words, but also to the narrow local group of sidekick, as she utters words related to the role at that stage of her development at all (words of confirmation, agreement, uptake etc.). Because identity display requires adapting to the ongoing interaction, it is a relational phenomenon and constantly being validated, dismissed or altered by or for other speakers. In the story world within the *Batman* comics, an identity is only legitimized when Batman addresses the person by the proper title; i.e. the sidekick status is only official if he uses the name *Robin* rather than a civilian name or other description (such as *young lady*, Example (3), line 11). An individual does not have full control over her or his identity; it is always shaped in social engagement. Finally, the character that is presented to us is always partial and one side of that person will be exposed clearer in one scene than in another. Within a few panels (Examples 1–2 which are one continuous scene), Batman transitions from an organizing leader to an admonishing father. These are all parts of the whole Batman identity.

The identity framework is supported by CA and membership categorization analysis. These deliver insights about the characters based not only on what is said, but also when it is said in the dialogue and how it is used to achieve an act with that identity. Not all identities in play are obvious by being overtly stated (by using a name or rank), but all are active and impact the direction of the verbal exchange and character development. Sometimes they are revealed in the structure of the exchange (e.g. initiation-response-feedback sequences involve teacher and student roles), recognizable from general expressions used by category members (e.g. *young*

lady used by parents), or from very specific lexemes that associated with a select group (e.g. *rooftop express* used by team Batman). Applying these strategies can unveil the simultaneous identities that make up an individual.

Although the *Batman* story is completely fictional, language is undeniably a crucial tool used to craft the characters the same way it persistently shapes real-life people. On one level, the way a character speaks in any given interaction says something about that character's identity, but because identity is intrinsically relational, it can simultaneously provide insights about the interlocutor's identity, like when speakers position each other. In comics, the re-creation of a super-identity (a promotion from novice to professional, for instance) is usually obvious by a new name and costume and maybe even a new comic book series. This chapter has uncovered that such a development is also accompanied by a new style of speaking and being spoken to. A complete analysis of identity must therefore indispensably include an analysis of linguistic interaction.

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PART II

Group identities

Code-switching and identity construction in WhatsApp

Evidence from a (digital) community of practice

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This paper examines how the use of WhatsApp promotes the linguistic construction of group identity and social meaning in a close-knit community of practice of six German university students. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of a private WhatsApp group chat, supported by the findings from a group-specific questionnaire, suggests that code-switching between English and German proves a powerful resource of group identity construction. The code-switches fulfil a variety of functions and are shown to be the overall unmarked choice in the group. Governed by the technical and social factors of WhatsApp as a multi-modal digital discourse mode, the CoP members draw on various verbal strategies and linguistic structures in order to negotiate social relationships and facets of group identity online.

Keywords: code-switching, digital discourse, group identity, community of practice, social networks, markedness model, WhatsApp

1. Introduction

Since its advent in 2009, the communication service *WhatsApp* (henceforth WA) has immensely increased in popularity and is used by a considerable number of people worldwide,¹ thus allowing for the emergence of new and multi-layered social networks. This chapter investigates the communicative practices of WA, taking into consideration the technical and social idiosyncrasies of this digital discourse

1. WA is the first messenger app to surpass the threshold of one billion active users worldwide. Per day, these users exchange a total of 42 billion text messages, 1.6 billion photos and 250 million videos (cf. <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/messenger-whatsapp-hat-mehr-als-eine-milliarde-nutzer-1.2845262>).

(DD) mode. The term DD is understood here as “predominantly text-based human-human interaction mediated by networked computers or mobile telephony” (Herring, 2007, p. 1).

In particular, this paper illustrates how the use of WA by a group of six German students of English fosters the linguistic construction of group identity and social meaning, transcending on- and offline contexts. A corpus of 682 WA messages serves as a basis to investigate German-English code-switching and its correlation with the processes of group identity construction. Combining corpus-linguistic and ethnographic methods, this study presents a multi-faceted approach to the complex verbal strategies and linguistic structures anchored in a (digital) community of practice. Throughout this study, the term *group identity* is understood in its constructionist sense, i.e. as a social construct, rather than as a pre-given entity. In this line of thought, facets of group identity are constantly co-constructed and mediated in the communicative endeavours of the group participants both online and offline.

The paper is structured as follows. The second section elaborates on major concepts and approaches to code-switching (CS) and group identity, as well as on social dynamics and identity in DD. The third section features a classification of WA as a socio-technical mode (cf. Herring, 2007) and expands on the data and methodology used in the current study. The fourth section presents the results of a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data. The subsequent section provides a discussion of the findings, focussing on empirical evidence from a group-specific questionnaire. Finally, the conclusion gives a brief summary of the findings and points out their implications for future research into this area.

2. Code-switching and group identity: Theoretical dimensions

2.1 Major concepts and approaches to code-switching and group identity

A considerable body of literature has been published on CS, which has investigated the contact phenomenon from different disciplinary perspectives, using various methodological approaches. This study adopts a broad definition of CS with a strong focus on pragmatic and social (rather than grammatical) aspects. CS is not regarded here as a compensation for an assumed deficit in either language, but rather as “a valuable linguistic tool” (Baker, 2006, p. 109) that can be used for various (linguistic) purposes, as will be discussed in the subsequent sections. CS in this dataset is so multi-faceted that it transgresses commonly considered dichotomies, such as matrix language vs. embedded language, as well as inter- vs. intrasentential CS (cf. Myers-Scotton, 1993a). Throughout this study, the term CS will be used to refer to all instances of talk in which two or more codes are combined. In the

corpus at hand, CS is of a conversational nature, i.e. “the items in question form part of the same minimal speech act, and message elements are tied by syntactic and semantic relations apparently identical to those which join passages in a single language” (Gumperz, 1977, pp. 2–3).

Bullock and Toribio (2009, p. 10) regard CS as a decision made by more or less proficient multilinguals, which is influenced by various social and discursive factors. Following Gardner-Chloros (2009, p. 98), three types of social factors can be differentiated, some of which will be used for the qualitative analysis of the data in Section 4. The first factor deals with external relations outside the exchange (e.g. prestige and power relations) and the second factor deals with speaker attributes (e.g. proficiency, relationships, and identities). The third factor comprises the conversational functions of CS, such as indicating direct quotations, conveying reported speech, indexing particular addresses, marking an interjection, or aggravating and mitigating a message (cf. also Gumperz, 1977, pp. 14–21). Androutsopoulos (2013) extends this list by pointing out that CS may also be used for formulaic discourse purposes, e.g. to contextualize a shift of topic or perspective. Additionally, CS can have the function of “index[ing] consent or dissent, agreement and conflict, alignment and distancing” (ibid., 2013, p. 681).

Following Myers-Scotton’s (1993b, [1988] 2007) model of (un-)markedness, speakers’ conscious or subconscious decisions to prefer or avoid one code have social meaning and are indexical of social negotiations. The participants of the WA group apparently know which linguistic code is used as the standard and, especially, what social meaning the use of a certain code can have for the interpretation of the communicative exchange. As the analysis will show, the overall switching of codes in the WA group is the unmarked (i.e. expected) choice (cf. Myers-Scotton, [1988] 2007, p. 104). As Dorleijn and Nortier (2009) point out,

in some speech communities the mixed code is the preferred variety for in-group communication: the members of those communities automatically switch to this mixed code when they meet (or when they write to each other on the Internet), because it is the easiest, the most “relaxed” and therefore most “spontaneous,” least monitored, and most unconsciously produced way of speaking for them.

(Dorleijn & Nortier, 2009, p. 128)

The group of students under investigation here constitute what Eckert (2009) calls a community of practice (CofP). More specifically, it can be identified as

a social grouping not in virtue of shared abstract characteristics (e.g., class, gender) or simple copresence (e.g., neighbourhood, workplace), but in virtue of shared practice. In the course of a regular joint activity, a community of practice develops ways of doing things, views, values, power relations, [and] ways of talking.

(Eckert, 2009, p. 109)

CofPs, like the one analysed here, are thus to be understood as social creations, in which various people participate for shared purposes. Through language use, new nuances of social meaning can be constructed collaboratively. This includes the constant co-construction and re-negotiation of both individual and group identities (cf. Eckert, 2000, pp. 34–39).

The idea of a CofP has a fair deal of notional overlap with Chambers' (2003) social network theory, which also proves useful here. The members of a certain network can show linguistic variation, even in relatively homogeneous and tightly-structured networks like the one focused on in this study. Influenced by the density of the network, and measured by their varying degrees of participation, the members of the WA group can be placed on a continuum ranging from core to periphery (cf. *ibid.*). It is further noted that “[n]etworks constituted chiefly of strong [interpersonal] ties appear to be supportive of localized linguistic norms, resisting pressures from competing external norms” (Milroy & Gordon, 2003, p. 118). Such localized norms (as present in the WA group) usually consist of various aspects of linguistic style, e.g. linguistically mimicking other people (see Section 4.2).

2.2 Social dynamics and identity in DD

A fair deal of research has been devoted to the topic of code-switching and identity construction in DD modes.² Several recent studies have set out to examine the interplay between bilingual texting and social identity in a broad sense. Deumert and Masinyana (2008), in their study on South African bilingual text messages, found that code choices fulfil specific functions, e.g. creating a sense of non-standardness or expressing emotions, also resulting in novel expressions. Hernández (2016) explores aspects of group identity in German-English WA text messages among siblings. CS is the overall unmarked choice in that group and is shown to fulfil shared as well as user-specific functions. By relying on ethnographic and visual methods of data retrieval, Lexander (2012), in her study on multilingual texting in Senegal, successfully demonstrates that CS is used as a means of managing relationships and highlighting different aspects of identity.

As this study focuses on CS and group identity, Baym's (1995) work on the social dynamics at play in digital discourse groups provides a useful framework. She proposes four facets of the creation of community in DD contexts: *forms of expression, identity, relationships, and behavioural norms* (*ibid.*, pp. 151–160). As will be shown with the present WA group, mediating relationships, norms and identities can create a sense of community in DD groups. Depending on a system's

2. For a comprehensive list of CS research, see Androutsopoulos (2013, p. 674).

infrastructure and the users' degrees of creativity, the emergence of group-specific vocabulary plays a decisive part in this process.

"Digitally-mediated communication (via both networked computers and mobile networked devices) offers opportunities for written CS on an unprecedented scale" (Androutsopoulos, 2013, p. 667). Yet, the researcher has to keep in mind that language data can easily be misunderstood when it is not viewed as the product or result of the socio-technical structures that compose a given mode (Dorleijn & Nortier 2009, p. 31). Therefore, the present study is based on a systematic classification of WA according to Herring's (2007) framework for computer-mediated communication. Androutsopoulos further regards synchronous verbal exchanges in DD "as the closest approximations of spoken conversation" (2013, p. 671). The dataset of this study fulfils common advantages for analysing (synchronous) chat groups, because it is very close to spoken language, shows a high similarity to natural conversation, and is open to new topics or linguistic forms (cf. Dorleijn & Nortier, 2009, pp. 131–133). This is why, together with the group's high degree of informality (*ibid.*, 130), the WA sample serves as a natural and useful corpus for investigating CS.

3. WhatsApp as a socio-technical mode

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the features of WA, Herring's (2007) faceted classification scheme is used, which not only considers the technical dimensions, but also the social characteristics of DD.³ With the help of this framework, WA can be established as an independent and discrete socio-technical mode which comprises more than the basic features of traditional text messaging.

3.1 Classification of WhatsApp

3.1.1 *Medium factors*

Technological factors (e.g. the properties of hardware and software) do not necessarily influence the way in which people communicate, "although each factor has been observed to affect communication in at least some instances" (Herring, 2007, p. 11), making them worthwhile mentioning. Technically speaking, WA is an asynchronous mode, even though for this sample, it seems to be quasi-synchronous most of the time, since it is expected or at least intuitively assumed that all users are online at the same time. The temporal structure (M1 in Herring's classification

3. For a complete list of factors (M1–M10; S1–S8), see Herring (2007).

scheme) in the WA group chat is thus one of intermediate synchronicity. In WA group chats, users were (at the time of data production) not able to see whether interlocutors are currently composing a message. The message transmission for this chat is thus one-way (M2). The transcript (M3) has a high degree of persistency, allowing users to have recourse to the whole group conversation, which “heightens [their] metalinguistic awareness: It allows users to reflect on their communication – and play with language” (Herring, 2007, p. 15). The message buffer (M4) for WA text messages is practically limitless, whereas for multimedia content it is limited to one item per message. WA uses multiple channels of communication (M5). Apart from plain text messages, users have recourse to an extensive set of emoticons, other icons, and pictographic elements. In addition, WA supports sharing pictures, videos, voice messages, audio files, the users’ current GPS locations and personal contacts. Since a WA account is always connected to a user’s mobile telephone number, anonymous messaging (M6) is not possible. Knowing the telephone number presupposes a certain sense of previous acquaintance or familiarity between users, which plays an important role in identity construction. In addition, users automatically reveal their offline/online and ‘last seen’ status, which clearly has an influence on their interlocutors’ communicative expectations, e.g. to receive an immediate answer. Private messaging (M7) is only possible in single-user chats with two people; there is no such feature in a group chat that allows for sending someone a private message that cannot be seen by other members in the group.

One basic characteristic of Herring’s (2007) system is its open-endedness. Hereafter, a number of additional facets (MA1–3) are proposed, which may influence the linguistic output of WA group chats. Properties of the *keyboard software* (MA1) installed on users’ devices, like the auto-correct function, may interfere with a user’s natural language production as various kinds of keyboard software offer word predictions based on the users’ language patterns. These predictions may, for example, prompt users to use certain phrases or forms, which they would not have thought of or used otherwise. Another facet that qualifies for being added to the list is *internet connectivity* (MA2), since it can be more or less stable. For WA communication, a poor Internet connection may increase the time lag between message production and reception, which may lead to limitations at the level of communication. A further potential facet is *communication costs* (MA3). At the time when the data were produced, the users were either in their free trial period or had paid a low one-time usage fee that granted them to use WA for a limited period of time. Thus, there was no communicative restraint due to high costs, e.g. resulting in the use of abbreviations.

3.1.2 *Situation factors*

The situation factors, i.e. participants' characteristics and their relationships towards each other, establish the social context for the analysis of the WA sample. The participation structure (S1) for the data in this study is limited to six participants, who engage in a private group chat in which the degree of participation varies by user and time of day. As regards participant characteristics (S2), the users belong to the same age group (between 23 and 25), with two male and four female participants, all of which have, besides their native control of German, a high proficiency in the English language. They share the same role in 'real life' as students of English, possess a similar sociocultural background as well as knowledge about interactional norms. All in all, the group exhibits a high degree of homogeneity. The main purpose (S3) of the group chat is social and recreational in nature, with participants getting and spreading information, developing and maintaining social relationships or entertaining others. The topic (S4) of the group is not fixed. The starting point was a university excursion to Ireland. The topics of the exchanges range from vacation plans and leisure time activities to academic advice, as well as expressing one's views and beliefs. The tone (S5) can be characterized as mostly casual, playful and friendly, but can at times also be sarcastic. Pervasive activities (S6) in the communication of the group are, e.g., exchanging jokes and information, as well as giving support and advice. The norms (S7) in the sense of linguistic practices and the different codes (S8) used cannot be reduced to one or two main observations. They are among the issues to be explored in this study.

3.2 Data and methodology

The dataset for this study derives from a private WA group conversation among German university students (Diana, Greta, Jennifer, Karl, Nora, Sven and Jennifer), aged between 23 and 25. Proper names were anonymized and the approval to use the data was obtained post-production to assure authenticity and genuineness, i.e. possible data elicitation effects such as the observer's paradox can be ruled out for this dataset. As the researcher is familiar with the authors of the messages and their practices due to former membership, the data can be adequately interpreted in its technical and social context.

The sample consists of 682 WA messages (5,594 words; without tags) and comprises a period of 43 days, from May 28 to July 9, 2014.⁴ Furthermore, the data was

4. Each message in the corpus is preceded by day, month, and time, followed by a dash and the sender of the message.

tagged for various channels of communication. Table 1 contains an overview of the different channels used, the corresponding tags, as well as the absolute frequencies for each channel.

Table 1. Overall distribution of different channels of communication in the dataset

| Channel of communication | Tag | Absolute frequency |
|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Written text | <i>None</i> | 493 |
| Emoticon | [em] ... [/em] | 266 |
| Voice message | [vm] “...” [/vm] | 123 |
| Image | [img] ... [/img] | 23 |
| Video | [vid] ... [/vid] | 11 |

The current investigation combines a system-oriented approach with a speaker-oriented approach. The screen data (i.e. the message content) was analysed by conducting a quantitative and qualitative analysis (DD as text). In addition, a group-specific questionnaire was generated and sent to each member of the WA group. Employing an ethnographic method like this not only supported the results of the textual analysis, but it furthermore helped to ascertain the users’ awareness of prevailing language practices in their community (DD as place). The quantitative analysis was carried out to determine the overall and user-specific frequencies with which both codes occur in the corpus. The qualitative analysis was conducted to exemplify the social and discursive functions of CS and illustrate the interplay between certain linguistic practices and the (co-)construction of group identity in discourse. Transcending on- and offline contexts, the current study thus combines an etic and emic approach to create a set of blended data, while pursuing an intra-mode design, i.e. focussing on data from one CMC mode only (cf. Androutsopoulos, 2014, p. 81).

4. Analysis of the WhatsApp data

This chapter aims to ascertain how frequently the English and the German code are used and which discursive and social functions are fulfilled by CS. These findings are then used to evaluate how exactly CS and other social practices are related to the (re-)negotiation of group identity.

4.1 Quantitative analysis

Before elaborating on the specific functions of CS, a quantitative analysis of the corpus data was carried out to give an overview of the distribution of languages in the overall corpus, as well as in the speech of individual users.

The overall distribution of languages in the WA sample was determined by assigning each message to one of the categories proposed in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of languages used

| | German only (GerO) | English only (EngO) | German + English (GerEng) | Other | Unspecified | Total |
|-----------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|-------|-------------|---------------|
| No. of messages | 359 | 135 | 89 | 6 | 93 | 682 |
| in % | 52.64 | 19.79 | 13.05 | 0.88 | 13.64 | 100.00 |

The first two categories include messages which are written either solely in German (*GerO*), or solely in English (*EngO*). The category *GerEng* comprises messages that contain both codes simultaneously, and therefore might feature instances of intra-sentential CS. The *Other*-category includes messages with elements from other languages (e.g. Dutch or Irish), which are only of secondary importance for the present study. The category *Unspecified* includes messages which contain no inherent clue as to what language the content can be attributed to, e.g. messages with emoticons/images/numbers only, as well as exclamation/question marks only. If a model was assumed in which multiple messages are treated as chunks, each representing a single unit, it would be difficult to determine the exact contextual boundaries between individual chunks. Treating each message as an independent representation of one language simplifies the analysis. Also, the length of the messages is neglected. As soon as a message contains elements of both English and German, it is assigned to the *GerEng* category, regardless of the matrix language and how much of the text is actually English or German, respectively.

The decision whether certain lexemes represent either the German or the English code was based on the Duden, the standard dictionary of German. As a rule of thumb, each lexeme which is listed in the Duden was assigned to the ‘German’ category because it has found its way into the German language at some point in time. The expression *Soccer and Guinness* is clearly *EngO*, because Guinness is an Irish beer. The expression *Soccer and Köpi* (short for *König Pilsener*, a local German beer) is, despite English being the matrix language, characterized as *GerEng* because *Köpi* is a German brand name.

Table 2 indicates that just over half the messages (359; 52.64%) are written in *GerO*. This is surprising due to the fact that German is the native language of all six participants. What seems to be more interesting, however, is that roughly one fifth of

all messages (135; 19.79%) is written in *EngO*, and that another 89 messages (13.05%) consist of German and English (*GerEng*). Together, this adds up to 224 messages (or 32.84%), in which English is at least partially involved. This is an astonishing fact since English neither has the status of a first language in Germany, nor is it essentially needed in the group to achieve mutual intelligibility. The overall figures from Table 2 suggest that the English code is used very frequently as a whole. English is, however, not used to the same degree by all participants, and participation patterns differ among users. A user-specific investigation of code choices (Table 3) and participation patterns (Table 4) will help to further qualify this general assumption.

Table 3. User-specific code choices

| | GerO | EngO | GerEng | Other | Unspecified | No. of Messages / User |
|-------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|----------|-------------|------------------------|
| <i>Sven</i> | 92 | 55 | 31 | 2 | 22 | 202 |
| <i>in %</i> | 45.54 | 27.23 | 15.35 | 0.99 | 10.89 | 100.00 |
| <i>Karl</i> | 73 | 29 | 33 | 3 | 26 | 164 |
| <i>in %</i> | 44.51 | 17.68 | 20.12 | 1.83 | 15.85 | 100.00 |
| <i>Greta</i> | 81 | 20 | 10 | 0 | 10 | 121 |
| <i>in %</i> | 66.94 | 16.53 | 8.26 | 0.00 | 8.26 | 100.00 |
| <i>Jennifer</i> | 55 | 11 | 6 | 0 | 14 | 86 |
| <i>in %</i> | 63.95 | 12.79 | 6.98 | 0.00 | 16.28 | 100.00 |
| <i>Nora</i> | 38 | 11 | 4 | 0 | 16 | 69 |
| <i>in %</i> | 55.07 | 15.94 | 5.80 | 0.00 | 23.19 | 100.00 |
| <i>Diana</i> | 20 | 9 | 5 | 1 | 5 | 40 |
| <i>in %</i> | 50.00 | 22.50 | 12.50 | 2.50 | 12.50 | 100.00 |
| No. of Messages / Code | 359 | 135 | 89 | 6 | 93 | 682 |
| <i>in %</i> | 52.64 | 19.79 | 13.05 | 0.88 | 13.64 | 100.00 |

Table 3 presents the user-specific code choices of the WA corpus. The assumption that German as the users' native language is used very frequently holds true. Each group member uses *GerO* more often than *EngO* and *GerEng* combined. *EngO* and *GerEng* are used by all participants, but the degree to which this happens varies considerably among the different members. Sven is the most frequent user of *EngO* (55 messages (m.); 27.32%), followed by Karl (29 m.; 17.68%) and Greta (20 m.; 16.53%). Also, the frequencies of *GerEng* are highest for Karl (33 m.; 20.12%) and Sven (31 m.; 15.35%), but considerably lower for Diana (5 m.; 12.50%), Greta (10 m.; 8.26%), Jennifer (6 m.; 6.98%), and Nora (4 m.; 5.80%). Regarding these figures as representative of the whole conversation, and not taking into account the degree of individual participation, it becomes evident that there is strong inter-speaker variation as regards the use of English.

Table 4. User-specific participation patterns

| | <i>Sven</i> | <i>Karl</i> | <i>Greta</i> | <i>Jennifer</i> | <i>Nora</i> | <i>Diana</i> | Total |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| No. of messages (total) | 202 | 164 | 121 | 86 | 69 | 40 | 682 |
| in % | 29.62 | 24.05 | 17.74 | 12.61 | 10.12 | 5.87 | 100.00 |
| Days active | 43 | 43 | 43 | 30 | 43 | 16 | – |
| No. of messages (average/day) | 4.70 | 3.81 | 2.81 | 2.87 | 1.60 | 2.50 | – |

As illustrated in Table 4, the participation patterns in the group differ substantially between users. Sven accounts for nearly one-third (202 out of 682 m.; 29.62%), whereas Nora accounts for no more than roughly one-tenth (69 out of 682 m.; 10.12%) of all messages. Due to the fact that two participants, Jennifer and Diana, joined the WA conversation at a later point in time (cf. Table 4), normalized participation figures (i.e. the average number of messages per day) are given for each group member to facilitate comparison. Comparing the users' average participation per day, Sven (4.70 m./day) and Karl (3.81 m./day) represent the core members of the group, whereas Nora (1.60 m./day), in relation to the more active users, clearly constitutes a peripheral member.

The quantitative analysis indicates that, on the group level, there is a striking preference for the English code, even though English is not the native language of the participants. The analysis of user-specific variation and participation illustrates, however, that certain members use English more than others, while similarly, there are core and peripheral members as regards participation. The very nature of this variation will be elucidated with the help of the qualitative analysis presented below.

4.2 Qualitative analysis

The present section focuses on discursive and social functions of CS on the group level. Examples from the WA corpus will be used to show how identities are (co-)constructed and (re-)enforced, especially so by means of using various codes to fulfil (group-) specific functions.

4.2.1 *Discursive functions*

As becomes evident from the data, instances of CS can fulfil a variety of different functions that help to structure the discourse. Two of those functions are illustrated in Examples (1) to (3) below. In (1), the English code serves as a vehicle to express a *quotation*. Sven employs a quote from the famous book and TV series *Game of Thrones*, which is embedded in the context of the talk episode. Karl states that he owes Sven money, and in the following turn, Sven uses this quote creatively in order

to remind Karl that he has to pay his debts. In this example, German⁵ functions as the matrix language and is complemented by an English quote.

- (1) **13 Jun 00:34 – Karl:** [vm] “Ich habe vier Bier getrunken, halt eben, das bezahlt ich Ihnen halt eben, da können Sie sich drauf verlassen halt eben, überweise ich Ihnen aufs Konto oder gebe ich Ihnen morgen im Pub dann halt. (*I drank four beers, simple as that, I will pay you for that simple as that, you can count on that simple as that, I will transfer it to your bank account or I will give it back to you tomorrow in the pub in that case.*)” [/vm]
13 Jun 00:36 – Sven: [vm] “A Lannister always pays his debts.” [/vm]

In (2) and (3), CS is used as a means to *index* or *specify* certain *addressees*. This is explicitly done by using different codes for different interlocutors in specific contexts:

- (2) **24 Jun 18:31 – Sven:** [vm] “Hello Karl, I am reporting live from the Fritzpatrick's Pub in Rütterscheid and it's really a shame that you are not here at this very moment. Also, ich wünsche dir eine gute beterschap natuurlijk, damit het dir wieder goed gaat zul ik sagen. Ja, wir bestellen gleich zwei Biertürme, glaub ich. (*So, I hope that you get better of course, so that you will be well again I should say. Yes, we will order two beer towers in a moment, I think.*) Have it beer tower!” [/vm]
- (3) **14 Jun 20:47 – Karl:** [vm] “Have it, im Namen der Gruppe kann ich hier mal sagen, dass die Gruppe gut gelandet ist, (*in the name of the group I can say here that the group has landed well,*) I'm not with the group anymore, but then again, eh, eh, also Deutschland hat ne schöne Temperatur, es ist sonnig, ein paar Wölkchen, (*eh, eh, well Germany has a nice temperature, it is sunny, a few little clouds,*) but then again, können wa mit leben, und eh, (*we can live with that, and eh,*) I hope you're doing fine in Dublin, yeah, send us some nice photos and tell us what you're doing and stuff, und ich werde hier niemanden imitieren mehr, (*and I won't imitate anyone here anymore,*) what have you?” [/vm]

In (2), Karl is ill and thus cannot attend the meeting at an Irish pub in Germany where the other members of the WA group are gathering. Sven sends a voice message to the group, addressing Karl with a direct salutation (*Hello Karl*) and expresses his discontent with the fact that Karl cannot be there. In this episode, multiple CS between English, German and Dutch is used as an explicit means to address Karl, who is a student of Dutch, and wish him well. In (3), Karl and the majority of the group have just returned to Germany from their university excursion to Ireland. Karl code-switches between German and English. The German parts in the message

5. Translations of the German text are provided in brackets, marked by grey italics and a smaller type size.

are used to refer to the situation in Germany (i.e. commenting on the group's landing, the weather, his own actions), whereas the text passages in English refer to Greta and Nora, who have stayed behind in Ireland for an additional two days. In (2), CS is used as an additional means to specify the addressee, whereas in (3), the context reveals that CS is used as a constitutive means of addressing Greta and Nora (i.e. without mentioning their names), and differentiating between events happening in Germany and Ireland, respectively. The code-switches in Examples (2) and (3) function as contextualization devices, regarding interlocutors and offline space.

4.2.2 Social functions

Apart from the discursive functions mentioned above, CS and other linguistic practices can reveal something about the relationships between interlocutors, their behavioural norms, and negotiations of group identity. The following examples illustrate these social phenomena.

As Example (4) shows, the WA conversation is marked by a plethora of group-specific forms of expression. The most prominent ones are *splendid*, *but then again*, *I mean*, *Kollege*, *have it*, *what have you* and the German interjection *ja*.

- (4) 3 Jun 12:52 – Karl: [vm] “*I mean what have you, ja. Ich mein, ich hab noch gar nichts gemacht, ja. Und, (Well, I mean, I haven't done a thing yet, so. And,) funny thing is, I don't have any time to do this, ja, (yeah,) before Thursday. So if Felicitas, or Feli, as I like to call her wants to see something today, I mean, we're fucked basically. But then again, I mean, have it a group, I mean, we are a group and we can justify.*” [/vm]
[...]
- 6 Jun 15:32 – Sven: [vm] “*Speak German in Ireland, ja Kollege, ja. Und, (yeah mate, yeah. And,) d'you have Eduroam at your residence?*” [/vm]
- 7 Jun 23:30 – Karl: [vm] “*Eh, well, Sven, just to make you jealous: We had a splendid time in a splendid pub called The Norseman. Ehm, we met some American guys, ja, (yeah,) and they were very, very very nice, and the leader so to speak is called Earl, and Earl was a very nice fella. But then again, we had a nice time and you were not there. But then again, please come to Ireland, ja. (yeah.) Who needs the Wolfsee, ja?! (yeah?!)*” [/vm]
- 8 Jun 07:05 – Sven: [vm] “*Jaaa... (Well...) have it, ich komm am Montag, Kolleeeege. (I will come on Monday, maaaate.)*” [/vm]
[...]
- 14 Jun 16:55 – Sven: [img] *Anne, waiting in airport queue* [/img]
- 14 Jun 17:04 – Karl: [vm] “*Have it funny, ja. (yeah.)*” [/vm]
- 14 Jun 17:06 – Sven: [vm] “*I mean it's always funny to see people wait, right?*” [/vm]
[...]

14 Jun 21:09 – Sven: *Have it in Duisburg in 10 minutes. Splendid* [em] sunglasses [/em]

14 Jun 21:25 – Sven: *Have it home* [em] sunglasses [/em]
[...]

24 Jun 13:57 – Sven: [vm] “Ja, dankeschön der Kollege, ja! Ich hab jetzt gleich beim Kollegen, ja. Ich grüß den mal von dir, ne?! Machs gut und ruh dich aus et cetera. (Yes, thank you mate, yeah! In a moment I will have [a lesson] with [our] mate, yeah. I will send him your regards, okay?! Take care and rest a little et cetera.) What have you and bye bye.” [/vm]

Example (4) illustrates how frequently these forms are used by various members of the group. The expression *have it* is often used as an indication marker for subsequent information. It fulfils group-specific functions such as expressing emotions (e.g. *Have it funny* or *Have It Scheiße*), indicating actions (e.g. *have it, ich komm am Montag...*) or times and places (e.g. *Have it in Duisburg in 10 minutes*), as well as disclosing the current location of the speaker (*Have it home*). The term *splendid* is used as a general expression of positive evaluation (e.g. *splendid pub, splendid time*). The expression *but then again* usually indicates a slight contrast to the propositional content of the preceding utterance, but is used with a different function here. In this example, the phrase is used, for example, to express wishes (e.g. *But then again, please come to Ireland*), or as a concluding remark (*But then again, we had a nice time...*). Also, the use of *what have you* is somewhat different to its standard use. Usually, *what have you* is used after an enumeration to indicate further possibilities that might come to one's mind later. In (4), *what have you* seems to be used as a mere sentence filler or interjection. If it were left out, the propositional content of the utterance would be the same. The term *Kollege* and its plural form *Kollegen* are frequently employed by the group members to address each other. In German, the term is commonly used for the concept of 'co-worker'. In the WA group, this term is employed in an informal way to perhaps convey a feeling of intimacy.

Taking into account the shared background of the group members, however, these very forms reflect the idiolectal language use of one of their lecturers. The emergence and the frequent imitation of these idiolectal forms have spread in the group and have created group-specific meanings and functions, which often differ from the original meanings.

Given that the group members have face-to-face relationships with each other, which already existed prior to the WA group, the chat is actively used for *relationship management*. This includes, for example, the organization of meetings or giving advice and support. CS permeates all of these social practices and is used as an unmarked choice in the group. Example (5) contains an excerpt from an episode of talk, in which a pub meeting is planned by the group members:

- (5) 24 Jun 17:16 – Sven: Bin da auch erst um halb nach Fahrplan (Will also only be there at half past according to train schedule) [em] laugh3 [/em]
 24 Jun 17:16 – Sven: Aber ich geb mein bestes (But I'll do my best) [em] beer [/em]
 24 Jun 17:18 – Greta: Top, vllt Treff ich dich ja in der Bahn (Swell, maybe I'll meet you in the train);-)
 24 Jun 17:23 – Sven: Anyway, I have boarded the Bahn (train) now [em] sun-glasses [/em]
 24 Jun 17:23 – Greta: Okay I'm still in my re ([regional express train])
 24 Jun 17:25 – Sven: Then thou shalt not be at St. Martin's Street at the wisely chosen time... [em] disappointed [/em]
 24 Jun 17:26 – Greta: Thus I lay my trust in thee
 24 Jun 17:26 – Greta: On
 24 Jun 17:28 – Sven: And I wyll not dysappoynt thou, mylady. From main station you may proceed via the U11, 107 and 101 trains to reach your beloved destination. [em] ghost [/em]
 24 Jun 17:29 – Sven: Choose wysely but with a firm heart!
 24 Jun 17:29 – Greta: Only to reach it in despair and with an unpleasant acquaintance waiting there [em] disappointed [/em]
 24 Jun 17:30 – Greta: Stark das hat sich sogar gereimt (cool that even rhymed) [em] smile [/em]
 24 Jun 17:31 – Sven: It even rhymes, what have you done? This has created lots of fun!
 24 Jun 17:34 – Greta: Touché [em] twinkle [/em]
 24 Jun 17:35 – Sven: Having arrived at Martin's street, I do now have to use my feet to where is my final destination for tonight's merry sensation.
 24 Jun 17:35 – Sven: Oder so (Or so)^^
 24 Jun 17:36 – Nora: Meine Fresse, da kann ich nicht mithalten... ich frag ganz schnöde: haltet ihr mir auch einen Platz in gebührender Entfernung zu einem gewissen Individuum frei? (Gosh, I can't keep up with that... I ask very simply: could you save me a seat at some distance from a certain individual?) [em] smile [/em] [em] smile [/em]
 24.06.2014, 17:38 – Greta: As you wish Madame
 24.06.2014, 17:38 – Jennifer: Haltet ihr mir auch einen platz frei. Ich fahr gleich nach dem seminar los. (Could you hold a seat for me, too. I'll leave right after the seminar.)
 24.06.2014, 17:40 – Sven: I have now stopped at a bank where I thought I had seen Kramer. Twas not him as I must say, but at least I can now pay [em] ghost [/em]
 24.06.2014, 17:42 – Greta: Bin jetzt da Shakespeare (Am here now Shakespeare)

In this section of the talk, Greta and Sven are talking about how to get to the arranged meeting place. After the code-switch from German to English, introduced by Sven (*Anyway, I have boarded the Bahn now*), the subsequent messages contain several instances of advice-giving on the part of Sven (*From the main station, you may proceed via the U11...*), and are very interesting from a stylistic point of view. The use of an elaborate vocabulary (e.g. *proceed, mylady, beloved, unpleasant acquaintance, merry sensation*) and a marked orthography (e.g. *dysappoynt, wysely, wyll*) are instances of creative language use. Here, the group members mimic (pseudo) archaic language from the early modern English period (cf. Kirner-Ludwig, this volume). This form of language use is possible because, first of all, code-switching seems to be the expected (unmarked) choice and, secondly, the group members are acquainted with each other, and therefore know that such stylistic language choices are deemed positive or appropriate by their fellow group members. Alternatively, one can argue that while code-switching to English in general is unmarked, the creative use of language and style can be regarded as a way of re-marking it. The comment by Nora (i.e. *Gosh, I can't keep up with that... I ask very simply...*) is a reaction to the creative language use of Sven and Greta, and seems to support the assumption that the stylistic choice does indeed re-establish markedness in the utterance. Nora's meta-comment expresses her admiration for their linguistic skills and, at the same time, declares that her creative language skills might be inferior to those of Sven and Greta. In the final meta-comment of this episode, Sven is even referred to as *Shakespeare*.

Example (6) contains an episode of talk, in which Karl communicates to the group that he has completed an excursion report, upon which he receives compliments and support from the group:

- (6) 25 Jun 23:18 – Karl: [vm] “Also ich hab den Bericht jetzt mal an euch geschickt, und würde mich freuen, wenn da die eine oder andere Reaktion kommen würde, ja?! (So, I have sent you the report and would appreciate getting some feedback, okay?!)” [/vm]
 26 Jun 09:34 – Diana: *Splendid Text* [em] *thumbs_up* [/em]
 26 Jun 10:18 – Nora: *I agree!!! Also very diplomatic language describing the dance session* [em] *sunglasses* [/em]
 26 Jun 10:19 – Nora: Ich les es nachher nochmal im Hinblick auf Kommasetzung etc. (*I'll read it again later paying special attention to comma placement etc.*) but for the moment, the verdict is TOP!!!!
 26 Jun 10:20 – Nora: [em] *thumbs_up* [/em]
 26 Jun 10:20 – Greta: *Stop that spoiling! I still have to read it:-P*
 26 Jun 10:43 – Sven: *No, the verdict is: absolutely splendid!* [em] *thumbs_up* [/em] [em] *beer* [/em]
 [...]

- 26 Jun 21:57 – Karl: [vm] “Kollegen, der Bericht ist jetzt fertig, mit Bildern, in PDF. (*Mates, the report is now finished, with pictures, in PDF.*)” [/vm]
- 26 Jun 21:58 – Nora: [em] *thumbs_up* [/em]
- 26 Jun 22:06 – Diana: *Tá sin ar fheabhas!*
- 26 Jun 22:08 – Diana: Angeblich heißt das (*This is supposed to mean*) “*That’s splendid*” auf irisch (*in Irish*) ... [em] *laugh3* [/em]
- 26 Jun 22:09 – Nora: gut, dass du die Übersetzung gleich mitgeliefert hast (*nice of you to add the translation*) [em] *thumbs_up* [/em] [em] *laugh3* [/em]
- 26 Jun 22:10 – Karl: [img] *screenshot of report* [/img]
- 26 Jun 22:11 – Jennifer: *Chic*
- 26 Jun 22:17 – Diana: Sieht super aus! (*Looking awesome!*)

Prior to this episode, Sven proposed to share the article with the group and called on the group to have a peer review, which now results in positive feedback for Karl’s work. The use of an Irish expression (*Tá sin ar fheabhas!*) alludes to the shared time in Ireland and, at the same time, indicates meta-awareness of the group-specific expression *splendid*. In the course of the episode, references to the report are made and the group members praise content and layout (e.g. *the verdict is TOP, the verdict is absolutely splendid, splendid text, great layout, chic, sieht super aus*).

A further social function of the chat group is to mock outsiders. An example of this can be found in the following episode:

- (7) 2 Jul 21:00 – Karl: [vm] “Ganz ehrlich, ich hab keinen Bock, dass Karina jetzt immer bei den Pub-Abenden dabei ist. (*Seriously, I have no desire for Karina to always come to the pub nights from now on.*)” [/vm]
[...]
- 2 Jul 21:01 – Greta: [vm] “Aber kommt, Leute, den einen Pub-Abend machen wir jetzt noch. Ich mein beim letzten Mal war sie ja auch echt okay. (*But come on, people, we can still do this one pub night. I mean, she was really okay last time.*)” [/vm]
- 2 Jul 21:02 – Karl: [vm] “*I mean you’re right, let’s endure her for the time being.*” [/vm]
- 2 Jul 21:03 – Sven: [vm] “*I mean it’s okay, ich bin dann im Pub, habe mein Guinness, und en Burger meinetwegen noch, dann ist die Welt doch in Ordnung. (I will be in the pub, have my Guinness, and a burger for all I care, then the world’s all right.)*” [/vm]
[...]
- 2 Jul 21:04 – Diana: Wir bestellen ihr einfach eine Suppe, dann ist die auch zufrieden und ruhig (*we will simply order a soup for her, then she will be content and quiet*) [em] *laugh2* [/em]
- 2 Jul 21:05 – Sven: [vm] “*Have it porridge for Karina.*” [/vm]

2 Jul 21:05 – Karl: [vm] “No no no. No soup for Karina. Kindly ask her to go to the supermarket and grab a drink there. Alternatively, bring it to the pub and consume it there, that would be her style. “The cheapest water there is, please.” [/vm]

2 Jul 21:05 – Sven: *soupermarket* [em] tongue1 [/em]

2 Jul 21:06 – Karl: [vm] “Der Sven haut hier wieder was raus, ja: (Sven is always good for a joke, yeah:) ‘soupermarket’. Have it goldig. (cute.)” [/vm]

In (7), the group members collaboratively express their dislike towards an outsider (... *I have no desire for Karina to always come to the pub nights from now on*). Nevertheless, Greta seems to sympathize with this person and comes to her defence (*I mean, she was really okay last time.*). Sven and Karl continue to mock her with the help of some narrative means. This episode of talk about an outsider implies a sense of in- and out-group identity, which is based on the dichotomy of ‘us versus them’, or in this case, ‘us versus her’ (cf. Kleinke & Bös, this volume). In other words, the shared dislike of the person who does not belong to the group, and the practice of mocking and bashing her, allow the group members to feel understood by their friends and affirmed in their collaborative view.

The qualitative analysis indicates that CS is used in nearly all episodes of the exchange and can be considered to be the overall unmarked choice in the WA group. Furthermore, it has been shown how CS is used to realize discursive functions, e.g. quoting or indexing addressees, as well as social functions, e.g. managing relationships by giving feedback and organising meetings, or mocking outsiders. The members frequently employ various group-specific expressions that have acquired group-intrinsic meanings. CS to English is apparently reserved for specific purposes, e.g. to be creative, to develop jokes, to mimic (pseudo-)archaic forms of English and imitate a teacher code.

Throughout the social and linguistic practices in the group, its members have been shown to construct or negotiate facets of their own group identity. The role of WA in that process should not be underestimated. Users draw on a variety of channels to communicate social meaning, e.g. the use of voice messages, images and emoticons, which complement the written text. In the following section, these findings will be discussed and tested against user data, which are drawn from a group-specific questionnaire.

5. Questionnaire results and discussion

Taking into account the findings of this study, a number of observations can be made. Given the users’ creativity and their high proficiency in English (due to their shared role of students of English), it is not surprising that instances of CS dominate

the conversation. The common practice of mixing both codes is indexical of social negotiations, and reinforces facets of group identity, not least because it is done and accepted by everybody. In addition to that, the WA group is quasi-private, since it consists of the WA group members only, constituting a further factor that affects the negotiation of both individual and group identity.

The questionnaire was distributed to the six participants of the WA group and aimed to elicit their self-assessment as regards their linguistic and social practices. The ethnographic data confirms that a major motive for CS between English and German is to be funny and creative. The English code is predominantly employed to mimic “legendary phrases coined by professors” (Sven) and to “keep up with ‘traditions’ such as *splendid*, *have it* or *what have you*” (Greta). A couple of informants claim that using English is a natural and mostly unconscious decision for them. Nevertheless, the majority of the informants agree that they believe they use German more frequently than English because they feel more confident when expressing thoughts and feelings in their mother tongue.

The quantitative analysis found that Sven and Karl engage in CS more frequently than the other group members. This finding is largely supported by the informants’ self-assessment as regards participation frequency. All informants agree that Karl and Sven are the most frequent users of *GerEng* messages, because they are deemed “fans of Anglophone countries/cultures”, like imitating the speech of lecturers, and simply want to come across as ‘funny’. The questionnaire findings further indicate that none of the informants would be surprised if other group members sent them a message in English. This lends further evidence to the fact that CS is indeed the overall unmarked choice in the WA group. In addition to that, the quantitative analysis revealed that there are user-specific participation patterns, with Karl and Sven being the most active users of the group (cf. Table 4). In the questionnaire, they evaluated the regularity of their participation accordingly. The assessed degrees of participation by Greta and Nora largely resemble the actual degrees of their participation. For Jennifer and Diana there is a clear mismatch between assessed participation and actual participation. This discrepancy can be explained by their late entry into the group, i.e. their assessment is likely to be influenced by their routine participation patterns at the time of data collection, which might not have been fully established at the onset of the group chat.

The findings of this study indicate that CS is used as a creative tool to fulfil various discursive and social functions in the WA group. As illustrated in the qualitative analysis, the use of group-specific forms of expression shapes the identity of the group, and creates a sense of meta-linguistic awareness. The additional information obtained through the questionnaire indicates that all of the informants are aware of at least some typical expressions that are typical for the group such as: *have it* (5x), *splendid* (4x), *but then again* (4x), *Kollege* (2x), and *Guinness* (2x). This proves

that these expressions take on an important role in the discourse, and can thus be regarded as unmarked, group-specific terms. It is extremely unlikely that the keyboard software (see Section 3.1.1) has an influence on the use of these expressions since they appear in (spoken) voice messages and in face-to-face contexts alike.

The motives as to why the informants take part in the WA group largely confirm the findings of the qualitative analysis. The most prominent social functions mentioned are to keep in touch with friends, to plan meetings and events (e.g. barbecues, pub tours), to share funny stories and pictures, and to get feedback and advice. WA is deemed a social mode that helps to manage relationships effectively. On a scale from 1 (“socially distant”) to 10 (“face-to-face like”), the group average for the social rank of WA is 6.8. The high extent to which WA helps group members to manage their social relationships in the group is confirmed by a group average of 8.2 on a scale from 1 (“totally unhelpful”) to 10 (“totally helpful”). The group chat allows all group members to keep in touch and be able to communicate with each other quasi-simultaneously. Furthermore, group activities can be planned in a convenient fashion, which, at the same time, creates a feeling of togetherness among the group members.

Despite the social advantages that WA offers, a caveat has to be made: the lack of synchronicity and extra-linguistic cues, both of which are present in face-to-face conversations, cannot wholly be replaced by the mode. In other words, WA cannot fully replace the act of talking to somebody face-to-face. Nevertheless, WA is considered a very effective tool to manage already established relationships. Apart from some general security and privacy issues, WA offers convenient, low-cost communication and is widely used. It allows to constantly (re-)negotiate facets of group identity and amplify the social ties between the participants and promote linguistic conventions with group-specific meanings.

Both the screen data and the user data are influenced by the socio-technical idiosyncrasies of WA (see Section 3.1). The fact that WA is technically asynchronous determines various pragmatic and interactional behaviours, i.e. what expectations users might have as regards response intervals. In addition, the high degree of transcript persistency heightens the users’ metalinguistic awareness. The informal nature of the data is largely determined by the multimodality of WA, e.g. sending voice messages produces spoken data and is more similar to natural conversation than plain text. These examples again illustrate that the language data need to be regarded as the product of the socio-technical structures of the WA group.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate code-switching behaviour and processes of identity construction in a digital community of practice in WhatsApp. One of the most significant findings of this study on the patterns and functions of CS in an informal WA group chat is that CS between German (L1) and English (L2) is the overall unmarked choice. The English code is used by the six participants for various group-specific purposes, such as being funny or referring to shared experiences in Ireland. The second major finding is that CS and other social practices (e.g. using group-specific vocabulary, providing support, mocking outsiders) are developed collaboratively. These practices contribute to the formation and constant re-negotiation of a shared group identity. The high degree of homogeneity in the group as well as the users' linguistic creativity were shown to be prominent prerequisites in the process of developing a sense of togetherness. The evidence from this research supports the idea that WA, not least because of its multimodal nature, functions as a mediator of social relationships and amplifier of group identity online.

However, the findings of the current study are subject to at least three limitations. Firstly, the analysis of a relatively small-sized corpus sample (only 43 days of interaction) cannot yield representative findings for a DD mode like WA as a whole. The results are merely representative of the WA group chat of this study, and thus only indicate trends for the role of WA in general. A larger sample or additional WA datasets could provide further insights into such practices.

Secondly, the current study followed an intra-mode design by focusing on one DD mode only. An alternative approach, pursuing an inter-mode design, could yield two or more comparable datasets from similar DD modes, and hence allow for a cross-mode investigation of social phenomena. It would also be interesting to assess the interplay between the use of various channels of communication in WA (text messages vs. voice messages) and the respective communicative intentions.

Thirdly, the current study is limited by the fact that there is no WA-specific framework which allows for the uniform analysis of multi-modal platform. For the purpose of this study, various frameworks and methods had to be combined in order to make analysis possible in the first place. Moreover, there is always a risk involved in using methods and frameworks that were originally designed for other studies and specific data. Future research should therefore also concentrate on the development of theoretical frameworks which are tailored to the specific communication structures of multimodal DD modes such as WA.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, the findings of this study still offer valuable insights into how WA is used for the management of social relations and how facets of an offline group identity can be mediated and reinforced online.

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Identity and metapragmatic acts in a student forum discussion thread

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Starting with the idea that identity is dynamic, interactive and contextualised, the present study offers a close reading of a discussion thread from an online student discussion forum. During the discussion, the interactants both construct identity with language and use identity in order to frame and evaluate their own and others' contributions. The discussion turns into a metapragmatic debate in which the interactants move away from the topic of the discussion to talk about who is allowed to say what on the topic. The analysis shows how a participant whose identity is flexible is challenged by the other participants, for whom her identity is defined from the beginning, as she self-positions as an outsider. Her contributions are evaluated against this positioning, and for the others her identity resists change.

Keywords: identity construction, metapragmatic acts, positioning, self-positioning, negotiation, evaluation, online interaction, discussion forum

1. Introduction

This paper offers a close reading of a discussion thread on an online student discussion forum based in the UK. The thread is initially about the difficulties faced by students during the first weeks at university, but after a while the discussion changes its direction and becomes a debate on who is allowed to say what in the forum. The debate centres on a participant who, after identifying herself as non-British, goes on to criticise British habits, which results in her statements being read and evaluated against this background by other (British) participants. In other words, identities and ideologies become intertwined in the discussion. The paper explores two questions: how the participants of the discussion construct identity with language, and how they – explicitly or implicitly – use identity in order to frame their statements and evaluate those of others.

The starting point of this study is the definition of identity as “a discursive construct that emerges in interaction”, provided by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 587). More specifically, the study focuses on the role of indexicality in the construction of identity, i.e. how participants indicate their own and others’ identity positions in interaction. It thus contributes to the growing number of studies in which discourse analysts strive “to show not only the centrality of the role of language in the construction and transmission of identities, but also the concrete forms in which and through which language practices index such identities” (De Fina, 2006, p. 351).

The present study highlights the role of the participants of the interaction and their reflexive awareness of the communicative act they are involved in. In practice, the analysis focuses on instances in which the participants themselves talk about their own and others’ identities and how those identities frame their interaction. The indexical construction of identity is therefore approached through the lens of metapragmatics. With metapragmatic acts, participants can comment on their own and their fellow participants’ contributions to the interaction. Earlier research has identified how metapragmatic acts can be used in, for instance, the negotiation of appropriateness (Tanskanen, 2007, 2014) and rudeness (Kleinke & Bös, 2015). This study looks at how they are used in the negotiation of identity, as the participants of the discussion forum construct their own and others’ identities and evaluate language use against these identities.

2. Constructing identity

2.1 Identity and interaction

Recent research has established that the construction of identity is dynamic, interactive and contextualised (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; De Fina, 2003; Delahunty, 2012; Kopytowska, 2012; Waugh, 2010). In the words of Bucholtz and Hall (2005, pp. 585–586), identity is “a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories”. Rather than making use of identity categories, the meanings of which have been defined in advance, interactants negotiate the meanings while interacting.

Studies on identity construction in digital discourse confirm the idea of identity as flexible and negotiated. Locher and Hoffmann (2006) focus on the emerging identity of a fictional expert advice-giver. Identity construction in Facebook profiles and status updates has been investigated by Bolander and Locher (2010), Locher

and Bolander (2015) as well as Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008). Page (2011) looks at storytelling as a means of performing identity in social networks, while Delahunty (2012) addresses the construction of learner identity on a post-graduate student discussion forum. Like the present study, all of these share a view of identity as complex, social, emergent, created and negotiated in context.

De Fina (2006, p. 355) reminds us, however, that negotiable though they may be, identities are neither solely nor exclusively locally negotiated, but also based on shared ideologies and beliefs. Ideological factors play a significant role in the construction of group identity in particular, as the members of a group negotiate “who they are, what the criteria for membership in their group are, how they relate to members of other groups and what their goals and values are” (van Dijk, 1998, p. 129; see also Waugh, 2010, p. 82). The debate analysed in the present study shows the members of the British group in an ideological battle with the participant who initially identifies as non-British.

In their theorising review of identity research, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) suggest five different principles that cover the study of identity. The first one, that identity is emergent, social and cultural, has already been discussed above. The second, the positionality principle, states that identity encompasses several levels of categories: macro-level demographic categories, local cultural positions and temporary interactionally specific roles. The relationality principle refers to the fact that identities are phenomena that acquire their social meaning in relation to other available identity positions. The partialness principle states that identity is always partial, produced through contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of self and other. Finally, according to the indexicality principle, identity is constructed in language use by overt identity labels, presuppositions and implicatures, evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk and participant roles, as well as style and code choices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). While all of these are relevant, the last is especially important for the present study, which approaches the construction of identity from the perspective of metapragmatics.

2.2 Identity and metapragmatics

Metapragmatic acts are an important linguistic resource which can indexically construct identity. These acts are one way of signalling reflexive or metapragmatic awareness, i.e. the understanding that interactants have of how language is used for interaction (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Culpeper & Haugh, 2014, p. 237; Verschueren, 2000). Metapragmatic acts are a visible sign of the management of discourse (Caffi, 1998), whereby interactants reflect on their own and other people’s communicative behaviour. Interactants use these acts to comment on their own and

their fellow interlocutors' contributions. They can be used, for instance, for clarifying or rephrasing contributions in case of evident or potential misunderstanding (e.g. *that is not what I was saying!*), or making assessments of the appropriateness of contributions visible (e.g. *I see you're missing the point*) (Caffi, 1998; Hübler & Bublitz, 2007; Tanskanen, 2007).

Metapragmatic acts are not concerned with the topic of the discussion but comment on the communicative act itself, and they may be self- or other-directed. To take an example from Hübler and Bublitz (2007, pp. 17–18), several functions can be posited for an other-directed metapragmatic act such as *You are repeating yourself*, depending on the context. It is evaluative to begin with, expressing a negative attitude towards a fellow interactant, but it can also be provocative and conflictual. It may be organisational in nature, signalling an attempt to gain the floor, or it can address a communicative norm, such as brevity. Lastly, it may serve to create or modify identity, as the utterance can help profile the interactant as critical, with a social status that entitles them to utter it.

Digital discourse is a fruitful area for studying metapragmatic behaviour, because as Georgakopoulou (2003) notes, (text-based) computer-mediated discourse shows a heightened degree of metalinguistic awareness due to the lack of non-verbal cues (see also Hancock & Dunham, 2001). By looking at metapragmatic acts used in the negotiation of identity, the present study tackles one strategy with which interactants can express their metalinguistic awareness.

3. Material: *The Student Room*

The material for the present study comes from *The Student Room* (TSR), which advertises itself as the “largest student community in the world – over 1.8m members” (thestudentroom.co.uk). The online community website comprises several sections, from “Applying to uni” to “Careers and Jobs” to the discussion forums, where you can “discuss anything – universities, health, lifestyle, relationships & more”. The description of the community indicates its participatory, interactional focus: the participants are responsible for creating most of the content.

The online discussion analysed in the present paper took place in September 2006 in the discussion forum of TSR. The topic of the discussion is *Anyone else finding Freshers week difficult?*; Freshers Week is the period at the beginning of the academic year, the purpose of which is to orient and welcome new students to a university. The discussion consists of 172 posts, and altogether 52 participants took part in the discussion. Most of them contributed to the topic at hand, i.e. Freshers Week, but some participants, although ostensibly talking about the original topic,

created a new topic for the discussion, a debate on who is allowed to say what about Freshers Week on the forum. Four participants in particular, Laurelei, Zigzag1, Timeoff and Rachel2,¹ took part in this parallel metapragmatic discussion. Laurelei contributed altogether 20 posts to this discussion, Zigzag1 seven, Timeoff 16 and Rachel2 14; some other posters participated with one or two posts.

That a discussion on an online forum can turn into a debate or even a conflict is a finding that has emerged again and again in research on digital discourse. Early studies, such as Baron (1984) and Hiltz, Johnson and Turoff (1986) identified a greater frequency of arguments in electronic than in face-to-face interaction. Subsequent research has corroborated the finding that disagreement and hostility are common in online interaction (see e.g. Adrianson & Hjelmquist, 1991; Avgerinakou, 2003; Bolander, 2012; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Graham, 2007). Research has also drawn attention to the fact that participants in electronic interactions use various affiliative and facilitative strategies in order to avoid communicative failure (Garcia & Jacobs, 1999; Hancock & Dunham, 2001; Harrison, 2000; Tanskanen, 2007). Indeed, electronic interaction seems to possess its own principles of politeness and impoliteness (Graham, 2008; Haugh, 2010; Locher, 2010).

The Student Room upholds a moderation policy according to which posts submitted to the discussion forum may be edited or deleted and entire threads closed (TSR “Terms and conditions”). In order to avoid intervention by moderators, participants must follow six community guidelines: be friendly, keep it clean, stay on topic, no cheating, no advertising, keep it legal (TSR “Community guidelines”). There were no comments or other activity by the moderators during the Freshers Week discussion, indicating that the moderators felt no need to intervene and that none of the participants requested such intervention.

4. Identity and metapragmatic acts in the Freshers Week discussion

4.1 Laurelei’s self-positioning as continental

The Freshers Week discussion starts with a seemingly innocent inquiry about people’s thoughts on Freshers Week, posted by Badnick:

1. In line with current ethical practice, the nicknames of the participants have been changed (see e.g. Bruckman 2002; Ortega & Zyzik, 2008).

- (1) It's only my second day here so I know that things will be a bit unsettled for a while, but I am feeling really disorientated and weird about the whole thing. How's everyone else feeling? It feels so odd to be in a completely different place and not have any friends (even though I have been out socialising!)

(Badnick, #1, 20/09/06 18:21)²

The discussion continues with several participants giving their thoughts on Freshers Week. In the next 57 posts, participants describe how they loved or hated Freshers week, how they survived it, and how one should just try to enjoy it. With post number 59, posted by Laurelei, a change in the direction of the discussion occurs:

- (2) i didnt like freshers too much either. I did go and talked to people, but they mostly hang out in our kitchen and get drunk on the very bad british wine (**coming from the continent, I'm entitled to say this**) and talk about stuff I dont care about.. then they go out, get pissed and come back at 3am, screaming and running up and down corridors. The nice people I've met were on the course inductions, so I am hoping to get along a lot better with the people on my different courses.

The biggest thing about Freshers seems to be to get as drunk as possible as many nights as possible – totally incomprehensible to me, and childish in my opinion, too. Thats something you do when you 15 or 16... or I might be wrong. whatever.

(Laurelei, #59, 23/09/06 19:51)

Laurelei's post and especially her³ comment, indicated in bold, marks a turning point in the discussion. The gist of her post is that she did not enjoy Freshers Week nor the fact that many people got drunk, on of all things, *the very bad british wine*. What follows this is a self-directed metapragmatic act, and the fact that it is in brackets emphasises its metapragmatic nature: it is extra information on why Laurelei thinks she has the right to say what she is saying. The first part, *coming from the continent*, is Laurelei performing an identity act (Waugh, 2008, 2010): she self-positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) as continental. Interestingly, Laurelei's

2. The participant's name is given in brackets after the post, followed by the number of the post in the thread and the time it was posted. All extracts from the discussion are unedited; where lengthy extracts had to be abridged, deletions are indicated with three dots in square brackets [...].

3. By clicking on the participant's nickname, their member page with personal information is displayed. Some participants have added a photograph, most give their first name or indicate their gender with a symbol. I have used this information for the personal pronouns used to refer to the participants. When little or no personal information is given, I use the singular reference 'they'.

personal information on her member page reveals that she was “born and raised in Southern Germany”. For some reason, in her post she chooses to identify herself as continental rather than German (on the construction of national identity, see de Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 1999).

The identity act is combined with an evaluative act, with which she describes her post as appropriate: *I’m entitled to say this*. In its entirety, Laurelei’s metapragmatic act is telling the other participants in the interaction that her status as someone coming from the Continent entitles her to criticise British wine. Since The Freshers Week discussion is about practices in British universities and it takes place on a discussion forum based in Britain, Laurelei clearly self-positions as non-British – as an outsider – with her act. She ends her post with another self-directed metapragmatic act, *I might be wrong*, which she uses to mitigate her opinion about the childishness of getting drunk.

The first reply she gets is very supportive, stating that Laurelei should not worry, mature friends “just take a bit longer to find” (Twopence, #62). Laurelei replies and explains that after experiencing immature behaviour in boarding school, she would now “rather have something else” (Laurelei, #63). The next post (3), however, has a very different tone. With his comment, Zigzag1 claims that Laurelei’s post shows a racist attitude, presumably against the British, and that this means that she is not going to be successful in finding friends. Within practically a couple of minutes, Zigzag1 receives two replies (Examples (4) and (5)):

- (3) Your racist, stuck-up attitude is not gonna take you very far in the friendmaking game. (Zigzag1, #64, 23/09/06 20:48)
- (4) what was ‘racist’ about that? they don’t like british wine?
...erm.
I don’t like any wine, doesn’t mean I’m racist against every wine producing nation in the world. (Hyperactive, #65, 23/09/06 20:52)
- (5) she insulted our wine!! someone – burn her
zigzag, i can see what youre trying to say but racism isnt something you should casually accuse people of (Twopence, #66, 23/09/06 20:54)

In Example (4), Hyperactive tells Zigzag1 that Laurelei’s post was not racist, because not liking British wine is not racist. Twopence in (5) first uses sarcasm (*she insulted our wine!! someone – burn her*), but continues by telling Zigzag1 that while he can understand his point, he thinks that accusations of racism go too far. What is interesting in the post by Twopence is the identity work done with the possessive pronoun *our*, with which Twopence self-positions as British and creates a contrast with Laurelei: *she* (who is not British) *insulted our* (British) *wine*. Zigzag1 responds with the following self-directed metapragmatic act (6):

(6) It was a joke.

(Zigzag1, #68, 23/09/06 21:02)

Claiming that you were not serious or that you were trying to be humorous is not uncommon in online debates and this is exactly what Zigzag1 does as well. In other words, with his metapragmatic act he is now saying that the other participants misread his post and failed to see that it was actually a joke. A retrospective labelling of a post as humorous has the effect of shifting the responsibility from the writer of the post to the readers, who misunderstood the intentions of the writer.

(7) well put a :) at the end then!

(Twopence, #69, 23/09/06 21:03)

Twopence in (7) tells Zigzag1 that the responsibility lies with him: if his intention was indeed to be humorous, he should have added an emoticon, a smiley, to indicate that he was not being serious. According to Twopence, Zigzag1 should not have expected the other participants to read his post correctly without a smiley. Twopence's suggestion is an indication that emoticons are seen as carrying illocutionary force (Dresner & Herring, 2010), and that they can help clarify post intention (Thompson & Filik, 2016; see also Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2007).

4.2 Laurelei's self-positioning as British

Laurelei returns to the discussion with the following reply to Zigzag1 (8):

(8) [quotation from the original post by Zigzag1]

doesnt sound too jokingly to me...

anyway. It's not racist. I am a British citizen myself, so go figure. I simply dont like the wine people buy and drink here.

I think the people are nice, but immature. Sorry for being "stuck up" if I am not too fond of immaturity... I guess you love immaturity, and think its the way to go. Have fun.

(Laurelei, #72, 23/09/06 21:22)

Laurelei does not accept Zigzag1's claim that he was joking; according to her evaluation, his post does not appear humorous. What follows is somewhat surprising: after identifying herself as continental in her first post, Laurelei now self-positions as British. She states that her opinion was not racist because she is in fact a British citizen – but one who simply does not like British wine. From her position as the other, created with her first post, she is now moving towards being “one of us” on this British students' discussion forum.

Laurelei's shifting identity goes unnoticed by the next poster, who, judging by the time stamps, may actually have been composing their post simultaneously with Laurelei:

(9) [quotation from the original post by Zigzag1]

I think I would rather call it “mature attitude”. I can’t see what is stuck up about finding “young teenage games” in the dead of the night unsuitable for a supposedly “grown up” student. [...]

As to the racist...where did your text analysis find that?;

(Timeoff, #73, 23/09/06 21:25)

Timeoff in (9) is replying to Zigzag1’s original post to inform him that Laurelei’s attitude is not stuck up or racist. Zigzag1 reacts quickly:

(10) I’ll repeat for any people who can’t read: it was a joke, I was mockingly making fun of the fact that Laurelei doesn’t like British wine and thinks she has a right, as a continental person, to dis British things, even though she chooses to study here.
(Zigzag1, #74, 23/09/06 21:44)

Zigzag1 repeats his claim that his post should have been read as a joke, at the same time rebuking Timeoff for not reading his later post. He offers a metapragmatic explanation of what he was trying to say with his post. It is clear that for him Laurelei remains continental; although he criticises Timeoff for not reading posts, he himself seems to have missed Laurelei’s latest post. There is also an undercurrent in Zigzag1’s post, according to which people who choose to study in Britain should not be critical towards British “things”. Timeoff is not offended by the rebuke:

(11) A suggestion: your phrasing was not really clear, making it difficult to see it was meant as a joke. You did explain, mind you others didn’t see the joke either. Just post a smilie or something after your post (as suggested), then these misunderstandings will maybe not happen. :)
(Timeoff, #77, 23/09/06 22:03)

In (11), Timeoff offers a metapragmatic evaluation of Zigzag1’s original post, repeating the advice given by a previous poster on the use of a smiley, which would make the illocutionary force of the post clearer and help others read the post correctly (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Thompson & Filik, 2016). The following morning, Zigzag1 replies to Timeoff:

(12) [quotation from Timeoff’s post #77]

Yeah I see what you mean.

I’d like to explain, for clarification, the joke. It was sarcasm in which I say “you’re racist for not liking British wine”, when we all know British wine is terrible.

(Zigzag1, #86, 24/09/06 09:22)

Example (12) is the third post from Zigzag1 explaining his original post. After submitting the posts in Examples (6) and (10), he still obviously feels the need to explain his intention retrospectively. His story has also slightly changed: in (10), he said that he was making fun of the fact that Laurelei was criticising British wine

although she chooses to study in Britain, whereas in (12) he is saying that everyone knows that British wine is terrible, and this is the reason why his post should have been read as sarcastic. There is no explicit indication in Zigzag1's post that he has read Laurelei's post in which she identifies herself as British, but it is interesting to speculate on his usage of the pronoun *we*. Zigzag1 points out that *we all know British wine is terrible*. Is this perhaps an inclusive *we* which covers everyone in the discussion, including Laurelei (on inclusive vs. exclusive uses of the first person plural pronouns, see Kleinke & Bös, this volume)? She seems to think so:

- (13) okay, sorry :)
 a smilie really would have helped ;) (Laurelei #87, 24/09/06 13:38)

In (13) Laurelei acknowledges and accepts Zigzag1's explanation that his post was a sarcastic joke, pointing out what others have also suggested, that a smiley would have been helpful. Laurelei's post seems to end the debate on racism and British wine, and indeed for a while the discussion continues on the original topic. i.e. people's feelings about Freshers Week. This lasts until post #107, posted by Rachel2 three days after Laurelei's last post:

- (14) [quotation from Laurelei's original post]
 Binge drinking is a deeply rooted part of British culture. And frankly your comments about it are quite insulting.
 This is not a joke. Quit criticising our culture or go somewhere else to uni.
 (Rachel2, #107, 27/09/06 20:31)

Rachel2 was not posting when the debate started, so it is likely that she found the thread later, read the posts and then decided to reply to Laurelei's post with a metapragmatic evaluation. That she has read the posts becomes clear in her post which echoes Zigzag1's words in (10): Laurelei should go and study somewhere else if she cannot help criticising British habits. Moreover, Rachel2's self-directed *this is not a joke* is a direct reference to Zigzag1's posts, and she goes as far as to claim that binge drinking is a key part of British culture, and that it is insulting if someone criticises it. Whether or not she has seen Laurelei's self-positioning as British is unclear, but it is obvious that Laurelei is not included in the possessive pronoun in *our culture* (see Kleinke & Bös, this volume). The first reply to Rachel2 comes from Timeoff:

- (15) I wouldn't call binge drinking "culture". Just because someone doesn't agree with a habit and actually has the courage to say so, does not mean they are criticising a country or it's people. Get real! That kind of comment is really not needed, out of place in this thread (go and make a: "kick foreigners out" thread) and apart from that it is xenophobic.
 And before you say it: I may live in Germany but I am British.
 (Timeoff, #113, 27/09/06 22:07)

Timeoff does not agree with Rachel2 that binge drinking is culture. They are also clearly evaluating Rachel2's comment as inappropriate for the current thread (*go and make a: "kick foreigners out" thread*). Timeoff concludes with an identity act, self-positioning as British though living in Germany. Timeoff seems to worry about being classified as a foreigner by the other posters because the place of residence indicated on their member page is not Britain. Rachel2 holds on to her opinion:

- (16) What british people say about their own is one thing. I don't go on continental forums and criticize all the things I hate about their countries. The poster made it quite clear what she thought of what is a key part of what the Brits do. I find it totally offensive, and inappropriate. (Rachel2, #114, 27/09/06 22:10)

Rachel2 repeats her evaluation of Laurelei's post as offensive and inappropriate, and Laurelei's self-positioning as British remains unacknowledged as well. Rachel2 clearly perceives Laurelei as continental and non-British: in other words, as someone who, unlike the British themselves, should not criticise Britain. In her reply (17), Laurelei starts with this:

- (17) I am British.
 you cannot honestly think drinking til you drop can be called "culture", because if you do, sorry, you're a sad person. I also do not see the point in telling me to go somewhere else if i dont like the drinking culture, as I can avoid it. I just think it is merely stupid, unhealthy and immature. 15 year olds do that, then you know your limit...
 [...]
 I am not saying I dont like the British. I don't like binge drinking. In any country. And it is not culture (Laurelei, #115, 27/09/06 22:21)

Laurelei first performs an identity act, self-positioning as British. She then explains what she thinks about binge drinking and that to her it is not culture; she repeats many of the points she already made in her original post in which she identified herself as continental. She gets an almost immediate reply from Rachel2:

- (18) It most certainly is part of the British identity and part of their culture. Culture is anything we do, that monkeys don't do. Whether you think it is any good or not is another matter, it doesnt make it not culture. How you can class something as 'immature' which is engaged in by such a large proportion of 18–30 year olds, and a lesser though significant portion of 30–50 year olds baffles me. Drunken behaviour may be immature, but that is due to drunkenness. I suspect you were just using it to be condescending and add punch to your own viewpoint. That's usually the reason people bandy about that word. If you don't like it, fine, don't do it, but slating others for doing it is not going to win you any friends, or make you look remotely sophisticated.
 And what happened to being continental? Or is that only when it suits you. (Rachel2, #116, 27/09/06 22:29)

Rachel2 is persistent: she still considers binge drinking as culture, because *culture is anything we do, that monkeys don't do*. According to her, Laurelei should not criticise the behaviour even if she does not want to engage in it herself. She evaluates Laurelei's comment as condescending. Laurelei's British identity is finally recognised: Rachel2 wants to know *what happened to being continental*. She concludes by alleging that Laurelei shifts her identity as the need arises.

4.3 Laurelei's self-positioning as someone with a dual nationality

Laurelei's reply in (19) provides an explanation for her shifting identity:

(19) I have a dual nationality.

I did not say I dont like the people that do it. I dont like the act of doing it. I quite like most of the people here around me, and to discourage you, they like me.

I do not try to sound condescending and I dont feel any need to sound sophisticated.

There are two ways of culture. there is the kind that is rooted in history or at least the nearer past as well as the mentality of people. I personally could not count drinking habits as such. They are habits, and we are fooled to saying they are culture because they are such widespread habits, at least in my opinion.

And why would I not be able to class someting as immature, even if 80 year olds were doing it? it would still be immature. and I am saying – just to press this once more – the action is immature, not the people.

I hope I made my point a little clearer. (Laurelei, #119, 27/09/06 22:41)

Laurelei's third identity act sees her self-positioning as a person with a dual nationality. After first presenting herself as continental and later British, she now reveals why her identity seems to be shifting: she is both continental and British. The post also contains a retrospective metapragmatic evaluation of her earlier posts, as she tries to explain what she meant. The time stamps suggest that Timeoff has not seen Laurelei's latest post:

(20) [quotation from Rachel2's post]

Maybe it is a continental thing, speaking one's mind? I must say whilst I don't find it to be extremely considerate towards the mentioned people's feelings it is nowhere near insulting to me. But I guess people are different.

(Timeoff, #120, 27/09/06 22:41)

Timeoff continues to view Laurelei as continental, or at least her behaviour as indicative of a continental background, but does not think it is insulting. It is of course possible that Timeoff sees Laurelei as both continental and British, but that her speaking her mind is more continental than British. Rachel2 is adamant:

- (21) [quotation from Laurelei's post #119]
 Immature is a ridiculous and misleading word that is irritating in itself. ... You deliberately used it to be condescending... Saying what you have said, in the way you have said it, about a 'habit' that is engaged in by millions of people, is going to get responses like mine. (Rachel2, #121, 27/09/06 22:51)

Rachel2's evaluation of Laurelei's posts remains unchanged: to her, Laurelei's opinions and her way of expressing them are irritating, and *millions of people* cannot be wrong in their habit. After this post, the conflict continues with Laurelei and Rachel2 arguing with each other. Timeoff tries to intervene with the following reply to Rachel2's post in which she is accusing Laurelei of just throwing insults with her "continental maturity":

- (22) [quotation from Rachel2's post]
 I for one find you rather tiresome, not only in this thread but in most of the other posts of your's I have come across.
 I think you have made your point, no need to want others to agree to your view. Hammering on about it will not make it more conclusive. You think your way and others think differently. End of discussion. :)
 (Timeoff, #159, 28/09/06 21:32)

Timeoff is very critical of Rachel2's posts and is trying to suggest that it is time to stop the debate because people are not likely to change their opinions. The post is evaluative and critical towards Rachel2, and also clearly organisational in its attempt to end the discussion. The following exchange then takes place:

- (23) I am not going to just walk off and leave the discussion on the note of someone insulting me. (Rachel2, #160, 28/09/06 21:38)
- (24) I dare say, don't be so touchy. You are not exactly mincing your words either. (Timeoff, #161, 28/09/06 21:44)
- (25) I most certainly am not mincing my words, but when someone has no comeback on the actual issue so resorts simply to insults, I find it necessary to highlight the fact. It is not a question of sensitivity. (Rachel2, #162, 28/09/06 21:48)

Despite Timeoff's request to end the discussion, Rachel2 submits two further posts, neither of which shows any attempt towards compromise, after which she withdraws from the debate. In (23), Rachel2 asserts that she is not one to leave in the middle of a debate, while Timeoff in (24) informs her that her words have also been insulting and thus may have been inciting the debate. Example (25) is, in fact, Rachel2's last post in this thread; she never posts again after this. If we compare Rachel2's behaviour to the findings of Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2014) from their study on YouTube polylogues, we can see the same tendencies,

namely that compromise and assent are rare in conflict situations, while withdrawal is the most frequent strategy to end conflict. Rachel2 then receives support from a participant who has remained quiet for a while:

- (26) Rachel2 is not the only person here who was pissed off by Laurelei's comments.
(Zigzag1, #164, 28/09/06 22:12)

Zigzag1 returns to the discussion with an evaluative comment indicating that he was also annoyed by Laurelei. After all the posts in which he declared that he was not serious in accusing Laurelei of racism, that he was merely joking and making fun of bad British wine, he now seems to be confessing that Laurelei's opinions actually irritated him. Timeoff replies with a further appeal for compromise:

- (27) And there were quite a few others who were pissed off by Rachel2's comments.
Why not call it a tie? (Timeoff, #165, 28/09/06 22:22)

This appeal, too, goes unheeded, as Laurelei posts yet again:

- (28) [quotation from Rachel2's post]
Arguing with you is as effective as running into a stone wall and just as tiring.
[...]
Zigzag, whatever I say pisses you off. So why bother reading it? Go have a UKIP party with Rachel
I'll leave it at that and hope people are going to discuss the original topic again, which does seem to be an issue...or did I misunderstand that? Rachel, go on, call me a coward. I am tired of your xenophobic rants.
(Laurelei, #168, 29/09/06 00:55)

With this evaluative and organisational post, tired of arguing with Rachel2, Laurelei informs the others that she is concluding the discussion on her part. She accuses Rachel2 of xenophobia, and the UKIP reference directed to Zigzag1 shows that she thinks he shares Rachel2's views. Laurelei seems convinced that Rachel2 and Zigzag1 will always view her as a foreigner, an outsider, the other. Zigzag1 replies one more time:

- (29) Woah, nice little insult there. Reasoning with you is just as effective as reasoning with a wall, except the wall doesn't bombard everyone with racially motivated insults.
(Zigzag1, #169, 29/09/06 10:09)

In (29), Zigzag1 returns to the theme of his first post in (3) and accuses Laurelei of racially motivated behaviour. Although she previously declared that she is ending the discussion, Laurelei has apparently been following the discussion, and Zigzag1's post prompts her to reply:

- (30) My motives are not racially motivated. How many times do I have to tell you people that I not only *like* the British in general, I also *am* one?

(Laurelei, #170, 29/09/06 10:39)

Laurelei performs her final identity act, self-positioning as British, and argues that her motives are therefore not racially motivated. At this point, the discussion seems to have gone a full circle, and a new participant submits the following post:

- (31) JEEEEZ^^^

So.....anyone else finding Freshers Week difficult? LOL

I know that I was until I came across this thread and read the last 2 pages....

that kept me entertained....LOL

(Hannah, #171, 29/09/06 10:50)

Hannah seems to be amused by the discussion (or at least the last two pages), as she ironically reminds the others of the original topic (*anyone else finding Freshers Week difficult? LOL*). She gets one reply:

- (32) sorry *blushes* I feel mean for spamming all the way through this thread and thus maybe keeping people with real issues away from it. At least it was entertaining to you ;) I just felt I had to try and defend myself, forgetting that it was quite impossible to argue with ultra-conservative patriots like Rachel2 (NOT saying that all British are exactly that. there are – sadly – people like that in every country of the world)

(Laurelei, #172, 29/09/06 10:53)

Laurelei has the final word, as hers is the last post of the thread. She apologises for the fact that she may have kept other participants from posting on the original topic, although many of them did, and explains why she felt compelled to write her posts. In this final post, Laurelei's identity seems to have shifted back to the continental end: her view of *all British* is that of an outsider, the other.

5. Discussion and conclusions

We have seen how the participants of the Freshers Week discussion produce, negotiate and contest identities by positioning themselves and others as specific personas or groups and using metapragmatic acts to evaluate their own and others' language use. The sub-thread is inherently metapragmatic: although the posters are writing under the original topic of the discussion, *Anyone else finding Freshers Week difficult?*, the topic of the sub-thread is actually *Who is allowed to say what about the habits relating to Freshers Week?*. This metapragmatic discussion centres on the identity of one participant, Laurelei, whose initial self-positioning as an outsider defines her identity for the duration of the discussion.

Laurelei's self-positioning as continental sparks the entire debate, although it later emerges that she has a dual nationality. She apparently thinks that a status as a continental person offers extra credibility for her argument that British wine is bad. The continental identity that she claims for herself is used by the other participants in their evaluation of the rest of her post, where she is seen as criticising British drinking habits, and her entire post is labelled as racist. That she later self-positions as British and then as a person with a dual nationality does not change the way she is viewed by the other participants. The other participants position her as a continental person throughout the discussion, and her posts are evaluated against this positioning. For Laurelei, her identity is flexible and negotiated, whereas for the others it is defined from the beginning and resists change (cf. De Fina, 2006, p. 355).

Of the other participants, Timeoff is the only one who explicitly identifies as British (Example 15). Although the others do not explicitly self-position as British, they construct their identity by other means. For instance, some use personal pronouns: Haloflessthan50p talks about *our wine* (Example 5) and Rachel2 about *our culture*. In the posts by Zigzag1, the construction of identity is more implicit and happens through his constant labelling of Laurelei as an outsider – and himself as an insider at the same time (Examples 3, 10 and 29).

The entire discussion can be described as an ideological battle between Laurelei's personal identity and the group identity of the British participants. Zigzag1 and Rachel2 are especially irritated by Laurelei's criticism, and Rachel2 points out in one of her posts (16) that the situation would be different if Laurelei was not an outsider: *what British people say about their own is one thing*. Even though Laurelei self-positions as British, she is never able to fulfil the criteria for membership in the British group (cf. van Dijk, 1998), which she herself seems to accept in her last post in which she views the British with the eyes of an outsider.

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Indeterminate *us* and *them*

The complexities of referentiality, identity and group construction in a public online discussion

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This paper reinvestigates the polarizing effects of indeterminate first- and third-person plural pronouns and determiners (i.e. the *we*-set and the *they*-set) from a Digital Discourse perspective. Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and a cognitive-linguistic approach, it tackles the double-indexical nature of the use of the *we*-set and the *they*-set by the participants of the public discussion forum *UK Debate*. Our analysis of a sample thread considers both the referential and the propositional level and shows how users construct and negotiate potential in- and out-group referents at different degrees of specificity and as ranging between immediate discourse participants and external referents. Our analysis shows how major cognitive domains are triggered and how the specific selections of predications as cognitive access points form oscillating clusters of salient in- and out-group attributes. In this way, the analysis also aims to reveal manifestations of more permanent cultural and mental models.

Keywords: indeterminate first- and third-person-plural pronouns, double indexicality, referentiality, predications, cognitive domains, salience, power

1. Aims, data and methodology

This paper focuses on the use of indeterminate first- and third-person plural pronouns, as well as the respective possessive determiners, as complex cases of identity construction linked to the specific framing conditions in public online discussions. Their polarizing effect as a central means of constructing identities has long been established in the linguistic literature, be it from a social-deictic, cognitive, semantic or (critical) discourse perspective (Bull & Fetzer, 2006; Duszak, 2002; Hart, 2010, p. 49; Helmbrecht, 2002; Jespersen, 1933 [2006]; Lakoff, 1990; Reisigl, 2007; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009). Combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

and cognitive linguistic approaches, our study reinvestigates these ‘collectivisers’ (Hart, 2010, p. 57; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 48) from the perspective of Digital Discourse (DD).

As Langacker points out, “a given [personal] pronoun is usable for an open-ended set of possible referents” (2007, p. 176). In this process, the predications¹ attached to referentially vague pronouns play an important role and can serve as linguistic identity markers (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005a, p. 592). They display complex traces of double indexicality in that they open up a scope for referential clarification (cf. Langacker, 2007, p. 180). At the same time, as linguistic expressions communicated in situated discourse, predications serve as prompts for the construction of mental models of group characteristics at a propositional level (*ibid.*; see also Reisigl and Wodak (2001, p. 46) and Hart (2010, p. 66) on partial overlaps between predication and referencing).²

The analysis draws on a sample thread from the platform *UK Debate*, “Osama Bin Laden dead”, which was started six days after Bin Laden was shot dead in Pakistan on May 2, 2011. It comprises 468 postings and 54,415 words and was chosen as its topic and the high number of participants invite complex patterns of referentiality and identity construction³.

Our paper discusses how participants in this public online discussion use indeterminate *we/us/our* (henceforth: the *we*-set) and *they/them/their* (henceforth: the *they*-set) collectively to construct complex discourse-based conceptualizations of identities. Such conceptualizations also reflect, perpetuate and construct more permanent cultural/mental models in the sense of “socially shared structures and representations” (Hart, 2010, p. 23). Analysing them ‘bottom up’, the way participants use them in a concrete interaction, also contributes to a better understanding of how these conceptualizations are socially shared, “acquired and stored in the

1. The terms *predication* and *predicating* expression are used here to denote linguistic structures at the micro-level of an individual posting that are either part of the *predicate(s) in the wider sense*, including the verbal predicate and its arguments (for instance *we*, *us*, *they*, and *them*) or *head nouns* and their modifiers of the determiners and possessive pronouns *our(s)* and *their(s)*.

2. On propositions, linguistic expressions and mental models see e.g. Evans and Green (2006, pp. 162–163), and from a CDA perspective, van Dijk (2014, p. 44).

3. In this study, the overall word count includes quotations to account for their complex coherence- and cohesion-creating impacts as well as their complex interpersonal functions (see Bös & Kleinke, 2015). The qualitative part of the analysis only considers types and disregards multiple-token realizations, unless these contribute to the explicit negotiation of propositional content such as in Example (2). Though inspired by well-established CDA- and CL-categories, our actual analysis is corpus-based. The data were tagged with the help of MAXQDA, a software programme for qualitative data analysis. Each author tagged the corpus individually, then both discussed fuzzy cases and assigned categories jointly.

individual minds of the community's members" (Dirven, Wolf, & Polzenhagen, 2007, p. 1217).

Methodologically, this paper thus adheres to the *interpretation stage* of CDA, in analysing ongoing discourse practice to observe conceptualization "as an 'online' cognitive process of meaning construction, which takes place during discourse and results in mental representations of the situations and events described" (Hart, 2010, p. 25). Following Evans and Green, we consider conceptualization as "a dynamic process whereby linguistic units serve as prompts for an array of conceptual operations and the recruitment of background knowledge" (2006, p. 162) – see also Hart (2010, p. 25). Our study focuses on the textual manifestations of these conceptualizations. As indicated above, the analysis draws on a range of cognitive linguistic concepts, including Langacker's notion of cognitive construal operations, especially salience operations, such as 'scalar adjustment' (*schematicity*), the construction of 'scope' (*domains*) and processes of 'selection' (*metonymy*) (see e.g. Croft and Cruse (2004), Langacker (2007, 2008), and for an overview and a typology also Hart (2010, pp. 26–27)).

Our analysis focuses particularly on the question of how participants use predicating expressions in their double-indexical function. Thus, after a short outline of notions of identity and referentiality in online discussions (Section 2) and a general overview of the respective pronouns in the corpus (Section 3), we tackle the use of the *we*-set and the *they*-set in our sample material at two levels: First, the negotiation of referential identity will be discussed in Section 4. Here, we are interested in the way users construct and negotiate, at a rather schematic referential level, the referents of the *we*-set as oscillating between immediate discourse participants and external referents (inclusive, exclusive and inverted *we*, and special configurations of partial identity). Analogously, we will provide a close-up investigation of the referential identification of the potential groups projected (more or less clearly) by the use of the *they*-set. As our data will illustrate, the negotiations in the thread are even pursued overtly in meta-discussions. On the second level, discussed in Section 5, we analyse the predicating expressions of the *we*-set and selected groups of the *they*-set in terms of their propositional content and the cognitive domains they provide access to. This allows us not only to identify aspects of emerging identities that users make salient in the discussion but also to gain insights into discursive manifestations of more permanent cultural models of *in-groups* perceived as powerless/underprivileged and their opposing powerful symbolic elite *out-groups*.

2. ‘Identity’ and ‘referentiality’ in public online discussions

Drawing on Duszak, we assume that “human social identities tend to be indeterminate, situational rather than permanent, dynamic and interactively constructed” (2002, pp. 2–3). Our analysis relies on the five principles of identity construction – emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality and partialness – outlined in Bucholtz and Hall (2005a, 2010). Although we fully acknowledge the mutual interdependence of these five principles, our study primarily focuses on indexical means users choose to signal their sometimes oscillating group alignments.

From a DD perspective, it is important that the temporary and interactionally specific participant roles of participants in public online discussions tend to be negotiated in the actual postings due to the unavailability of user-related context information. In our sample thread, complex personal identities of single users cannot take centre stage. Instead, group alignment – largely achieved by referential processes and predications – seems to be an essential factor in the construction of otherwise broad-brushed, condensed participants’ identities. Thus, as Llamas and Watt (2010, p. 2) discuss for offline-communication, belonging or not belonging to certain groups, communities, regions and nations constitutes an important facet of identity construction. Bucholtz and Hall observe a tendency to reduce “complex social variability to a single dimension: *us* versus *them*” (2005b, p. 384), which we handle effortlessly (Schaller & Neuberg, 2008, p. 404) and which is obviously of particular interest with regard to our focus here. As Tajfel and Forgas put it, “[w]e are what we are because they are not what we are” (1981, p. 124). From an evolutionary perspective, Hart argues that “humans have evolved cognitive capacities to (i) categorize coalitional groups and (ii) construct associations between out-group members and negative or threat-connoting cues” (2010, p. 55). Thus, we align with some, and in doing so we distance ourselves from others; yet, we may affiliate to different groups and change our alignments according to context.

In the discourse dynamics of a public forum discussion, there are obviously no clear-cut boundaries delineating *us* and *them*. As meaning is not “only intrinsically connected to use, but also relativized to collections of people who share the same background of experience and the same *world-view*” (Duszak, 2002, p. 4, original emphasis), self- and other-allocations to groups may be constructed completely differently by the individual users when exploiting different techniques of referentiality related to different degrees of referential specificity. Thus, boundary marking is often complex and ambivalent, and we encounter “a continuum of ingroupness–outgroupness, rather than a combination of disparate or partly overlapping constructs” (Duszak, 2002, p. 3).

The special framing conditions and technical affordances of Internet discussion fora such as their polyloguicity (i.e. a high number of participants – 36 users in the thread studied here) and their anonymity (cf. Bös & Kleinke, 2015; Kleinke &

Bös, 2015) foster broadly varied but underspecified ranges of cultural background knowledge. These augment the diversity of potential referents for the *we*- and *they*-sets analysed here. As the next section shows, there are, of course, clear cases, but also instances which remain vague and open for negotiation.

3. Anaphoric, cataphoric and indeterminate pronoun reference in the sample thread

Table 1 provides a quantitative summary of how the *we*-set and the *they*-set are used in the sample thread. Our material features a substantial number of tokens which have a clearly identifiable anaphoric reference to noun phrases in antecedent text. Cataphoric references to noun phrases in succeeding text are less frequent, and they are not straightforwardly determinate, as potential referents might not only be provided in the same posting by the same user, but also in a later posting by another user, where the referential link is the result of their specific individual inferencing processes (cf. Section 4).

Table 1. Referential usage of the *we*-set and the *they*-set in the corpus

| Pronoun/ determiner | Determinate | | Indeterminate (vague) | Total |
|-------------------------|-------------|------------|--------------------------|-------|
| | Anaphoric | Cataphoric | | |
| <i>They</i> | 183 | 4 | 102 | 289 |
| <i>Them</i> | 51 | 3 | 20 | 74 |
| <i>Their(s)</i> | 85 | 0 | 11 | 96 |
| <i>Total</i> | 319 | 7 | 133 | 459 |
| <i>We</i> | 0 | 11 | 134 | 145 |
| <i>Us</i> | 5 | 2 | 48 | 55 |
| <i>Our</i> ^a | 2 | 3 | 46 | 51 |
| <i>Total</i> | 7 | 16 | 228 | 251 |

^a Our data did not contain any strong form of the possessive pronoun *our*.

Yet, as Table 1 also indicates, quite a few pronouns and determiners display indeterminate, vague references. In the context of an anonymous online discussion it is hardly surprising that 91% of the tokens of the *we*-set come without any explicit reference in the thread and rely heavily on the context for disambiguation. However, given the specific topic of the discussion with an expectable set of political actors, it is more intriguing that fuzzy *they/them/their(s)* also feature quite prominently in the thread, accounting for almost one-third of all the relevant instances (28.9%)⁴

4. With regard to the *they*-set, only instances with person/group reference were tagged. Impersonal references (as in *They are our own rules are they not?*) were neglected.

of a fairly frequent lexical token structure. This seems to stand in contrast to the common assumption that humans usually prefer definite to fuzzy or ambiguous reference (e.g. Langacker, 2008, p. 265).⁵

4. Negotiating referential identity – the *we*-set and the *they*-set in indeterminate uses in the sample thread

4.1 The *we*-set

From a functional perspective, *we/us/our* are generally strong means of establishing membership categorization (cf. Bull & Fetzer, 2006, p. 14). Communicative grammars differentiate between inclusive and exclusive *we* and inverted *we*. Inclusive *we* is usually assigned integrative and expressive functions such as solidarity (Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990) and proximity (Hausendorf & Kesselheim, 2002; Helmbrecht, 2002). Exclusive (authorial) *we* comprises editorial *we* (*pluralis modestiae*); coercive *we* and the *pluralis maiestatis* (Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990, p. 129; see also Bull & Fetzer, 2006, p. 13; Kuna, 2016). Inverted *we* refers to a group of people excluding the speaker but including the hearer (cf. Bazzanella, 2002).

From a discursive perspective, Pavlidou (2014, p. 4) refines inclusive uses at a rather schematic deictic level depending on *referential values*, *plurality* and *addresseeclusivity*. She outlines 27 different values in nine combinations, which all focus on *speaker*, *addressee* and *a third party* referring to *just one* or an *open set* of potential referents and addressees. Due to the special framing conditions in online discussion fora, with their delineated groups of participants, one more facet of clusivity emerges in the discussions: *partial inclusivity*, i.e. *we* including the user and some, but not all addressees inside and/or outside the forum (see Figure 1 (Groups 2 and 3) below). Our sample thread also suggests the need for a modification to Pavlidou's (2014, p. 4) *exclusive set*, to be discussed in Section 5.2.

From a cognitive point of view, indeterminate *we/us/our* can be viewed as 'schemata' constructing a referential situation in a rather general way (Radden & Dirven, 2007, p. 23), i.e. as a highly abstract conceptual configuration which participants in the discussion instantiate at different levels of specificity. Typically, potential referents of the *we*-set are described as "a group that includes [...] the speaker" (Langacker, 2007, p. 176; see also Hart, 2010, p. 59). The use of first-person pronouns puts the discourse participants themselves in their relation to others on stage, fulfilling a "dual role" as "subject and object of conception" (Langacker, 2007, p. 183). Yet, our data suggest that in Internet discussion fora, due to their lean

5. But see Langacker (2007, p. 180) on the usefulness of referential vagueness.

ethnographical and other contextual clues, identity often needs to be negotiated more explicitly. Furthermore, in some uses (where users distance themselves from their own in-group),⁶ the referents of *we* and *us* become the *object* rather than the *subject* of conception and go beyond the actual interlocutors, taking on an intermediate position between inverted and inclusive uses.

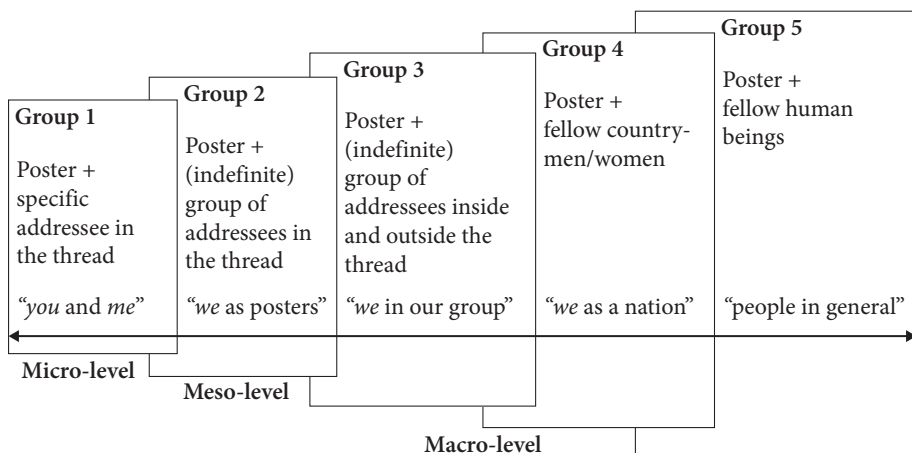


Figure 1. Oscillating degrees of inclusivity/exclusivity of the *we*-set in the sample thread⁷

A closer look at the usage of indeterminate *we/us/our* reveals that the degree of inclusivity and exclusivity oscillates (see Figure 1) and is often interactively negotiated in the thread investigated. It ranges from a ‘you and me’ including only one user and his/her fellow user (see Group 1) to fully ‘generic *we*’, i.e. ‘people in general’ (Group 5). Between these two poles our data show various intermediate uses referring to groups of varying sizes inside the thread, including cases of partial inclusivity (Group 2), reference to groups beyond the thread (Group 3) as well as *we* “in the collective sense of ‘*we* – the nation’”, cf. Westin (2002, p. 44), who calls this ‘rhetorical *we*’ (Group 4). The boundaries between these groups are not clear-cut and overlaps in the referential identification are possible. As Figure 1 illustrates, these overlaps are particularly strong between Groups 1 and 2 and Groups 3 to 5.

6. See Section 5.1, where users in the discussion instantiate token structures from the *we*-set as a “junction between the ‘I’ and the ‘non-I’” (Pavlidou, 2014, p. 3 with reference to Benveniste 1971, p. 202), stressing that *we* is not merely a duplication of identical individuals.

7. Not included here are instances of quotations from thread-external sources where *we* in the quote refers to an indefinite group of others not including the users themselves. This facet of the referential range of *we* (which is not integrated in Pavlidou’s set) is also quite typical of forum discussions, yet this extra-layer of referentiality is neglected here.

Example (1)⁸ provides evidence of how the use of *we/us/our* can adopt different shades of inclusivity even within one posting. Whereas the first occurrence of the pronoun, (*neither of us*), includes the user him-/herself and the particular fellow user directly addressed here (i.e. a Group 1 constellation), the second token from the *we*-set is more fuzzy, oscillating between a Group 1 and Group 2 interpretation.

- (1) [251] Post by <user 33> on May 08, 2011, 12:43:40
 [reaction to quote from [243] by <user 10>, SK & BB]
 No < user 10>, not a re-direct, a simple diversionary tactic away from an argument that **neither of us** will win [...]
You, and the rest of the muslim world believe it was a crime to shoot an unarmed man!
 I, on the other hand recognise that this was no ordinary man in the street and I am glad the piece of shite is dead!
 We can drone on all afternoon, and come to nothing! ;) [...]

The specific framing conditions of online discussion fora – their anonymous, polylogal character – often trigger explicit negotiations of the inclusivity/exclusivity of the *we*-set. Example (2) illustrates the importance of metadiscourse in this constellation. It is an extract from a longer metadiscursive sequence, where participants discuss the degree of inclusivity of one specific instance of the pronoun *we*. Similar to Bull and Fetzer's (2006, p. 8) findings for political interviews, Example (2) shows that in this online discussion, too, the social roles or identities constructed by individual users are only accepted if the domain of reference indicated or claimed by a user is mutually accepted.

- (2) [173] Post by < user 30> on May 04, 2011, 22:21:26
 Quote from [170] by < user 28>
 [...] *The bottom line is the crimes we commit receive little or no coverage/remembrance/remorse but those committed against us, well, that's a whole different story. And it's f*ckin' sickening imho.*
 'We'?
You might be American but a site called 'UK debate' might tell you that **most of us** aren't.
 Doh!

In such sequences, the negotiations of *we* verbalize cognitive processes which are usually hidden: the individual users' attempts to disambiguate vague pronouns by drawing on their cotext, i.e. 'microcontextualizing effects', but also extra-linguistic,

8. Spelling in the examples is always as in the original, quotations in the postings are marked by italics, all other emphasis is ours.

i.e. interactional, situational and extra-situational contexts (cf. Janney, 2002, pp. 458, 463). In this way, they try “to construct, redistribute or change the social values of in-groupness and outgroupness” (Duszak, 2002, p. 8). This includes the de-construction of mutually presupposed in-groupness among the participants by establishing new group-internal divides in instances of *partial inclusivity*. Group negotiations are performed collectively (cf. Dori-Hacohen, 2014, p. 201; Pavlidou, 2014, p. 2); they can be non-hierarchical, e.g. when different camps with a social rank perceived as equal are formed in- and outside the thread, or hierarchical, e.g. when majority groups outside the forum are constructed (as will be discussed in Section 5).

4.2 The *they*-set

‘Unspecified *they*’ was already described by Jespersen as being “used without any reference to previously mentioned persons” (1933 [2006], p. 115). In modern grammars, it is occasionally introduced as roughly equivalent to “people, not you or me” (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002, p. 96; cf. also Leech & Svartvik, 2013, p. 40), as detaching “the general observation equally from both the speaker and the addressee” and thus being “especially convenient in relation to regret or disapproval” (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990, p. 115). The *they*-set thus usually serves to construct “an out-group relative to the discourse participants, who are further inferred as belonging to the same social in-group” (Hart, 2010, p. 59).⁹ In indeterminate uses, *they* is often perceived and constructed as ‘symbolic elites’ with ‘their institutions and organizations’ “who literally have everything ‘to say’ in society” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 103).

From a cognitive point of view, indeterminate *they/them/their*, just like *we/us/our*, can be viewed as ‘schemata’ instantiated by participants at different levels of specificity. In an ‘instantiation of a schema’, an entity or a situation is construed with a greater degree of specificity (see Example (3) below). With the *they*-set, schematic reference is made to *non-interlocutors* (Langacker, 2007, p. 177), and, other than with *I* and *you*, speakers use a maximally objective construal to construct potential referents as distant from the speaker (ibid., p. 181). Assuming ‘intersubjectivity’, i.e. a shared focus between speaker and hearer, referents of both sets do not have to be explicitly mentioned, but “can be identified with a particular entity sufficiently salient in the linguistic or extralinguistic context to offer itself as the only obvious candidate with the appropriate specifications” (ibid., p. 177).

9. However, given the complex patterns of participation and group construction in public online fora as discussed for the *we*-set (see e.g. Groups 2 and 3), this does not always have to be the case – for further discussion see Section 5.

However, quite in tune with Langacker's (2007, p. 180) account of the referential scope of *it*, our data show that, firstly, the complexity and diversity of context-knowledge that users contribute to the discussion often make it difficult to identify just one entity as being *sufficiently salient* and carrying the *appropriate specifications* in the discussion. Secondly, users quite frequently instantiate the schema induced by a token structure from the *they*-set at different levels of specificity – sometimes within one single posting, such as in Example (3).

(3) [70] Post by <user 14> on May 02, 2011, 13:16:37

Quote from [68] by <user 17>

In which case they shouldn't have killed him.

But this is a win-win situation. Obama [instantiation 1 – SK & BB] gets to pronounce that he has made it possible for Bin Laden to be killed, he approval ratings will soar, giving him a much better chance of re-election for a second term. And it also means that “Al Qaeda” can get a new leader, a younger Emmanuel Goldstein, so that it can all restart.

If the Americans [instantiation 2 – SK & BB] could have produced a body, I would probably have been a lot less sceptical.

Example (3) shows how participants instantiate a schema (here: indeterminate *they*) by filling it with conceptual content (here: *Obama* and *the Americans*). This conceptual content is organized in a complex overlapping set of cognitive domains.¹⁰

In contrast to the fairly limited set of potential referents of the *we*-set, the third-person pronoun *they* “select[s] open-ended sets of eligible candidates” (Langacker, 2008, p. 314) with an infinite referential potential for the indeterminate *they*-set, opening up a boundless web of overlapping domains as conceptual background for its potential instantiations. In our sample thread, potential referents relate to a set of five central cognitive domains: THE AMERICANS/THE US; THE TERRORISTS/BIN LADEN FOLLOWERS; (THE) PEOPLE (in the Arab countries); THREAD PARTICIPANTS; THE UK (PEOPLE)/THE BRITISH. In addition, there are a few quite varied miscellaneous cases related to the macro-context of the whole thread, such as e.g. PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATION IN AN IRA CONTEXT, PUPILS IN SCHOOLS, THE BBC, and WRITERS OF WIKIPEDIA ARTICLES.

To gain access to these cognitive domains, participants can resort to various sources, including (i) the topic of the discussion: “Osama bin Laden Dead”, (ii) their background knowledge related to this topic, (iii) the discourse-internal context

10. We are using the term *domain* here in the most general sense, defined as “any kind of conception or mental experience” (Langacker, 2008, p. 50), including more complex conceptual configurations often referred to as *frames* – cf. Langacker (2008, p. 46) and Hart (2010, pp. 108–109) – as well as discourse-dynamic configurations such as *mental spaces* (see e.g. Hart, 2010, pp. 105–107). For a more detailed discussion of these terms see e.g. Langacker (2008, p. 51).

developing throughout the discussion at the macro-level of the thread and (iv) the micro-context of a single/follow-up posting. Despite these four factors, some instances in our data remain completely vague. This is demonstrated by Example (4), where users allude to a scenario not directly discussed in the thread.

- (4) [65] Post by <user 5> on May 02, 2011, 12:15:42
Of course you could do it Israeli style as **they** *did for the Munich terrorists* [...]

Here, the identification of an intended referent depends entirely on the background knowledge of the addressee(s). If the addressee(s) in the thread do(es) not know what happened in Munich in 1972, the referent is in fact reduced to ‘some agent other than S and H’ – almost the schematic meaning of *they*. If they know about Munich 1972, addressees may still have *different* knowledge or assumptions as to who the agents actually were in this event.

Throughout the discussion, many instantiations of *they* can be plausibly inferred from the micro-context of a single posting, where the meaning of the predicate expressions that users provide may invite such a referentially plausible interpretation. Parallel to what Langacker (2007, p. 180) observes for the use of *it*, the predicate expressions directly attached to *they* in the micro-context of a single posting often hint at the *scope of relevant referents*. This is illustrated by Example (5), where the predicate expression *flew him in on a flying saucer piloted by Elvis* triggers a humorous interpretation of the potentially intended referent ALIENS.

- (5) [136] Post by <user 25> on May 03, 2011, 21:06:07
Whilst we’re at it, **they** flew him in on a flying saucer piloted by Elvis.

Nevertheless, our examples also show that instantiations of indeterminate *they* are often truly collectively constructed (just like the *we*-set), not fully fixed, and sometimes also contested. This is shown in Examples (6a) and (6b).

- (6a) [77] Post by <user 16> on May 02, 2011, 15:26:07
If he was already dead would **they** not already have a photograph and would not need to photoshop one?
- (6b) [81] Post by <user 4> on May 02, 2011, 15:36:10
[...] right. Why did the newspapers and the US government use a previously prepared photo? [...] You would have thought **they** would have wanted *to ship it back* to the US for proof/glory/parading about.

Here, user 16 starts a debate on the source of the pictures of Osama Bin Laden broadcast in the press. Only four postings (or ten minutes) later, user 4 in (6b) replies by instantiating *they* from Example (6a) almost cataphorically in a more specific manner (*the newspapers*). S/he thus offers a referent from the domain alluded to in the predicating expression of Example (6a) (*not already have a photograph and*

would not need to photoshop one?), but also adds a second instantiation of schematic *they*, namely *the US government*. In addition, there is another instance of *they* in Example (6b) which does not easily lend itself to an anaphoric interpretation related to *the newspapers* and *the US government* as antecedent noun phrases. Here, movement to another level of specificity seems to be indicated, as the predicating expression *ship back* suggests a concrete individual AGENT rather than two different collective entities. Examples (6a) and (6b) thus also show that even if one user instantiates *they* at a more specific level, its referent is not necessarily fully fixed. Firstly, users do not always agree on an instantiation and also often fail to explicitly ratify a certain interpretation (for example, in our discussion, in postings #2, #5, #27 and #31, four other users offer other potential instantiations of *they*: A SPECIAL FORCES OPERATION, US TROOPS, THE US, and THE CIA). Secondly, the scope of reference may oscillate even within one single posting, just as in Example (6b), and mutual acceptance of one suggested referent (cf. Bull & Fetzer, 2006, p. 6) may never be reached.

Furthermore, Example (6b) also indicates that participants instantiate their intended referents of indefinite *they* not only against the background of different domains (e.g. THE MEDIA, THE STATE), by construing their referents with different scopes, but also with remarkably different degrees of specificity, by varying their scalar adjustment (a further level of cognitive salience operations). This is illustrated by Figure 2, which depicts selected referents of schematic *they* in the “Osama Bin Laden Dead”-thread with different degrees of specificity, ascending from left to right (as exemplified in (6a) and (6b)).

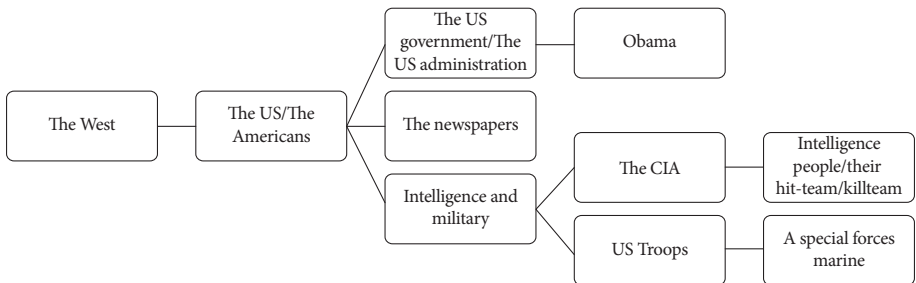


Figure 2. Users’ instantiations of indeterminate *they* with different degrees of specificity in the sample thread

In our case, increased levels of precision and detail involve partonomies (i.e. part-whole hierarchies, cf. Radden & Dirven, 2007; Ungerer & Schmid, 2006) rather than true taxonomies (type-of hierarchies), which are the canonical conceptual background for specification referred to in Langacker (2008, p. 56). The different degrees of specificity depicted in Figure 2 indicate users’ cultural knowledge about categories of potential actors in operations such as the killing of an internationally wanted terrorist, which links up to our discussion of predicating expressions in Section 5.

5. Constructing complex identities – predicating expressions and the propositional level

This section addresses how users actually construe out-groups referred to by both sets propositionally, when they exploit the double-indexicality of predicating expressions at the descriptive level of their propositional content. As one of the linguistic manifestations of this process, predication “is the very basic process and result of linguistically assigning qualities to persons, animals, objects [...] and social phenomena” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 54; see also Hart, 2010, p. 65). An analysis of selected instances of the *they*-set (5.1) and all instances of the *we*-set (5.2) with regard to the more complex conceptual domains their predicating terms provide access to shows how vague referents in the sample thread are constructed and characterized by means of predication.

Our central questions are the following: (1) How do participants in this concrete discourse space use predicating expressions to construct and negotiate salient social-cultural characteristics of the referents of both sets? (2) What social-cultural values¹¹ of the conceptual domains do the predicating expressions provide access to metonymically, and (3) How do predicating expressions relate to the way users shift between different types of alignment and sometimes also non-allegiance when assigning group identities to potential referents in the discussion? Question (3) is of special interest in cases where users distance themselves from their own in-group, as withdrawing from an in-group may also subtly shift the perspective of identity construction towards an *objective* (Langacker, 2007, p. 177), *non-inclusive* (Pavlidou, 2014, p. 4) construal of the situation in the *we*-set (see Section 2 and the discussion of Groups 3 and 4 in Section 5.2 below).

Along with other factors, the micro-context of a single/follow-up posting is an important source users can draw on in order to provide and obtain access to overlapping domains that can serve as the conceptual background for identity construction. Thus, it is quite natural that both the groups of potential referents for the *we*-set and the groups for the *they*-set outlined in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 show obvious correlations to semantic groups of predications.

5.1 The *they*-set

The set of potential referents of elements in the *they*-set is in principle unlimited and participants in the thread employ a broad range of potential candidates. Here, we focus on the potential referent instantiated most frequently and by several users throughout the thread: THE AMERICANS/THE US.

11. Comparable to Reisigl and Wodak's (2001, p. 55) notion of 'topoi', discussed from an evolutionary perspective by Hart (2010, pp. 73–80).

Even though potential referents of the *they*-set in the discussion often remain vague, users frequently construct them as a powerful majority or symbolic elite out-group. In line with van Dijk's (2008, pp. 65–66) 'dimensions of dominance', the referents of the indeterminate *they*-set are (often institutionalized) representatives of a social group exercising 'social' rather than 'individual' power. Following van Dijk (*ibid.*), we see 'social power' as "a property of relations between social groups" and define it

in terms of the *control* exercised by one group or organization (or its 'members') over the *actions* and/or the *minds* of (the members of) another group, thus limiting the freedom of action of the others, or influencing their knowledge, attitudes or ideologies. (van Dijk, 2008, p. 65, original emphasis)

Social power, which is based "on privileged access to valued social resources, such as wealth, jobs, status, or indeed, a preferential access to public discourse and communication" (van Dijk, 2008, p. 66) is hence closely intertwined with dominance. Furthermore, social power is often "organized and institutionalized, so as to allow more effective control, and to enable routine forms of power reproduction" (*ibid.*).

These constitutive characteristics of powerful elites form a complex matrix of conceptual (sub-)domains including e.g. POTENTIAL FOR ACTION, EXERTION OF (LEGAL) ACTION, POSSESSION OF VALUABLE OBJECTS (INFORMATION, PROOF, ARTEFACTS), (POTENTIAL FOR) PUBLIC COMMUNICATION, against which members of a speech community construct their rather abstract notions of 'power' and 'dominance'. Such conceptualizations of powerful majority out-groups appear to be based in *textual* and *discourse* rather than *actual experience*, perceived through cultural transmission (Hart, 2010, p. 55), and related to more permanent cultural models (see Section 1). In the sample thread, participants collectively entextualize these conceptual sub-domains as rather schematic predicating expressions such as *to have potential for action*, *to exert (legal) action*, *to possess valuable objects*, and *to (have the potential to) communicate publicly*. Obviously, this list is not exhaustive. Interactants in concrete discourse spaces may add further aspects, depending, for example, on their broader cultural background knowledge or the immediate context of the discussion.¹²

Turning to the potential referent THE AMERICANS/THE US, Table 2 provides a list of predicating expressions occurring with tokens from the indeterminate *they*-set. In column 1, these are linked to representative predications of the domains mentioned

12. The choice of a specific conceptual profiling operation when highlighting specific aspects of power in a concrete discourse event is – just like other conceptual construal operations – motivated by a broad range of contextual factors (see e.g. Kövecses (2009, 2015) on sources for the actual choice of conceptual metaphors in concrete speech events).

above at a more schematic level. Column 2 gives examples of their linguistic manifestation, providing the respective predicating expressions used in the thread.

Table 2. Constructing the complex identities of indeterminate *they* at the propositional level

| Conceptual domains and schematic predications | Predications about the majority group <i>THE AMERICANS/THE US</i> in “Osama Bin Laden Dead” |
|--|--|
| (POSSESSION OF) VALUABLE OBJECTS (INFORMATION, PROOF, ARTEFACTS) <i>to possess valuable objects</i> | <i>they <u>have got a shed load of information</u></i> [29] <i>they <u>knew where he was</u></i> [32] <i>they [...] <u>have a photograph</u></i> [77] |
| POTENTIAL FOR ACTION <i>to have potential for action</i> | <i>Even if they <u>put the head on a spike outside the White House</u></i> (<i>fake, of course</i>) [132] |
| EXERTION OF (LEGAL) ACTION <i>to exert (legal) action</i> | <i>They <u>caught him</u> a long time ago</i> [30] <i>they <u>killed him</u> a long time ago</i> [1] |
| PUBLIC COMMUNICATION <i>to communicate publicly</i> | <i>they would have wanted to ship it back to the US <u>for proof/glory/parading about</u></i> [81] <i>I guess when they <u>said he was shot twice in the head</u></i> [354] |
| DECISIONS <i>to make decisions</i> | <i>Well there you go, I reckon they killed him a long time ago, maybe three years, but <u>have decided this is the right time.</u></i> [30] |

The conceptual domains highlighted by participants in their predicating expressions thus provide access to essential attributes of a cultural lay-model of power as shared by the participants in the discussion, highlighting selective aspects of expert models such as outlined by van Dijk (2008, pp. 65–66, pp. 106–107). However, in the ongoing discourse, these attributes are not clear-cut, in a state of flux and may, again, be subject to negotiation. For illustration see Example (7), where two users post deviating opinions as to whether action has actually been taken (postings #88 and #89), initiating a dispute going on for two more postings about whether Osama Bin Laden’s death had actually been proven.

- (7) [89] Post by <user 6> on May 02, 2011, 16:51:05
Quote from [88] by <user 1>
*yeah but **they** could have taken steps to prove his death, then got rid of the body at sea*
 That is what **they** have done.

The predicating expressions attached to *they* and their schemata indicate that lay people in this specific discourse space largely resort to the broader conceptual domains outlined in expert models of power. Yet, they also show that users in this specific discussion made certain sub-domains of these broader conceptual domains

salient. The concept of *power* of potential referents of the *they*-set constructed in this online discussion highlights the possession of information rather than wealth, status and jobs; their (assumed) potential for action – especially the exertion of legal action, their unlimited access to public discourse, communication and information, as well as their capacity to make decisions. As Section 5.2 will demonstrate for the *we*-set, the same (sub-)domains are involved in conceptualizations of potential referents of Groups 3 and 4. They seem to provide a conceptual basis for processes of group-alignment and non-allegiance by critical distancing as well as the individual positioning of users towards collective identities constructed *top-down* in official political discourse (see also Musolff, this volume).

5.2 The *we*-set

Turning to the *we*-set, our sample thread demonstrates how participants in the five groups of inclusivity outlined in Figure 1 use predications to foreground different but also overlapping domains of in-group identity construction.

Instances of Group 1 constellations (User + specific addressee in the thread) are generally rather rare in our material. Their predications provide access to the conceptual domain VERBAL INTERACTION and two of its sub-domains, STRATEGIES OF ARGUMENTATION and METAPRAGMATICS. Predications relating to STRATEGIES OF ARGUMENTATION include *to win an argument*, *to be a redirect*, *to take as an example*, and *to clear up a claim*. Predicating expressions providing access to the sub-domain METAPRAGMATICS signal how the addressee is meant to interpret an utterance and include *let's not get panties in a bunch* and *let's face it*.

Group 2 (User and co-users in the thread) is – as expected – similar to Group 1, in that its predications also relate mainly to the conceptual domain VERBAL INTERACTION. However, it is slightly more diverse and shows some variation regarding its sub-domains. Group 2 comprises predicating expressions relating to STRATEGIES OF ARGUMENTATION (*take as an example*, *jump to*, *factor in*, *argue*, and *divert*), ACTS OF SAYING (*(trying to) tell us*, *call*) and PERSUASION (*take what X says as the gospel*, *want us to think*).

Some of these predications (e.g. *drone on*, *take as an example*, *jump to*, *factor in*, *argue*, *take as the gospel*) exemplify the oscillating identities and demarcation problems between groups already mentioned in Section 4.1. As Example (8) shows, such predications may also be used in interaction between just *two* interlocutors in the thread (as in Group 1). There is also one instance of a verb of saying with an obvious undertone, *to drone on* (cf. Example (1) above), which expresses a negative attitude towards the manner of interaction (see also Kleinke & Bös, 2015). However, despite its slightly negative connotation, in the given frame of political online discussions,

the predication used here is clearly inclusive and has no distancing effect relating to non-allegiance.

Identity allocation to Group 2 is more obvious in cases where predications contain *us* as an argument such as *divert us*, *(try to) tell us*, *want us to think* – see Example (9). In principle, the same holds true for predications of the sub-domain CONVERSATION MANAGEMENT (e.g. *stop the thread* – which needs to be done collectively).

- (8) [351] Post by <user 28> on May 12, 2011, 22:12:38
 [...] Nobody disputes the history of famines in India and no doubt it will remain a grave problem in the future especially if **we factor in the warming global climate**. [...]
- (9) [463] Post by <user 30> on May 28, 2011, 23:18:20
 [...] Oh – you’ve already **told us**, haven’t you? [...]

In Group 3 constellations (User + indefinite group of others inside and outside the thread), participants construct group identities on the spot based on assumingly shared experiences and (largely Western) moral and cultural values, which are not supported by actually shared long-term experiences with concrete people. They use predications that provide access to a slightly broader range of conceptual domains. These include domains highlighting more general human features and social roles such as PARENTHOOD (*our boys and girls* in a literal, non-metaphorical/metonymic reading, which is also sanctioned as a potential referential candidate in the immediate context of the posting); MORAL DIGNITY (*It’s what separates us from the animals* [here metaphorically used for *the terrorists* discussed before]); the experience and release of EMOTIONS related to concrete events (*bay for blood, dance in the streets*) such as in Example (10) below and MENTAL STATES (*think, miss, see*).

Other predications provide access to a number of domains highlighting the perceived powerlessness of this group. Among them we find the mirror images of domains already discussed for the *they*-set in Section 5.1 – where they are used with a potential to construct a group as *powerful*. This is evident in predications alluding to the conceptual domain of (TERRORIST) ACTS with the sub-domains of TARGET, EXPERIENCER, AFFECTED OBJECT highlighted, such as in *going to see, watch, get war declared* (metaphorically used with reference to Osama Bin Laden declaring war against the West and Western cultural values rather than a specific nation or humans in general). Other relevant domains include the LIMITED POTENTIAL FOR ACTION, e.g. *denied participation in political decision-making* – see Example (11), and predicating expressions jokingly alluding to a British diet (*wonder if we will be able to get pork scratchings*). Furthermore, participants use predicating expressions providing access to the domains LIMITED ACCESS TO JUSTICE (e.g. *to fight for justice*,

having no access to justice, not to benefit from basic rights, let's repeal law) and a LACK OF VALUABLE OBJECTS, most importantly INFORMATION (such as in *need to know, should have ever found out, or before we know about it* in Example (11)).

- (10) [118] Post by <user 23> on May 02, 2011, 23:49:27
 [...] Talking heads have been saying that justice has been done. No it hasn't; Retribution has been done. [...] *They* [...] danced in the streets as NYC burned. Now *we* dance in the streets in reply. [...]
- (11) [410] Post by <user 33> on May 21, 2011, 21:44:11
 Quote from [409] by <user 18>
 No <user 33>, *we are the fools for giving them foreign aid.*
 <user 18>.
 “*We*” are not the fools <user 18> [...] “*we*” have no say in the matter, it is all done and dusted before we know about it!

It is especially the construction of this indefinite group of people inside and outside the thread by domains related to the *powerlessness* of its members and the group in general which seems to foreshadow a shift in perspectivization from inclusive *we/us/our* to the *they*-set, in that participants implicitly construct this out-group by profiling opposite portions of conceptual domains related to power.¹³ In Example (11), the predication of the *we*-token in the quote (*giving them foreign aid*) provides access to a domain related to powerful agents as discussed in 5.1 for the *they*-set and triggers a focus on national identity (see Group 4 below). However, this notion of power as a trait of nationhood is explicitly rejected in the comment, where the two tokens of *we* contest a *national* reading and receive a special emphasis through their presentation in scare quotes.

Furthermore, in the domains related to human experience and mental and emotional states, predications occasionally also have the potential to instantiate thread-internal group allocations. However, in our thread, the latter usually seem to be linked to the domain of VERBAL INTERACTION, constructing a Group 2 constellation of ‘participants in this very discussion’.

In Group 4 (‘*we* as a nation’), users resort to more permanent traits of their own national identity. As in Group 3, the picture is quite varied and identification patterns seem to anticipate the construction of an out-group such as that represented by the *they*-set in Sections 4.2 and 5.1. Predicating expressions in Group 4 provide access to domains constructing their own nations as powerful agents, largely

13. See Langacker (1991, p. 132) on the profiling mechanisms related to negation.

resorting to the conceptual domains already discussed in Section 5.1, in which the actual participants of the discussion are not normally involved as individual agents (see e.g. the quote in Example (11) above). These comprise, among others, the EXECUTION OF (LEGAL) ACTION (e.g. *be out of Afghanistan, leave Africa, support a state, push the Russians, provide foreign aid, be at war with, commit crimes* (as collective agents), *sort someone out, starve millions of Indians to death, gain access to these monsters, put terrorists on trial, shoot terrorists dead, give them a rail system, bring civilization to*); the POSSESSION OF VALUABLE OBJECTS such as an army, soldiers, weapons or information (*our boys and girls* (here metaphorically and metonymically for *soldiers*), *our soldiers, our guns, have a machine gun, have information*); the STRUCTURE OF A STATE (*need a PM, our government, our leaders, our propaganda/legal system, our law, our rules, our colonial past, have alleys/enemies, have a/benefit from/don't subvert this system*); NATION (*be a member of a nation, be better/worse than other people/any other colonial power, above in moral development, be different from the rest of humanity*) and a few instances of the domains HAVE POTENTIAL FOR ACTION (e.g. *batter the Iraqis to death*) and COMMUNICATE PUBLICLY (*if we say ... that has massive implications*).

Analogously to Group 3, several postings also make the vulnerable aspects of a nation salient when momentarily constructing national identities in a bottom-up fashion. Yet, the focus remains on more permanent or institutionalized characteristics of nations rather than on experiences that are merely putatively shared by the user and an indefinite group of people inside and outside the thread, as in Group 3. The relevant predicating expressions provide access to the conceptual domain of TERRORIST AND VIOLENT ACTS and highlight the state of the nation being subject to or experiencing such acts by relating to the sub-domains TARGET, EXPERIENCER, AFFECTED OBJECT (e.g. *crimes committed against us, watch citizens being blown to bits, a campaign against us at home and abroad, have muslim hate-preaching on the streets and are unable to stop them because of the "free speech" getout clause, our 9/11* – metaphorically used).

As in Group 3, participants in Group 4 constellations often seem to challenge the political majorities by profiling debatable aspects of their politics and actions. This distancing practice reduces the solidarity-component of otherwise *inclusive we*. In terms of perspectivization, the user is still the subject perceiving the entire situation, but their own subject role in the situation perceived seems to be marginalized and backgrounded. In Example (12), the users' criticism reflects at least indirectly that they take a distancing stance in the discussion vis-à-vis their own nation. Thus, it demonstrates how users in this very discussion challenge and contest powerful collective identities based on institutionalized power and dominance exercised top-down.

- (12) [60] Post by <user 2> May 02, 2011, 11:40:30
 [...] We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would [...]

Finally, participants in the thread construct themselves occasionally, but not very frequently, as members of Group 5 ('people in general'). One such case is presented in Example (13).

- (13) [296] Post by <user 28> May 08, 2011, 21:28:41
 I understand the qualification but I still maintain that the charge of "animals" is a can of worms. My view is that *we are all animals* (in the context you are using the word) all we need is the right circumstances IE occupation and repression to bring it out.

Standard grammars consider this usage of *we* as preserving "the inclusionary warmth of implied 1st person involvement" (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990, p. 115), and setting "the focus on shared human experience or knowledge, including the speaker's" (Biber et al., 2002, p. 96). This is also reflected in the predicating expressions and their related conceptual domains. They comprise EXISTENTIAL STATES (*live, be X, been to, need*); MENTAL STATES and KNOWLEDGE (*see, know*); EMOTIONAL STATES (*our thoughts must be with the families*) and ATTITUDINAL STATES and CONVICTIONS (*stand firm, restore our belief, sing from the same hymnsheet, be sure*).

Example (14) provides an interesting case where, similar to Groups 2, 3 and 4, the user opts for a predication with a distinctly negative connotation.

- (14) [2] Post by <user 2> on May 02, 2011, 05:42:01
 Seems they killed him yesterday in a special forces operation against a mansion compound in Abbottabad which is a city of over a million folks a few miles north west of Islamabad. They have possession of his body.
 I suspect that al Qaeda will try another 'spectacular' to avenge him being sent to 'Allah'. [...] Will his followers try to hit the Olympic games? Maybe specifically targetting the Americans there?
 We [Group 2, 3, 5? SK & BB] certainly live in 'interesting' times!

Yet, unlike in Groups 3 and 4 and just like in Group 2, there seems to be no implication that the user wants to distance himself from humanity altogether. However, the potential for overlap, especially with Groups 2 and 3, is particularly obvious here, as the user highlights human experiences smaller as well as larger groups may share, which sometimes not even the context may fully disambiguate.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The two-step analysis pursued in this paper provides insights into the complex processes of identity construction and negotiation in the case of indeterminate first- and third-person-plural pronouns and determiners.

At the first, referential level, the tokens of the *we*-set were found to index various in-groups subsumed in five major groups of varying inclusivity. The complex participation framework of online fora invites one special configuration of in-group alignment, *partial inclusivity*, which allows participants to refer to *some but not all* members of the virtual in-group constructed during the discussion. For the out-groups indexed by the indefinite *they*-set, although potentially open-ended, five major cognitive domains were documented: THE AMERICANS/THE US; THE TERRORISTS/BIN LADEN FOLLOWERS; (THE) PEOPLE (in the Arab countries); THREAD PARTICIPANTS, THE UK (PEOPLE)/THE BRITISH.

In the second step, we demonstrated how participants in online discussions collectively construct in- and out-group identities at a propositional level. With their respective selections of predications as cognitive access points to more complex domains, users highlighted oscillating clusters of salient in- and out-group attributes. In combination with the *they*-set, the users employed a selection of predications as cognitive access points to the complex domain of POWER, including e.g. POSSESSION OF VALUABLE OBJECTS; POTENTIAL FOR ACTION; PRIVILEGE OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION. During the discussion, these individual predications amalgamated, in bottom-up processes, into a collectively shaped out-group identity of a *symbolic elite*, against which participants positioned themselves critically and which contested and re-constructed the positive images powerful political elites tend to convey of themselves in mainstream public discourse.

Despite some overlaps and fuzzy cases, processes of in-group-construction indexed by the *we*-set broadly correlated with patterns of in-group-alignment in Groups 1–5. Predications in postings featuring Group 1- and 2-alignment centred around metapragmatic predications and negotiated identities of current discourse participants in their verbal interaction. By contrast, predications in Groups 3 to 5 also highlighted domains relevant for identities outside the immediate realm of the very discussion. Almost iconically, Group 3 bridges Groups 1–2 and 4–5. Along with domains underscoring more general human features, character traits and mental states (to be found especially in Groups 3 and 5), predicating expressions provided access to domains highlighting the perceived powerlessness of this group. Among them we found the mirror images of domains already outlined for the *they*-set such as LIMITED ACCESS TO JUSTICE, LIMITED POTENTIAL FOR ACTION, LACK OF VALUABLE OBJECTS. These foreshadowed a shift in perspectivization from inclusive *we/us/our* to the *they*-set. Predications in Group 4 provided access to

domains constructing their own nations as powerful agents, largely resorting to the same conceptual domains as for the *they*-set. As in Group 3, participants in Group 4 often seemed to challenge the political majorities by profiling debatable aspects of their politics and actions, thus distancing themselves from their own group ('we as a nation') and swiftly moving from a *subjective construal* of *we* (including the speaker) to a more *objective construal* (foregrounding the deeds of the political elites and backgrounding their own group membership). Finally, our sample thread also featured some instances of predications constructing 'humans in general' (Group 5) by predications related to domains of *typical human characteristics* such as mental, emotional and attitudinal states and convictions.

Taking a bottom-up perspective by focusing on one sample thread of a public forum discussion, the study provides an insight into the verbal manifestations and dynamics of cognitive conceptualization processes related to more permanent cultural models which indefinite non-elite groups construct collectively of their own in-groups as well as of elite out-groups. Thus, their model of powerful elites is perpetuated in public online fora as one form of public digital discourse, where users feed their individual stances into a broader pool of attributions, which remain largely in flux and open to serve as a conceptual background for further processes of identity construction.

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“no prizes to anybody spotting my typo, by the way”

The interplay between criticism and identity management in the comments sections on newspaper websites

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Criticising others not only seems to be one of the core functions of comments posted on newspaper websites, but also an intriguing means to perform identity work. This paper therefore consists of a fine-grained analysis of the discursive construction of identity in critical comments posted on the websites of the *Guardian* and the *Times*. Drawing on the framework proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 2010), the study explores how the users construe and negotiate not only the identity of the person criticised in their comments, but also their own. Focusing on criticism targeting the journalist and prior commenters, it reveals how criticism can be used to foreground certain identity aspects and uncovers the different strategies employed for this purpose.

Keywords: reader response, user-generated content, identity construction, criticism, disagreement, impoliteness, digital discourse, mass media

1. Introduction

Just like online bulletin boards or forums, the comments sections on newspaper websites have become a highly popular platform for the discussion of current topics and thus a virtual space where people who would normally not interact with each other can actively engage and debate with one another, voice their opinions or simply vent their feelings. Since the interaction takes place online, the written posting is the only channel the interlocutors have to communicate their stances and to position themselves. Linguistic means therefore play a vital role in identity construction and negotiation. As this unique communicative situation brings together

people from various backgrounds with often diverging opinions, disagreement and criticism are more often the norm than the exception and consequently, rather heated debates can ensue. 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, which in turn makes this form of communication ideal for discourse-based research on linguistic means of self-presentation, identity construction and the (im)politeness strategies used by newspaper readers putting in their two cents' worth.

Given that in public opinion, online discussions and contributions to comment sections are often associated with aggressive or uninhibited verbal behaviour, i.e. flaming, 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. Angouri and Tseliga (2010), Baym (1996) and Kleinke (2007) for discussion forums and Bolander (2012, 2013) and Luzón (2011) for blogs). Reader comments on newspaper websites, the genre under investigation in the present analysis, 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. This highly intriguing interplay between disagreement and criticism on the one hand, and identity construction on the other, is also the focus of the present analysis. With more and more media sites 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 is certainly not only of relevance to those investigating communicative practices and media usage from a critical discourse perspective, but also to those interested in social behaviour at large.

2. Data, goals and methodology

Drawing on the framework proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 2010), this study explores how users who post comments on the newspaper websites of the *Guardian* and the *Times* construe and negotiate their own identity and that of the person or institution criticised in their comments – in particular the author of the original newspaper article and other comment writers. The analysis thus focuses on what (group) identity aspects are foregrounded and selected for criticism and what roles the critics assign the journalists, other commenters and themselves. The comments under investigation are all taken from a corpus consisting of 1,000 online comments (i.e. 96,068 words) posted on the two websites in the summer of

2009. In contrast to Neurauter-Kessels (2011), who selected only the 15 most active comment threads for analysis, the present corpus was built by means of random sampling (Androutsopoulos, 2013), i.e. from all the comment threads produced during a time span of six weeks, the first twenty comments of every fifth thread were included in the corpus. This choice was driven by the objective to produce a fairly representative corpus of online comments, thus allowing for generalisations about the genre as such without risking a total lack of coherence and context. 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 (Upton & Cohen, 2009) of disagreeing/criticising and identity construction is qualitative in nature.

The central questions addressed are the following:

1. Who is the target of the criticism and on what aspect(s) is the criticism based (e.g. reasoning, manner and style of the contribution, underlying/assumed character traits and values)?
2. How is the criticism expressed (e.g. explicit judgement, irony, rhetorical questions, use of mitigating devices)?
3. How is identity constructed in such critical comments and what aspects of the user's identity and that of the person criticised are foregrounded?

However, the main goal of the study lies not in answering these questions individually, but in uncovering the various links among these factors and questions by examining the functional interplay between them. In order to achieve this goal, the data were coded manually with MAXQDA, a software tool for qualitative data analysis, following the corpus-based approach to discourse analysis as proposed by Biber, Connor and Upton (2007) and Upton and Cohen (2009). This approach is based on the framework for move analysis introduced by Swales (1990), in which moves are considered the functional building blocks that texts belonging to a particular genre usually share. From the vast range of moves performed in comments on newspaper websites, that of *criticism* with its different forms of realisation will be the focus of the present study. However, as the comments in their entirety, together with the broader interactional context (i.e. the entire thread of comments and the newspaper article triggering the comments), represent an important backdrop for understanding and analysing individual moves (cf. Bolander, 2012, p. 1617), these will be considered in the discussion whenever necessary.

3. The communicative situation

In the comments section of newspaper websites, readers are invited to ‘share their opinions’ and ‘join the discussion’ by leaving a comment below the line separating the newspaper article from the reader comments. The act of posting such a comment thus always represents a reaction to a media product and as such constitutes a response to a previous turn, or a so-called *follow-up* (Fetzer & Weizman, 2015).

At the time of data collection, both newspaper websites could be accessed free of charge; in order to leave a comment, however, users had to – as they still do today – register and choose a nickname to be automatically added to each comment posted. So while individual comments can be attributed to certain nicknames and – at least in the case of the *Guardian* – even user profiles and an optional profile picture, the writer of online comments can still hide behind the mask of anonymity. Together with differences in the selection process and the immediacy of publication, this is the feature that distinguishes the genre of reader comments on newspaper websites most clearly from its predecessor in print media, i.e. letters to the editor. What the two genres share, however, is the underlying function: both types of reader response are written in reaction to a trigger in the newspaper – be it a newspaper article or another reader’s contribution – and their purpose is to comment and provide feedback, thus constituting not only a direct backchannel between the public and the media, but also an important opportunity for lay people to participate in public discourse.

Just like letters to the editor, which are – despite being addressed to the editor – intended to be read by a much larger audience, i.e. all potential readers of the newspaper, online comments simultaneously operate on different levels of communication. These are not unlike those identified by Pfister (cf. 2001, pp. 20–22) for narrative and dramatic texts: the internal communication system, which consists of the user commenting on a prior text and directly or indirectly addressing its author, is embedded in the external communication system, of which all readers of the online edition of the newspaper are part. This peculiar constellation is of vital importance for the discussion of face management: in the present data, the relational work (Locher & Watts, 2005) is always performed in front of a large group of people, and the comments are produced and even designed for this ‘overhearing audience’ (Heritage, 1985), which automatically enhances the effect of face threats (cf. Neurauter-Kessels, 2011, p. 198).

Comments sections on newspaper websites are certainly not intended as virtual 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 and comments may be deleted in a

post-moderation process if they do not abide by the community standards.¹ 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” (Community standards and participation guidelines, 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?

4. The discursive moves of criticism and disagreement

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (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” (OED, *criticism*, n., sense 1), whereas *disagreement* is simply defined as “difference of opinion; dissent” (OED, *disagreement*, n., sense 2). While the two often go hand in hand, it is certainly possible to openly disagree with somebody’s opinion without criticising that person, i.e. without passing judgement. In Brown and Levinson’s 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 (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). In a similar vein, Leech’s 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”) (1983, p. 32). In Culpeper’s impoliteness theory, “seek disagreement” is listed as a positive impoliteness strategy (1996, p. 357), and Bousfield, 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” (2008, pp. 126–127). Of course, as has been stressed many times in the past, 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. It can also be the unmarked norm in certain communicative settings, e.g. in problem-solving meetings in a business

1. While deleted comments leave no clearly visible trace in the case of the *Times*, they stay in the thread of comments in the case of the *Guardian*, where the body of the comment is replaced by a notification that the comment has been removed by a moderator. Of the 600 comments collected from the *Guardian* website, only 21, i.e. 3.5% are ones that have been deleted.

context (Angouri, 2012), in debates in online discussion forums (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010), or in academic discourse (Tannen, 2002). It can be the preferred instead of dispreferred second in terms of structural properties, e.g. in debates (Gruber, 2001, p. 1823) or in reaction to self-deprecating statements (Pomerantz, 1984); for a more detailed discussion see Kotthoff (1993). 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 (Golato, 2005), or even be used to create a sociable, intimate atmosphere and signal solidarity and group membership (e.g. Schiffrin, 1984); for an overview of this practice in different cultures see Tannen (2002, p. 1652).

As arenas for debate, comments sections are prone to disagreement, and if producing counter-statements is also considered a disagreement strategy (e.g. Kleinke, 2010), almost any instance in which an opinion is expressed could be considered a disagreement 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.² However, the focus of the present study being on criticism, only those cases of disagreement in which the commenters attempt to correct the prior speaker are included in the analysis:

- (1) 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. [...]
[G08-017 c1]³

In this example, the commenter clearly goes beyond disagreeing in order to take a stance and position him-/herself in relation to others and corrects the journalist. Since accuracy is one of the core principles of journalism, such disagreement – even if followed by an apology as in the present example – always constitutes a face threat and is thus considered an indirect form of criticism (see also Examples (11) and (12) below).

2. See also the approach adopted by Langlotz and Locher (2012, p. 1599), who follow Bolander (2012) and Baym (1996).

3. The original spelling, including the use of italics, punctuation and line breaks, was retained in all examples. Additional information was added in square brackets when considered necessary, and user names were replaced by <user>. If more than one user is named or addressed, the individual users are identified by letters.

5. Targets of criticism

Despite the fact that 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 of these 638 critical moves. 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 1 below.⁴

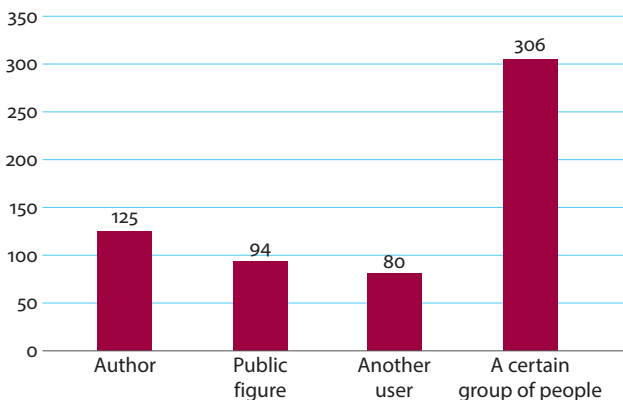


Figure 1. Target of the criticism in online comments ($N = 605$)

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 ($N = 295$), i.e. the author of the newspaper article ($N = 125$), a public figure clearly identified by name ($N = 94$), or a previous 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). 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”,

4. 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 1, where N amounts to 605 comments.

“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 ($N = 125$), while public figures ($N = 94$) and other users ($N = 80$) are less frequently targeted. While this already suggests that leaving a comment on a newspaper website is used more often to *react* to the journalistic product than to *interact* with other users, this tendency is confirmed by the facts that (i) the majority of users post only one comment (only 81 comments are written by users who have already contributed to the same thread), and (ii) only 180 comments constitute a direct or indirect reply to another user’s comment. In the vast majority of online comments (82%), there is no link to previous comments on the textual level, i.e. no direct addresses, no references to, or quotes from, other comments, no allusions to their content and no strategies such as *format tying* (Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998) to signal responsiveness. While this does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about whether the respective comment writers read the other comments before posting their own 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.⁵ However, this also means that the figures above

5. Two important points need to be made at this stage. First of all, while one could argue that including only the first 20 comments of each thread (which, after all, can be up to 1,000 comments long) distorts the picture, Ruiz et al. (2011, p. 476), analysing 16,494 comments from the *Guardian* in 2010, found 88.6% of the users to contribute just once. Second, the comments section of the *Guardian* has now been restructured, allowing commentators to choose whether they want to post their reply below the article itself or directly below another user’s comment. This creates a major trunk of comments with several branches extending from it, and readers have the options to view the so-called *conversations* with *collapsed* or *expanded threads*, making it easier to establish coherence and keep track of the comments written in reaction to one’s own contribution. This suggests that the genre of online comments on newspaper websites is

need to be re-evaluated: if only 180 comments constitute a reaction to another user's comment, and other users are criticised in 80 comments, this means that in nearly half (i.e. 44.4%) of the comments written in reaction to other users, this reaction is hostile in nature.

6. Aspects criticised and forms of criticism

As the goal of the present paper is to unravel the interplay between criticism and identity construction in interaction, the following 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 users. The criticism directed at these two targets 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. via explicit judgements, irony or rhetorical questions). Some of these aspects and strategies have been described in previous studies (e.g. Johansson, 2015; Kleinke, 2010; Neurauter-Kessels, 2011), 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 corpus of 1,000 online comments collected from 63 comment threads.

6.1 Criticising the journalist

In her analysis of impolite reader responses, Neurauter-Kessels (2011) identified 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 criticism, four major and three minor aspects can be distinguished. Their distribution is illustrated in Figure 2 below.⁶

currently undergoing some quite interesting developments, and that the data of the present study document a situation that can be considered an important and illuminating precursor to the current state of affairs.

6. As it is not infrequent to criticise more than one aspect within the same comment, the total number of instances amounts to 156.

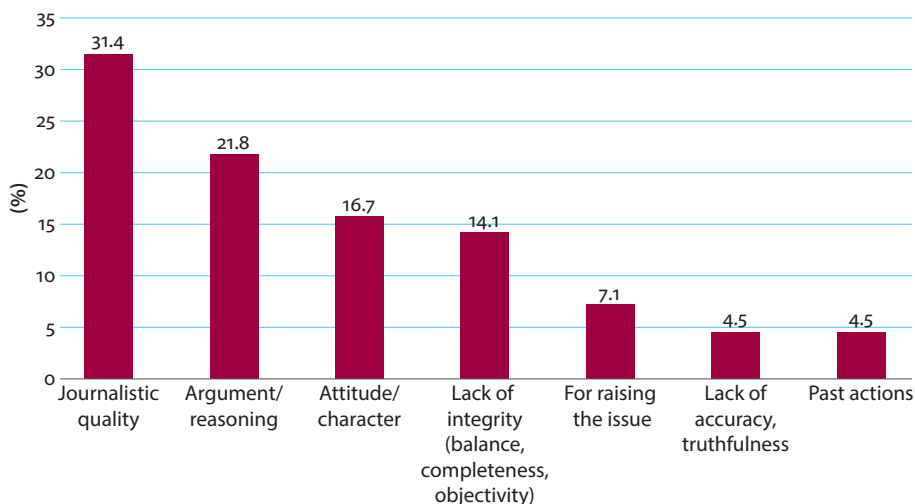


Figure 2. Aspects criticised when targeting the author ($N = 156$)

6.1.1 *Journalistic quality and identifying the target*

In about one third of the cases in which the author is criticised (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 Examples (2) and (8) below), possessing the required knowledge and expertise to comment (see Example (3) below), basing one's article on well-researched facts (see Examples (3), (4) and (10) below) and having the analytical skills to produce a coherent (see Example (5) below), meaningful (see Example (4) below) and convincing (see Example (6) below) argument.

- (2) 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. [...] [G07-067 c14]
- (3) 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. [...] [T07-005 c3]
- (4) 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; [...] [G06-060 c7]
- (5) 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 else's response. [...] [G07-083 c19]

(6) Sir, you have ignored the root problem. [...] [T08-059 c8]

Even if the journalist is only named or directly addressed in Examples (5) and (6) respectively, all of the five comments above represent a threat to the respective journalist's positive face, as talking about "the Guardian", "the headline", "this article" and "whoever penned the title" serves to clearly identify the target.⁷

While Neurauter-Kessels (2011, pp. 205–207) claims that talking about the author in the third person is face-threatening because it is an example of the impoliteness strategy that Bousfield (2008, pp. 101–102), drawing on Culpeper (1996), calls *snub*, it is argued here that this is the standard way of referring to the journalist when commenting online. Leaving a comment may not be conceptualised by the users 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. As a result, 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.⁸ So while 34.4% of the users directly address the journalist when criticising him/her, the 23.2% 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, is also usually performed in this way:

(7) A lovely, timely and needed article by Libby Purves [AUTHOR]. [...] [T08-032 c5]

7. In addition to such fairly direct – even if metonymic – references or forms of address, the author can also be indirectly addressed or talked about, as in Example (10) to be discussed below, where it is the content of the comment that identifies the target of the criticism. In his research on news language and the process of news production, Bell (1991), drawing on Goffman (1981), subdivides the role of the sender into that of *principal*, *author* and *editor*. However, most commenters do not differentiate between these roles and seem to assume that a single person, i.e. the author, is responsible for the text.

8. While there is at least one comment thread in the present data where the original author even contributes to the discussion by writing four posts (comments 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. While 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).

However, there are some cases in which the author is talked about 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:

- (8) [...] Message to Guardian editor; please explain to this lady [AUTHOR] the difference between deficit and debt. [G11-001 c5]
- (9) Someone please teach this fellow [AUTHOR] the apparently lost art of precis. [G09-061-62 c13]

In these 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 individual, personal identities (by avoiding their names) on the one hand, and their professional identities (by avoiding terms such as *journalist*, *columnist* or *correspondent*, i.e. terms that are very frequently used for this purpose in letters to the editor) on the other. Notwithstanding the fact that “lady” and “fellow” are friendly terms, in the above cases such general terms of reference 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 illustrate 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, it is not necessarily the case that less direct references are also less face-threatening. In Example (10) below, there is no reference to the author at all, yet the content leaves no doubt as to who is the target of the criticism:

- (10) 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. [G10-056-59 c13]

The explicit negative evaluation of the text (“poor journalism”, “badly researched”, produced only because it “makes for ‘exciting’ copy”), constitutes an indirect claim that the article does not live up to the core principles every journalist should strive to uphold (e.g. professionalism and reliability as opposed to sensationalism). The comment writer thus 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 *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 (1969, p. 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, the action 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 the author’s. While Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 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 advice-giver 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 (Locher, 2006, pp. 37–40). According to MacGeorge, Feng and Thompson (2008), for advice to be effective, the advice recipient should not only need and want the advice, but also perceive the advice-giver as having the requisite 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, strengthening 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, despite the fact that the journalist is neither addressed nor named, nor even explicitly referred to.

6.1.2 *Challenging argument/reasoning*

With 21.8%, the second most frequently criticised aspect 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 a good journalist should possess, this type of criticism differs from the first type in that the focus lies on the argument itself and not on how it is presented and the skills and effort required to present it well. In the examples below, the users challenge the arguments advanced by the journalists by disagreeing with and correcting the authors (see Examples (11) and (12)) and by asking rhetorical questions (see Examples (12) and (13)). Even though the authors are directly addressed in all three comments, the criticism does not focus 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.

- (11) A CT scan is not without hazard. The rate of usage you describe is not necessarily in the patient’s best interests. [...] [T06–018.1 c2]
- (12) 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”? [T07–022 c10]
- (13) [...] 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. [...] [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 – as opposed to attacks on the journalist – is welcomed in the community standards, it is still a form of criticism, as challenging the journalist’s argument or reasoning means indirectly challenging his/her authority and competence. So 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 Example (11) 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 Example (13) 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, which is not altogether unusual but certainly more common when providing positive feedback, but also uses a conducive tag question (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 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”. This greatly strengthens the effect of the face threat performed by the negative evaluation (cf. the example discussed by Bousfield, 2008, p. 247), despite the fact that the reasons are not even the author’s but those put into his mouth by the comment writer.

While the examples above exhibit many moves characteristic of debates (e.g. directly addressing the opponent, asking (rhetorical) 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 Example (14) 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 original argument.

- (14) [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE] That is not Brown's style. He condemns himself to an agonised deviousness whose sole virtue is honesty. [END QUOTE FROM ARTICLE]
 No, whose sole virtue is *deviousness* thus it was ever so when it comes to Britain's interests [G07-083 c12]

The same strategy is used in Example (15), which is a comment posted in response to an article entitled "The spirit of Thomas Paine could yet inspire Cameron". 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. This agreement, however, 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 being inspired by John Lennon.

- (15) Aye. And the spirit of John Lennon could inspire Katy Perry. [G09-061-62 c3]

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 who 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 not only 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"), but also explicitly asking its readers to "[d]emonstrate and share the intelligence, wisdom and humour we know you possess" (Community standards and participation guidelines, 2009).⁹ It can thus be argued that in challenging the

9. 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* draws attention to the fact that online comments may even represent a threat to the newspaper's reputation: "Very 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" (quoted in Reich, 2011, p. 103).

author's argument or reasoning, the commenters – despite criticising the newspaper – attempt to demonstrate that they possess the qualities expected of them and hence fit the image constructed for them.

6.1.3 *Attitude/character*

While evaluating the journalistic quality negatively or challenging the author's reasoning means criticising the journalist and his/her *professional* identity, another fairly frequently criticised aspect (i.e. 16.7% of the cases) is the journalist's attitude or character and hence a facet of 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 Example (17) below), indirect evaluations (e.g. saying that the author's attitude "is quite telling"; see Example (16) 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 Example (18) below) and mock agreement (e.g. "of course this couldn't be [...] it *has* to be..."; see Example (18) below).

- (16) [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE] 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. [END QUOTE FROM ARTICLE]

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.

[G09-033-34 c4]

- (17) [...] [QUOTE FROM ARTICLE] 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. [END QUOTE FROM ARTICLE]

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. [...]

[G11-018 c7]

- (18) [...] Essentially you're [AUTHOR] 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. [...]

[G07-083 c14]

Attacking the author in this way is clearly threatening his/her positive face – irrespective of whether the threat just consists of a snide or wry remark or bald on-record insults. While it could be argued that attacking the author's professional identity by criticising his/her skills is 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 instead of constructive criticism or a valuable contribution to the debate. Especially in Examples (17) and (18), 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).

6.1.4 *Lack of integrity (balance, completeness, objectivity)*

In 14.1% of the cases in which the author is criticised, 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 the missing piece of information in order to further the discussion, but accuse the author of having omitted this piece of information on purpose (e.g. by stating that something “has been conveniently overlooked here”; see Example (19) below), thus implying that the journalist is biased. In doing so, they not only attack the journalist’s professional identity, but also position themselves as educated readers who have the necessary background knowledge and skill to expose such persuasive techniques:

- (19) 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. [...] [T11–013 c13]
- (20) [...] 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. [G07–083 c19]

So while the journalist is criticised for lacking the integrity to present the readers with a balanced, objective and complete picture, the commenters cast themselves in the role of knowledgeable and responsible readers, holding the press to account.

6.1.5 *Minor aspects*

The remaining aspects will be discussed together in the following, as their occurrences are comparatively rare. In 7.1% of the cases, the journalist (or even the entire newspaper) is criticised for having raised the issue in the first place. While the frustration resulting from reading the article is made fairly obvious with the help of the performative predication or *emote* (Virtanen, 2013, p. 161) “groan” in Example (21), which is even prosodically respelt to strengthen the effect, the commenter in Example (22) uses the more subtle strategies of irony and feigned interest to mock the journalist’s choice of topic.

- (21) Groooooaaann. Yet another divisive victim article about education in the UK.
[...] [T08–032 c14]
- (22) I don’t feel we’ve had enough coverage of 10:10 around here lately. It sounds great, what is it? [...]
[G09–051 c6]

In such comments the users not only criticise the author’s judgement of newsworthiness and the newspaper’s overall balance, but also position themselves as constant and regular – as opposed to sporadic – readers of the newspaper.

The last two categories are both fairly infrequent (i.e. only 4.5% each) and consist of, on the one hand, comments correcting a factual error and hence questioning the article’s accuracy or truthfulness (see Example (23) below), and, on the other, comments criticising actions of the journalist or newspaper (see Example (24) below).

- (23) [...] By the way Hobbit was a PBI variety, I used to be a Licenced Crop Inspector.
[T10–025 c14]
- (24) 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.
[T10–005 c7]

The comment that a certain crop was developed at a different institute from the one claimed by the author would – as an important contribution to accuracy – lead to an entry in the *corrections and clarifications* section in the printed edition of the newspaper. Interestingly, the user feels the need to support his/her correction by claiming expert status in the field – a move that is, just as that of recounting personal experiences, also frequently used when debating in order to lend more weight to one’s arguments. In this case, it can also be interpreted as a justification for the implied criticism, as correcting information published in a newspaper always amounts to criticising those responsible for a lack of journalistic accuracy. On the other hand, the comment accusing the newspaper of ignoring the express

wish of mourning parents for profit reasons criticises both the decision to publish the picture of a dying Marine (past action) and the alleged reason for taking this decision (attitude, character). The focus is thus no longer solely on the journalistic product and the topic at stake, but the person(s) behind it. In such cases, the target of the criticism may be extended to include the entire newspaper (after all, it is not known who took the decision), even if the reference to immortality in the comment above establishes a clear link to the author who defends the decision by claiming that the image immortalises the soldier's death.¹⁰

6.2 Criticising other comment writers

When targeting other comment writers as opposed to the author of the newspaper article, the aspects criticised are surprisingly similar, but their distribution seems to differ slightly, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.¹¹

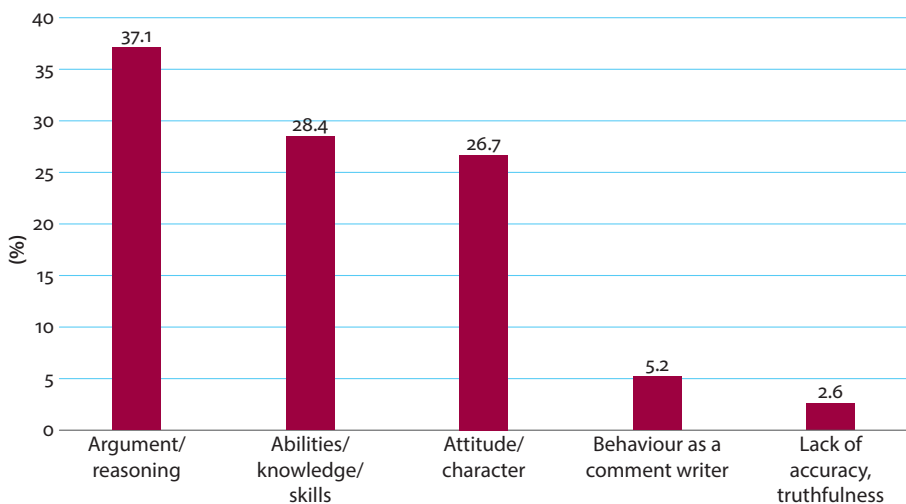


Figure 3. Aspects criticised when targeting other comment writers ($N = 116$)

In more than one third of all occurrences (i.e. 37.1%), the argument or reasoning of other users is challenged, while their abilities, knowledge and skills are questioned in 28.4% and their attitude or character is criticised in 26.7%. Yet while

10. As argued above, posters usually do not differentiate between principal, author and editor/s.

11. As 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.

a comparison with the criticism targeted at the journalists (cf. Figure 2 above) seems to suggest that when criticising other users, 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 criticised more frequently found in combination than is the case 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, as in Example (25), or attitude, as in Example (26). This directs the focus to the comment writers behind the argument and is commonly used as a strategy to discredit them.

- (25) [...] [QUOTE FROM OTHER COMMENT] we are a soft touch, and they [asylum seekers] know it. [END QUOTE FROM OTHER COMMENT]
 We have some of the most draconian immigration laws in Europe. You seriously do not know of what you speak. [G08-074-75 c14]
- (26) <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. [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 other users, just like journalists, may 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. In the examples below, this is achieved by using irony and rhetorical questions to implicitly refer to the unwritten rules of appropriate behaviour in comment sections, such as reading the article before commenting.

- (27) [...] Congratulations <user> you have demolished an argument that nobody ever made. Look up the definition of straw man. [T07-005 c3]
- (28) Did <user A> read the above article? I very much doubt it as <user B> pointed out. [...] [T07-005 c5]

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 skill 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, despite the fact that 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 according to more or less the same criteria, the crucial difference lies in the fact that the journalists are paid for what they produce and that their skills and knowledge are part of their professional identity. While comment writers may well feel deeply offended when 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 concrete 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 free 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 author in the third person when criticising him/her (23.2%) – even though cases of direct address are more frequent (34.4%) – 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%).¹² This clearly illustrates that while the author may not be perceived to be a participant in the interaction and hence may 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, disagreement, irony, rhetorical questions, implicature), 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; see also the mitigation strategies for criticism discussed by Leech (2014, pp. 192–196) and Diani (2015)) 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 the comments targeting another user. These findings stand in stark contrast to the preference for hedging criticism in book reviews found by Hyland (2000) and the preference for mitigating disagreement in dinner table conversations found by Locher (2004, p. 145), which seems to suggest that in on-line comments sections, there is not only less consideration for face, but also less need to protect oneself from retaliation (cf. Diani, 2015, p. 173). In critical reader

12. As there are a number of other strategies used to identify the target of the criticism, e.g. quoting the journalist or comment writer, the percentages mentioned above do not add up to 100.

response, getting one's point across and casting oneself in the role one would like to have seems more important to the interlocutors than showing consideration for other people's face wants.¹³

7. Discussion and conclusion

The present study, analysing 1,000 online comments posted on the websites of the *Guardian* and the *Times*, has found a little more than half of the comments to contain some sort of criticism. In more than half of these comments, groups of people (as opposed to individuals) were attacked – the biggest one being that of *politicians, the government, parties*. In order to analyse how criticism is used for identity construction and negotiation, the subsequent discussion focused on criticism addressed at the author of the newspaper article on the one hand, and other users on the other. While nearly half of the comments written in response to other users are of a critical nature, user-user interaction is comparatively rare – an issue that the *Guardian* has, in the meantime, tried to remedy by redesigning the comment function and thus making it easier to address other users directly.

The analysis of the criticism targeting the author of the newspaper article has revealed that the commenters focus their criticism on various aspects and thus foreground different parts of the journalist's identity, while at the same time asserting their own authority. When authors are criticised for the journalistic quality of their article or when their argument, reasoning and integrity are questioned, 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 (cf. e.g. The Guardian's Editorial Code, 2007) under which the two newspapers work and to which all journalists have to subscribe (cf. also Neurauter-Kessels, 2011), the present corpus also contains a substantial number of comments in which it is not the professional but the personal identity of the journalist that comes under attack: all in all 16.7% of the critical comments are of this nature. Interestingly, the criticism directed at other, lay comment writers not only addresses largely the same aspects, but also uses the same strategies – with the major difference lying in the interactive strategies used. However, I have argued that while questioning the journalists' core competencies in front of their own audience leaves them and their professional identity fairly

13. It is certainly tempting to hold the anonymity of the Internet and the spontaneity of the interaction responsible for this (cf. McKenna and Green, 2002, p. 119), who name deindividuation and its disinhibition effect as a source for flaming); however, a comparison with traditional letters to the editor (cf. Eller, 2017), which are not anonymous and probably written in a less ad-hoc fashion, shows that such behaviour is far from uncommon in that genre.

exposed, attacks on any individual from the mass of anonymous comment writers are not likely to have the same impact.

The most striking conclusion to be drawn from the analysis is that commenters use criticism as a highly effective tool for identity construction. In reader response, criticism is not only a form of stance taking, as the comment writers evaluate, show their disalignment and position themselves in the ongoing interaction (DuBois, 2007), but 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 somebody for lacking skills and integrity or for their attitude and character).

Yet through criticising others, the users 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 comments in which users reveal something about themselves or even relate personal experiences abound in the corpus (all in all, 591 comments contain such instances), these moves are hardly found in comments criticising the author or other users. Attacks on others are thus usually performed from the safe position of anonymity: no concrete personal information is revealed, but discourse is nonetheless employed to assume a certain role in the interaction (cf. Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) positionality principle). The motivation for many users seems to be that pointing out faults in others projects positively on their online personas.

However, as the examples above have shown, online comments may not only be used to actively project the identity one would like to have; they can also be turned against their authors when used as a basis to discredit them and cast them in bad light – a fact that the comment writer cited in the title of this paper seems all too aware of. In a comment thread about the supposedly declining standards in education, he/she first criticises others for lacking orthography and grammar skills, and once having posted the comment, becomes aware of the danger of being made the target him/herself and therefore feels inclined to pre-empt possible criticism by adding the tongue-in-cheek notification:

(29) “no prizes to anybody spotting my typo, by the way.” (G06–011–12 c19)

This nicely captures the core essence of reader response, where criticism and fault-finding are not only a form of stance-taking, but also important tools for identity construction, which may be used as strategies to score a point in the public debate.

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PART III

Collective identities

The use of face-threatening acts in the construction of in- and out-group identities in British parliamentary debates

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Identity construction is group membership construction in that humans bring their individual selves into being by declaring and performing their belonging to in-groups which are constructed in contrast to out-groups, as suggested in Tajfel's theory of social identity. In parliamentary discourse, the establishment and reinforcement of in- and out-group identities is particularly important, since parliamentary discourse represents an institutionalized arguing game of 'us' versus 'them' (between political parties). One decisive way in which these group identities are construed and maintained is through the use of face-threatening acts (FTAs), analyzed here in British House of Commons debates on health policy. A taxonomy of FTAs in this context is developed, allowing for an analysis of addressers and addressees, and close interpretation of examples leads to the conclusion that FTAs are used to denigrate the out-group and strengthen in-group identification at the same time.

Keywords: group identity, identity construction, face-threatening acts, impoliteness, parliament, House of Commons

1. Introduction: In- and out-group identity construction and face

Social psychology has long accepted that social identities are always constructed with reference to an Other – an identity of a group in terms of what 'we' are is only possible when there are other groups who 'we' are not like. This raises the question of how such in- and out-group identities are constructed in discourse. The present chapter illustrates one type of linguistic strategy for marking the out-group as different from the in-group, namely the face-threatening act. The context focused on is parliamentary debate, with political parties as social groups. Firstly, however, identity construction in general, social identity theory and its findings on in-group

vs. out-group identities, as well as the concepts of face and face-threatening acts are addressed. Then, after a review of previous work on face-threats in parliamentary discourse, the results of the analysis of five parliamentary debates are discussed, concentrating on types of face-threatening acts as well as on the speakers and targets of face-threatening acts. Examples are analyzed to show that face-threatening acts against representatives of a group have an effect on the group as a whole, and that derogation of the out-group is used to construct a positive in-group identity.

The concept of identity followed here is that laid out in Bucholtz and Hall (2005). To begin with, identity is seen as constructed, as emergent from semiotic practices (emergence principle), as encompassing several layers of social categories, both stable and transitional (positionality principle), indexed in language overtly and covertly (indexicality principle), and, finally, constantly shifting in focus in interaction (partialness principle). For the present context, however, Bucholtz and Hall's relationality principle is foregrounded. The crucial point Bucholtz and Hall make is that "identities are never autonomous or independent but always acquire meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors" (2005, p. 598). One example of social relations that are used to construct identities given by Bucholtz and Hall is that of similarity and difference (which they term adequation and distinction, cf. p. 599), in that actors bring their selves into being by declaring and performing their similarity to some actors or groups, and their dissimilarity to others. Bucholtz and Hall (*ibid.*) maintain that previous research on identity has wrongly focused on this social relation, since a host of others exist which have gone almost unnoticed, such as the relation between authenticity and artifice or legitimacy and delegitimacy. Nevertheless, this chapter will focus on identity construction via the similarity-dissimilarity relation, simply because this is the axis that actors foreground in the specific context under study – that of parliamentary debates in which members of political parties explicitly seek to establish the superiority of one group over the other, and thereby overtly construct in-group and out-group identities.

Of all the theoretical approaches to identity from various disciplines, the one that has focused the most on in- and out-group identities is social identity theory as proposed by social psychologist Henri Tajfel (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as well as its later offshoot of self-categorization theory (Turner & Reynolds, 2003). Social identity is defined in social identity theory as "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40¹). Social identity theory emerged from a series of experiments in what is called the minimal group paradigm, pioneered by

1. Quotations using the generic masculine are cited here of course also with reference to all human beings.

Tajfel at the beginning of the 1970s. These experiments showed that when subjects are divided into groups according to even the most trivial of characteristics, an in-group bias emerges automatically (Tajfel, 1974), i.e. “the tendency to favor the in-group over the out-group in evaluations and behavior” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 38). In fact, in-group favouritism and out-group derogation even occur when subjects are allocated to groups entirely randomly (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Social identity theory proposes that this bias is the result of an identification process:

Social groups, understood in this sense, provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms. These identifications are to a very large extent relational and comparative: they define the individual as similar to or different from, as “better” or “worse” than members of other groups. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40)

Centrally, Tajfel and Turner maintain that every individual strives for a positive social identity, which “is based to a large extent on favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups” (ibid.). This need for a positive self-image recalls Goffman’s (1959, 1967) notion of face – “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). The crucial difference between Tajfel and Turner and Goffman here is that Tajfel and Turner refer explicitly to a positive social identity – i.e. those facets of identity that relate to an individual’s identification with social groups – while Goffman’s face relates more to personal identity (note, however, that face is not non-social: it is a social construct which may refer to both personal and group identity, cf. Goffman, 1967, p. 5; also cf. Spencer-Oatey, 2007, p. 643). Nevertheless, the two approaches are certainly compatible, especially if one assumes that identity is multi-layered, including both social as well as personal aspects, which may be foregrounded in different situations, respectively. In fact, Tajfel’s social identity theory rests on the assumption that individuals will sometimes act as individuals, and sometimes as group members. The stronger an intergroup conflict is, the more the individuals’ actions will be based on social group identity than on their personal identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 34 – see also Musolff, this volume).

Therefore, even though it is recognized that individuals have multiple identities, this chapter focuses on social identity in terms of in- and out-group affiliation and assumes that individuals will strive for a positive social identity, or, to adapt Goffman’s concept, will strive for the group they identify with to maintain a positive face (even though Goffman primarily envisaged individuals to be endowed with face). In Parliament, individuals act as representatives of a group with which they identify, of which they are members. We will see that and how they attack not only individual representatives of the out-group, but also the out-group itself, and, in addition, individuals representing the group in order to denigrate both the representative and the collective (e.g. the party, the Government) at the same time (see also Musolff, this volume). Following social identity theory, it is suggested that these attacks against

the out-group and representatives of the out-group are used in order to strengthen in-group identification and even in order to attract new members to the in-group.

Social identity theory therefore serves as a fruitful base for investigations into group identity construction in the political domain. Self-categorization theory, launched by John G. Turner and colleagues in the late 1980s to complement social identity theory by focusing on self-categorization processes (Turner & Reynolds, 2003), contributes one further crucial point to the analysis that follows. This is the fact that groups are organized around a salient member, the leader, who prototypically embodies the attributes characterizing the group and with whom members identify, attempting to make themselves more similar to her/him (Hogg, 2002). This helps explain why spokespeople of political parties are attacked so frequently by out-group representatives and defended by in-group members, as will become apparent in the analysis below.

As a final point on social identity theory, it needs to be remarked that this is not an essentialist, but indeed a constructivist theory, even if this is not a label explicitly sought by the authors. Nevertheless, Tajfel and Turner emphasize that social categorizations “provide a system of orientation for *self*-reference: they create and define the individual’s place in the world” (1979, p. 40). Huddy points out that the very fact that group identities can be created ad hoc in the social identity theory perspective means that social identity is seen as constructed and not as given (2013, p. 742).

The chapter therefore rests on the background of social identity theory to conceptualize in- and out-group identity construction. The notion of face, however, is invoked to conceptualize how this identity construction proceeds, to describe the mechanisms of elevating the in-group and degrading the out-group. As mentioned above, the concept of face is Goffmanian in origin, with the sociologist using it to describe face-work, i.e. the strategies of protecting or defending one’s own face, or of threatening or saving someone else’s (Goffman, 1967). The concept was introduced into linguistics by Brown and Levinson (1987), who used it to construct a model of linguistic politeness, at the centre of which stands the face-threatening act (FTA), i.e. any act that potentially threatens a person’s positive self-image, and which interactants wish to avoid or at least mitigate, by strategies which are then defined as polite. Brown and Levinson’s model has since been heavily criticized, among others for their claim of the model’s universality, for the formalism of the model, their static notion of face and for their assumption that speakers always act rationally (e.g. Sifianou, 2010; Watts 2003). Nevertheless, the notions of ‘face’ and ‘face-threatening act’ are still in use today in politeness and impoliteness studies (e.g. Culpeper (2011) and sources referred to in the next section) – while unmodified uses of the terms ‘politeness’ and ‘impoliteness’ are declining in use. Since there is a clear difference between whether interactants in a situation themselves

perceive utterances as polite or impolite (first-order conceptions) or whether outsiders (linguists) classify them as such (second-order conceptions), it is increasingly argued that as im/politeness emerges in discourse, first-order definitions should prevail (e.g. Grainger, 2011; Locher & Watts, 2005). In the following, therefore, the potentially problematic term ‘impoliteness’ is not used to refer to the behaviour of Members of Parliament. Rather, the term FTA is used to describe all those moves by which a speaker doubts positive characteristics or actions of the addressee/ addressed group or assumes negative characteristics or actions.

2. Face-threatening acts in parliamentary discourse: A review with a focus on identity construction

In parliamentary discourse, the construction and reinforcement of in- and out-group identities is particularly important and visible, since parliamentary discourse represents an institutionalized arguing game of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (between political parties). After all, the ostensible point of parliamentary debate is to debate – to weigh the pros and cons of political ideas and proposals for action. In addition, most Western parliaments are organized by party membership. Members of Parliament (MPs) are typically elected as members of political parties, and parliamentary proceedings depend on political party membership, with speakers being given the right to the floor based on their party membership, party members being placed en bloc in the seating arrangements, etc. The British House of Commons, moreover, is perceived as one of the most antagonistic parliaments in arguing style, visible in the confrontational architecture of the chamber (Government MPs sitting opposite Opposition MPs rather than in a semicircle, cf. Meyer & Ebeling, 2000). It is also crucial to point out that it may be a misconception that parliamentary debate is intended for the deliberation of courses of action – this is a process that political science sees mainly as happening backstage. Instead, parliamentary debate appears to serve mainly the public staging of parties’ positions (Burkhardt, 2003, pp. 224ff.; Stopfner, 2013, p. 11). Ilie links this directly to the construction of political identities: “parliamentary interaction is not just about problem-solving, but also about constructing, challenging and co-constructing identities through language at micro and macrolevels” (2010, p. 58). One decisive way in which these social identities may be construed and maintained in this confrontational context is through the use of FTAs.

Face-threatening acts against political opponents serve to derogate the out-group, and at the same time implicitly strengthen the in-group identity, emphasizing that ‘we’ do not share a specific flaw pointed out for ‘them’, in line with social identity theory as elaborated on above. Ilie (2001) lists the functions of FTAs in this

genre.² Firstly, they “score points by silencing, embarrassing, and/or humiliating political adversaries” (ibid., p. 253), and secondly, they “challenge the authority and institutional role of political adversaries” (ibid.), i.e. they establish the out-group or representatives of the out-group as deficient. Thirdly, they are used to “redress the political power balance and to strengthen group cohesion” (ibid., p. 254). FTAs thus have a double purpose in identity construction: to derogate the out-group, and to strengthen and enhance the in-group identity of group members present.

However, the multi-audience setup of parliamentary debate means that the strengthening of in-group identity is not only intended for those in-group members in the parliament itself, but also outside it. That is, FTAs are also performed for the benefit of those members of the public who identify with the same party, in order to maintain their sense of belonging to the ‘right’ group. A further important goal of face-threatening acts is the wooing of undecided constituents in the hope that they will see the flaws of the political opponents and the virtues of the speaker’s own party (cf. Ilie, 2001, p. 258; Ilie, 2004, p. 78). Parliamentary debate may therefore be seen not as a genre of ‘authentic conversation’, but as a staged performance (e.g. Ilie, 2010, p. 63; Taylor, 2011, p. 6), in which addresser and addressee are joined not only by the visible audience, but also by an invisible audience, who, however, is the main beneficiary. One additional complicating contextual factor concerning debates in the British House of Commons is that the discourse is mediated through the Speaker – MPs are not allowed to address each other directly, but direct their speech to the Speaker of the House, referring to the actual opponent in the third person (cf. Ilie, 2010, p. 62).

Regarding the form and function of face-threatening acts, it has been pointed out above already that these may be directed against either individuals or groups. However, especially when an individual politician is high-ranking within their party, attacks on their individual face may serve to attack the face of the group as a whole by approximation, thus also functioning as in-group/out-group identity construction devices (cf. Bull & Fetzer, 2010, p. 160) – in line with the finding in self-categorization theory (cf. above) that social groups are organized around prototypical members. The picture becomes even more complex when we assume that any given speaker in the House of Commons has not one exclusive identity (and face) as a party member, but also other, more individual identities (Pérez de Ayala, 2001, p. 145). In this context, Ilie (2001) rightly emphasizes that

2. Ilie, however, uses the term ‘insult’, which she characterizes as being “emotional” (ibid., p. 236) or “irrational” (ibid., p. 258). This is unfortunate, since ‘insults’/FTAs are actually strategically used, which Ilie implicitly acknowledges when she enumerates the goals of ‘insults’.

insults appear to exhibit a dynamic scope, since they are usually directed at multiple, moving, partly superposed, targets. Depending on the situation and the intentions of the insulting agent, each of these targets may get foregrounded, while the others are pushed into the background. (Ilie, 2001, p. 248)

Previous work on face-threatening acts in political discourse in general has emphasized that confrontativity is frequently the unmarked mode, resulting in a high proportion of aggressive attacks. This is true, for example, for pre-election debates (e.g. Blas Arroyo, 2003; García-Pastor, 2008), even though authors here also find a great deal of mitigation of FTAs and overt politeness, probably in order to keep proceedings smooth, and in order for candidates not to come across as uncivilized. Luginbühl (2007), analyzing debates in a Swiss political TV talk show, also notes the high frequency of instances of what he calls ‘conversational violence’, especially when alleging incompetence or insincerity on the part of the opponent. Luginbühl asks whether, if violence is expected of the politicians, we can still call it violence (*ibid.*, p. 1386). His opinion is that it is not real violence, but rather it is staged, since the political debate in the context is only a game. Nevertheless, even if adversarial contexts do have a performance character, this does not mean that FTAs are without effect for the speaker’s face (for a similar argumentation cf. Bousfield 2010, p. 105; Culpeper, 2008). The crucial difference between TV and parliamentary debates is that the TV debates foreground the individual politician, whereas the parliamentary context (even if televised) foregrounds the politician as a representative of a political party, and therefore also group identities.

Parliamentary language itself has repeatedly been termed confrontational in past research (e.g. Ilie, 2001, p. 241), and House of Commons proceedings have generally been found to contain many face-threatening acts (e.g. Bates, Kerr, Byrne, & Stanley, 2014; Bull & Wells, 2012; Christie, 2002; Harris, 2001; Murphy, 2014; Pérez de Ayala, 2001; Shaw, 2000; Taylor, 2011). The largest amount of work has focused on Prime Minister’s Question Time (PMQ), the weekly session in which the Prime Minister is scrutinized by Parliament and which regularly leads to very heated exchanges particularly between the Prime Minister and the Shadow Prime Minister, cheered and jeered by the other MPs. Harris (2001) notes an extraordinary number of FTAs in this particular parliamentary setting, and concludes that these appear to be the primary aim of the format, while actually seeking information is only secondary. Furthermore, she finds that FTAs are not only sanctioned in this context, but rewarded by the speaker’s fellow party members. Likewise, Pérez de Ayala defines PMQ as a “face-threatening genre” (2001, p. 159), with a frequency of almost one FTA per speaking turn. However, in addition, she finds a high frequency of politeness strategies. She argues that these are needed in order to be able to perform the FTAs without being called to order: “the production of FTAs

has to be compatible with moderate parliamentary language, and this moderation is reached through the production of politeness strategies” (ibid.). Certainly, politeness strategies also fulfil a group identification function, signalling to group members that the speaker is a perfectly likeable person, a good identification figure. Murphy (2014) also considers PMQ, focusing on the quantity and types of FTAs performed. He finds a marked difference between Government and Opposition MPs: the latter produce more FTAs, while Government MPs use mitigation strategies most frequently when asking their own leader for information. The leader of the Opposition in Murphy’s data is even more impolite than the Opposition backbenchers. All findings are seen by Murphy to be in general accordance with the goals and aims of PMQ. Interestingly, the use of impoliteness, but also of politeness and mitigation, is reciprocal: the Prime Minister tends to reciprocate the level of im/politeness in his response. Murphy lists a number of FTA types, which will also feature in the analysis below, such as accusing a speaker of inaction, or of posturing, or questioning his leadership (details below).

Research on FTAs in debates rather than in PMQ is rarer, probably since the face-attacks are neither as pervasive nor as salient in these contexts, which also draw far less public attention – indeed, it is well possible that their not being broadcast widely is the reason why FTAs are less frequent. Ilie (2001, referred to several times above) elaborates on the contexts and conditions of ‘insults’ in debates, but provides no empirical analysis. Taylor (2011) investigates how politeness formulae are used to introduce FTAs (e.g. *with all due respect...*), while Christie (2002), in her analysis of the role of gender in polite and impolite behaviour in debates, finds that male MPs are proportionally more often called to order than female MPs for transgressing transactional and interactional norms. All in all, however, the analysis of functions of face-threatening acts that has advanced quite far for Prime Minister’s Question Time has not spilled over into a comparable analysis of debates, and in general, the question of in- and out-group identity construction has not taken centre stage as a motive for the use of face-threatening acts in Parliament.

3. Identity construction through FTAs in House of Commons health debates

The present chapter aims to unearth and illustrate the ways in which face-threatening acts are used in order to construct in- and out-group identities in British House of Commons parliamentary debates. To repeat, the context selected for analysis here is not the extremely adversarial and routinized setting of Prime Minister’s Question Time (as in Bull & Wells, 2012; Harris, 2001; Murphy, 2014; Pérez de Ayala, 2001), but the more content-oriented and apparently less routinely face-threatening debates.

Debates constitute the main business of the parliamentary sitting day, discussing motions tabled by the Government, the Opposition or even individual MPs, or discussing (more rarely) general issues, as in emergency debates (Leach, Coxall, & Robins, 2006, p. 232). Individual motions may undergo several readings, followed by debates, until a vote is taken on them. The data for the present study come from general debates in the field of health policy.

All in all, five complete House of Commons debates (14 hours of talk) on the National Health Service (NHS) from the 2012–2013 sitting period were analyzed. The debates are summarized in Table 1. The official report, the so-called Hansard transcript, formed the basis for the analysis. Since it is known, however, that the Hansard report is not a verbatim transcript, all debate transcripts were checked against video footage, especially in order to see whether face-threatening acts were uttered the way they have been represented. Fortunately for the present purpose, the Hansard staff mainly change some grammatical and lexical items and remove false starts or incomplete utterances (Mollin, 2007), so that the report is actually quite suitable for studies in pragmatics.

Table 1. Debates used for analysis

| Date of debate | Contents of debate |
|-------------------|---|
| December 12, 2012 | Opposition Day debate in which the Opposition seeks to establish that expenditure on the NHS has not risen (contrary to promises by the Government) |
| March 14, 2013 | debate on a motion to make NHS executives personally accountable for failure |
| June 5, 2013 | debate on the high waiting times in accident-and-emergency departments of NHS hospitals |
| July 3, 2013 | estimate debate discussing the future budget of the NHS |
| July 16, 2013 | debate on a statement by the Secretary of State for Health on the fact that several NHS hospitals have been put under surveillance following high mortality rates |

3.1 Categories of face-threatening acts

The central methodological step in the analysis of the debates was the identification and classification of face-threatening acts. The coding was carried out with MAXQDA. At first, all debates were read and watched closely, and potential face-threatening acts were marked. Utterances or parts of utterances were identified as FTAs if the speaker questioned positive characteristics or actions of the addressee(s) or accused them of negative characteristics or actions. In the second step, the identity of the speaker and their professional role was noted, as well as the target of

the FTA. Regarding the type of FTA performed, the taxonomy of FTAs developed by Murphy (2014) with his data from Prime Minister's Question Time sessions was used as a basis. Not all of Murphy's categories were applicable to the debate context, since some originate clearly from the question-answer format of PMQ. However, the following categories were indeed found to occur in the present data as well:

- a. accuse target of acting as a stooge
- b. accuse target of lacking knowledge or intelligence
- c. accuse target of posturing
- d. accuse target of inaction or slow pace of action
- e. accuse target of not answering a question
- f. criticize actions of target
- g. draw attention to unpopular politics of target
- h. question leadership of target

In addition, the analysis of the data gave rise to several new categories, as some FTAs committed did not fit well into any of Murphy's categories. These additional categories of FTAs are:

- i. accuse target of insincerity
- j. accuse target of putting the party before the issue
- k. accuse target of lacking integrity
- l. accuse target of short-sighted politics
- m. accuse target of wrong priorities
- n. accuse target of dodging blame
- o. accuse target of lacking personal dignity

The classification of FTAs into these categories is certainly a qualitative analytical means; however, the classification also leads to some quantitative results, since it makes quantification of FTAs possible in terms of who threatens whose face in which manner. Firstly, 387 face-threatening acts were marked in the data, which contained 682 speaking turns by MPs, so that on average every other turn contains an FTA (0.57 FTAs per turn). It needs to be pointed out, however, that turns vary greatly in length. Table 2 shows which FTA types were performed the most frequently in the data. Since some FTAs were marked with multiple codes, i.e. they contained more than one type of accusation at the same time, the frequencies add up to more than 100% (100% corresponding to 387 FTAs). In addition, Table 2 contains an assessment of whether a specific type of FTA foregrounded an addressee's role performance, i.e. their political actions and opinions (P), or character attributes (C). It becomes clear that FTAs far more frequently attacked a person's or group's character, i.e. the 'how' of the political process (C: 282 cases) rather than the 'what', the politics themselves (P: 130 cases). It appears that speakers believe that it will be easier to maintain a strong in-group identity and initiate an in-group identification

in potential newcomers by discrediting the opponent as an untrustworthy (or at least inefficient) person or a collective of untrustworthy/inefficient persons. However, the exact distribution of FTA types is certainly content-dependent. Some of the debates analyzed quite clearly centred on questions of blame for unsatisfactory states of affairs and/or questions of whether promises were broken. These may have led to a greater prevalence of the character-targeting FTAs than in an ‘average’ debate.

Table 2. Types of FTAs in the debates, sorted by frequency

| Type of FTA | Frequency | targeting character (C) or politics (P) |
|--|-----------|---|
| i. accuse of insincerity | 78 | C |
| f. criticize actions of the target | 63 | P |
| o. accuse the target of lacking personal dignity | 54 | C |
| d. accuse target of inaction or slow pace of action | 42 | P |
| b. accuse target of lacking knowledge or intelligence | 37 | C |
| j. accuse target of putting the party before the issue | 36 | C |
| n. accuse the target of dodging blame | 36 | C |
| k. accuse the target of lacking integrity | 23 | C |
| m. accuse the target of wrong priorities | 22 | P |
| others / unclear ^a | 22 | |
| g. draw attention to unpopular politics of the target | 19 | C/P |
| c. accuse target of posturing | 6 | C |
| e. accuse target of not answering a question | 6 | C |
| h. question leadership of the target | 4 | C |
| l. accuse the target of short-sighted politics | 3 | P |
| a. accuse target of acting as a stooge | 2 | C |

^a This category includes a variety of other minor types of FTA (occurring no more than once in the data each), such as not giving way when the right to the floor has been requested, recommending enraged members of the other party to ‘calm down’, calling for a specific person to resign (without providing reasons), or reminding the audience of a speaker’s failed bid for the party leadership. In addition, unclear cases are subsumed in this category. Sometimes these have been classified as ‘unclear’ because of potential irony (e.g. “I congratulate XY on seeking to defend his Government’s record”) or because it was not clear on which grounds a target was attacked (e.g. “I find the behaviour of both former Secretaries of State strange all round”).

In order to clarify the classification of FTAs and to illustrate how FTAs function as identity construction devices, the five most frequent FTA categories will now be illustrated by one example each from the data.

FTAs in which targets are accused of insincerity are the most frequently found in the data analyzed. This is interesting because the House of Commons regulations actually forbid MPs to accuse another MP of lying³ – but they still regularly do so,

3. The House of Commons regulations list “charges of uttering a deliberate falsehood” as one of several “unparliamentary” expressions (McKay, 2004, p. 441).

even if they may then be reprimanded by the Speaker of the House. Example (1) shows how the then Shadow Secretary of State for Health for Labour threatens the face of the Conservative Secretary of State by alleging that he is making an unsupported (and thus potentially wrong) statement. In fact, the truth of the statement remains contested until the end of the debate, with the Secretary of State claiming that he has evidence and the Shadow Secretary of State claiming the opposite. Interestingly, the Shadow Secretary in Example (1) suggests that to speak without evidence is “outrageous”. The use of this adjective is intended to emphasize the gravity of the misdemeanour, singling it out as a particularly serious shortcoming on the part of the Minister, thus enhancing the face-threatening effect.

- (1) It is outrageous for the Secretary of State to come to the House today and repeat those concerns without a shred of evidence to back them up.

(Andy Burnham, MP for Leigh, Shadow Secretary of State for Health, Labour; July 16, 2013)

Similarly frequently, MPs attack opponents’ political actions, as in (2). Once more, the examples show the curious rules of address in the House of Commons, which imply that the opponent is never attacked directly, but always via the Speaker, or, as is the case in (2), by addressing the MP currently holding the floor, asking for agreement. MP Helen Jones attacks the Government as a group, addressing her own frontbencher (Andy Burnham). The question itself is not information-seeking, but is asked in order to draw attention to an action by the Government which she deems to be wrong (cutting expenses in adult social care), and to provide the leader of the in-group with the opportunity to attack on an additional front.

- (2) Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the pressures on A and E comes from this Government’s cuts to adult social care?

(Helen Jones, MP for Warrington North, Labour; June 5, 2013)

Example (3) shows how MPs may be accused of a lack of dignity, particularly if they hold office but may be thought not to have behaved as befits their office. Once more, a Labour MP threatens the face of the Secretary of State for Health. In fact, the FTA in (3) is a metapragmatic comment referring to FTAs committed by the Secretary of State and targeting the Labour Shadow Secretary of State. The situation is thus quite complex: One speaker performs an FTA by accusing another speaker of having committed too many/too aggressive FTAs. Even though it is perfectly normal and indeed required of the leaders of groups to attack leaders of the out-groups, at least in this political context, speakers try to score additional points by claiming that an invisible line has been crossed, which threatens the target’s face because he/she is portrayed as more aggressive than necessary. This is highlighted by the use of the

expression “on reflection”, suggesting that the Secretary of State has been speaking without reflection and has allowed himself to be carried away by emotion.

- (3) However, I hope that, on reflection, the right hon. Gentleman will realise that the comments that he has made demean his office.

(Jack Straw, MP for Blackburn, Labour; July 16, 2013)

Accusations of inaction or slow action are typically made against those in power, but in Example (4), the current Minister accuses the former one (who was the Shadow Secretary of State for Health at the time of the debate) of not having acted on a problem during his time in office. Even though the FTA ostensibly targets the Government at the time, it is clear that the Shadow Secretary is targeted personally, since he was responsible for health policy then.

- (4) The right hon. Gentleman should accept that between 2005 and 2010 his Government received 142 letters about this hospital which they did nothing about [...]

(Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health, Conservative; July 16, 2013)

Finally, the accusation of ignorance is one of the most face-threatening of all the types of FTAs in evidence here. In Example (5), the Labour frontbenchers are accused of not understanding some of the most basic principles in politics. The perceived competence of politicians to fulfil their role successfully rests crucially on the impression that they are intelligent enough to grasp the complexities of political processes. To suggest that they do not understand obvious facts is thus to ridicule the out-group to the maximal degree.

- (5) The simple truth that Labour Front Benchers cannot understand is that spending is related to budgets, [...]

(Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health, Conservative; December 12, 2012)

There are thus many different ways in which MPs threaten each other’s face. The classification of FTAs as laid out in Table 2 is therefore the first result to come forward from the study. The next section focuses on the targets of the FTAs, relating them to in- and out-group identity construction.

3.2 Addressers and addressees of face-threatening acts in the data

The quantitative analysis of the health debates confirms Murphy’s (2014) finding for PMQ that Opposition members perform more FTAs than members of the governing parties, and that Opposition frontbenchers are the most aggressive of all. In the present data, Labour MPs perform, on average, 0.80 FTAs per speaking turn,

as opposed to 0.53 per turn for Conservative MPs (the difference is significant at $p < 0.05^{*4}$; smaller parties are not considered since they have too few members). In general, frontbenchers use FTAs more frequently than backbenchers (0.97 vs. 0.47 FTAs per turn, difference highly significant at $p < 0.01^{**}$), and Opposition frontbenchers are characterized by even more FTAs than Government frontbenchers (1.57 vs. 0.51 FTAs per turn, difference highly significant at $p < 0.01^{**}$). Murphy's conclusion was that the aim of PMQ is to challenge the Prime Minister, which is reflected in the frequency of FTAs.

For the context of debates, it is certainly true that some debates are clearly intended to challenge Government policy, but in terms of identity construction, the distribution of FTAs can also be explained by the fact that the Opposition leader needs to work harder to maintain a positive in-group identity than the Government representative. As Tajfel (1974, p. 69) maintains, individuals strive for a positive social identity, and the more positive social identity pertains to groups with higher social status, such as Government parties compared to non-Government parties. Should an individual belong to a group with lower prestige, they may try to achieve a positive group value by foregrounding aspects in which the in-group is perceived to be superior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 41). This is exactly what the leader of the Opposition appears to be doing in debates, by attacking the face of both the Government and its representatives, flagging up attributes for members of the in-group as opportunities for negative identification along the lines of 'even if we are not governing, at least we are not X'.

In addition to this distribution of FTAs by addresser, it is also quite interesting to consider their distribution by addressee. Firstly, considering the two main parties (again, smaller parties are excluded), slightly more than half of the number of FTAs (57.79%) has a Conservative target, with 42.21% targeting Labour. For the focus on group identity, however, it is imperative to distinguish between individual and group targets of attacks. Figure 1 breaks down all FTAs according to target: the left-hand columns show Labour targets, the right-hand ones Conservative targets, including both individuals and groups. The groups as a whole, i.e. parties and governments, are attacked slightly more frequently than individuals (56.37% vs. 43.63%), and among the individuals, only strong representative figures are frequent targets of attack – backbenchers' faces are only rarely threatened. One may argue that this is so because backbenchers are not visible, and form only marginal elements in the debate. Yet backbenchers contribute 64% of the speaking turns in the debates. Granted, the 36% frontbencher turns are covered by only one or two

4. * refers to significant findings at the level of less than 5% chance of coincidental occurrence, and ** to highly significant findings at the level of less than 1% chance of coincidental occurrence.

actors per party, whereas the backbenchers form a very diverse group, so that the individual backbencher is indeed far less visible than the individual frontbencher. But nevertheless, the reason that they rarely become the target of FTAs is that an FTA is far more effective when directed at a frontbencher exactly because he/she speaks for the whole party, and therefore acts as a central, salient group member. As a consequence, the face-threatening effect extends to the whole out-group, and the representative also serves as a projection figure, illustrating for the in-group the negative attributes of the out-group. Examples of these dynamics are discussed in the following section.

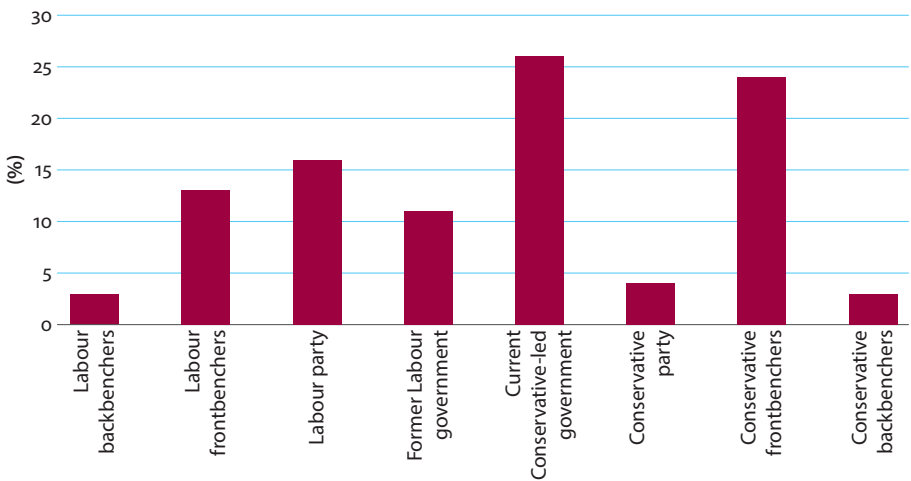


Figure 1. Targets of face-threatening acts in the debates

3.3 The effect of FTAs on face and group identity construction

The phenomenon that individual figureheads stand for the whole group is evidenced in utterances with multiple targets of FTAs. Consider Example (6), in which a Labour backbencher juxtaposes one FTA against the Secretary of State with one directed against the Government. She even draws an explicit metonymic link between the lack of integrity of the individual and that of the Government he is a member of: since the individual has broken his promise (FTA: accuse of lack of integrity), by extension the Government as a whole cannot be trusted (FTA: accuse of lack of integrity).

- (6) He has broken his promises on NHS spending and he has broken his promises about Lewisham hospital. If anyone needs proof that the Government cannot be trusted with the NHS, they need look no further.

(Heidi Alexander, MP for Lewisham East, Labour; December 12, 2012)

Similarly, in Example (7), the Secretary of State for Health begins with an FTA against the Labour party as a whole, claiming that it does not support transparency in the management of the health sector (FTA: accuse of lack of integrity). He backs up this statement on the whole party by referring to those individual Labour MPs who have spoken in the debate, claiming that they did not support transparency, but rather tried to cover up their own mistakes (FTA: accuse of lack of integrity/accuse of dodging blame). Also, the use of the declarative construction “Voters will notice” allows him to draw the attention of voters to something he thinks they should notice.

- (7) We do need to draw those lessons, and the sad lesson from this afternoon is that that change in culture with respect to transparency and accountability does not extend to the Labour party. Voters will notice how unwilling Labour Members are to accept that things went wrong on their patch.

(Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health, Conservative; July 16, 2013)

Examples (6) and (7) thus show that sometimes speakers make explicit links between the shortcomings of individuals and the groups they represent, by performing FTAs against each separately, but within the same utterance. Nevertheless, many instances of metapragmatic comments support the initial hypothesis that an FTA against only one representative of the group threatens the face of the group as a whole (so that there is no need to attack the whole group explicitly at the same time). Almost all metapragmatic comments, like the one in Example (3), function as defence moves on the part of backbenchers in help of their frontbencher. A further example is found in (8), showing that an attack against one party official or a smaller group within the party (the previous Government) is not seen as irrelevant by other members of the party under attack, but is perceived as an assault against Labour as a whole and all those identifying as members of Labour.

- (8) The Secretary of State has made an appalling attempt to smear my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh. Will he now acknowledge that in 2009, my right hon. Friend sought a review [...]

(Dame Joan Ruddock, MP for Lewisham and Deptford, Labour; July 16, 2013)

Here, a backbencher comes to the rescue of the Shadow Secretary of State, listing actions he took when he was in Government to amend the situation denounced by the Conservatives. She does this by attacking the present Secretary of State on two counts: his failure to acknowledge positive actions taken by the previous Labour

Government, and, metapragmatically, the fact that he used FTAs strategically in order to derogate her colleague. Once more, the FTA itself is enhanced by the use of an intensifying adjective (“appalling”). Such metapragmatic comments illustrate the effect which FTAs against figureheads have on the whole group and its members.

Finally, the last examples address the issue that FTAs against the out-group serve to enhance in-group identity. Sometimes utterances indeed include both attacks against the out-group and positive statements about the in-group at the same time, as in Example (9):

- (9) Will my right hon. Friend pledge to work tirelessly [...], so that my constituents, my friends and my relatives do not continue to die unnecessarily because of the failed policies of the previous Labour Government?

(Andrew Bridgen, MP for North-West Leicestershire,
Conservative; July 16, 2013)

Here, a Conservative backbencher poses a rhetorical question to his own Secretary of State, supporting him in his work for the National Health Service. At the same time, an FTA towards the Opposition party is included, directed at a subgroup of the Labour party (the former Labour Government), which is accused of misguided policies leading to unnecessary deaths. This is actually an FTA directed against the Shadow Secretary of State, who is taking part in the debate, because he used to be Secretary of State in the previous Labour Government and thus responsible for Labour health policy in the period in question. This FTA, designed to mark the Labour party and the Shadow Secretary in particular as not only incompetent but fatally incompetent, positions them as the clear out-group. It is accompanied, however, by obvious moves to strengthen in-group identity, making reference to the fact that the speaker and the Secretary of State are (as party colleagues) on the same side in this fight, together with “my constituents, my friends and my relatives” – a whole group of people marked with the first person possessive pronoun as belonging to ‘us’ rather than ‘them’ – and themselves of course representing ‘the ordinary people’, on whose side the Conservatives claim to be.

Frequently, policies of the two main parliamentary parties are juxtaposed explicitly, in order to highlight the difference between party positions for the benefit of the audience. Typically, the out-group’s positions are presented with a measure of irony or ridicule, in order to make clear that what ‘they’ want is nonsense, whereas what ‘we’ plan makes sense. A good example of this pattern is found in (10):

- (10) Unlike Labour Front Benchers, I do not want to micro-manage every hospital in the country and tell them exactly how many doctors and how many nurses they should have.
(Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health,
Conservative; December 12, 2012)

However, the vast majority of FTAs against the other party are not accompanied by explicit moves to construe the in-group as positive. This suggests that the attack against the out-group is sufficient means for maintaining the group boundaries, and that by denigrating the out-group, a positive effect for in-group identification is achieved automatically. Indeed, overall, moves attacking the out-group are five times as frequent as moves positioning the in-group as endowed with positive characteristics or responsible for positive actions (a pattern that is frequently observed in critical discourse analysis, cf. e.g. Hart's (2010) findings on referential strategies in immigration discourse). As in Example (11), speakers typically only explicitly mention shortcomings of the out-group, but, again as in Example (11), there is always the implicit meta-message that this is not a fault shared by the in-group. This follows from the very fact that speakers in Parliament act as representatives of their party, and not as individual actors. One non-linguistic indication that FTAs strengthen in-group identification, even if it would be difficult to put this to the test empirically, are the facial expressions of party members when listening to their own figurehead threatening the face of the out-group or the out-group representative – frequently these can be described as smug.

- (11) The Government's response to date has been totally inadequate for the scale and urgency of the problems. (Andy Burnham, MP for Leigh, Shadow Secretary of State for Health, Labour; June 5, 2013)

4. Conclusion

The present contribution has set out to view face-threatening acts in parliamentary debates from the perspective of in- and out-group identity construction. Social identity theory functions well as the theoretical fundament to an analysis of FTAs, since it predicts that social identity will lead to in-group favouritism and out-group denigration. The specific context of parliamentary debates means that social identities are very much foregrounded at the expense of more private ones, and there is a clearly competitive set-up in that the debates function as performances of group differences. Even though debates are less confrontational than the question time genre within parliamentary discourse, this in-depth analysis of five health policy debates shows them to be relatively FTA-full.

Face-threatening acts target several aspects of a person's or a group's identity, more frequently focusing on negative character attributes than factual political shortcomings. FTAs are more frequently committed by and against the figureheads of parties, but the analysis of examples, including metapragmatic comments, suggests that FTAs against individual representatives of a party have an effect on the social identity of all group members. In addition, it is important to note that FTAs

against the out-group have a positive effect for in-group identification, even if positive aspects of the in-group are not explicitly mentioned.

Ultimately, the parliamentary debates do indeed appear to function as battle-grounds for social identification processes, not least because their effect transcends the context of the actual debate with its present actors and audience. The debates, being recorded for a far larger virtual audience, instead become a central means of positioning groups in relation to each other in the eyes of the public. Nevertheless, even if actors frequently foreground the us-versus-them relation in this performance, we should not forget that even in this context, speakers construct multiple identities, and that any actor may choose to foreground other characteristics, thereby constructing private or even other social identities. Social identities that are not infrequently performed in the parliamentary setting are of course local identities (e.g. an MP highlighting his/her belonging to a specific region or his/her constituency), but also family identities, emphasizing the role of mother/father/son/daughter etc. (see also Fetzer, this volume). Not least, and perhaps reassuringly, a number of MPs in the debates construe their identity as an essentially non-partisan politician who is only interested in the facts (see Example (12) for a Conservative backbencher refusing to attack the Labour Shadow Secretary of State). However, playing football appears to generally be a very fitting metaphor for the parliamentary debates, with two opposing groups seeking to score goals by attacking each other.

- (12) I do not want to cast political aspersions, because I have a great deal of respect for the right hon. Gentleman. I believe he wanted to improve the NHS every bit as much as our Secretary of State and Ministers want to. I dearly wish the NHS was not a political football and we did not bandy about figures and information.

(Stephen McPartland, MP for Stevenage,
Conservative; December 12, 2012)

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“And you know, Jeremy, my father came from a very poor background indeed”

Collective identities and the private-public interface in political discourse

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This chapter examines the discursive construction of identity in political discourse and considers collective identities as the default in that context. It utilises an integrated approach informed by interactional sociolinguistics and discourse pragmatics. Departing from the premise that discursive identities are co-constructed, reconstructed and – possibly – deconstructed in and through the process of communication, it focuses on those contexts in which political agents depart from the default by entextualising non-collective identities, e.g., private-domain-anchored family person or ordinary citizen. The ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ of discursive identities in discourse is reflected in the importation of private-domain-anchored communicative styles and genres, such as colloquial expressions and small stories, contributing to the ongoing process of hybridisation of institutional discourse in general and political discourse in particular. The discursive construction, re- and deconstruction of identities in political discourse is a multifaceted endeavour which exploits the structural, pragmatic and cognitive constraints of a discourse genre as well as those of institution and society.

Keywords: contextualisation, decontextualisation discourse genre, discursive construction, entextualisation, hybridity, political discourse, private-public interface, recontextualisation

1. Introduction

In discourse, participants refer to themselves and to others; they make predictions about themselves and about others as well as about referents in the discourse world and in the social world; and they express evaluations about themselves and others as well as about referents in the discourse world and in the real world. Self- and

other-references are of key importance to the presentation of self and others, and to their interpersonal and social relationships. They are used strategically to construct, reconstruct and deconstruct discursive identities of self and others by negotiating their communicative status as regards personal identity, group identity or collective identity (cf. Kleinke & Bös; Mollin; Musolff; this volume), for instance. In mundane, everyday communication, discursive identities are negotiated directly by face-to-face participants and by other ratified participants in the local context. In media discourse, the construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of discursive identities as well as their negotiation concern both the directly addressed communication partner(s) and other ratified participants in the local context, but above all, they concern the media audience. In this particular communicative event, the media audience and all of its diverse subsets is the actual addressee of the media discourse and of its negotiation-of-validity processes. This is particularly true for political discourse, which has become media discourse par excellence in digitalised mass-media societies, and which is frequently taken up and referred to in follow-ups (cf. Fetzer & Weizman, 2015; Lauerbach & Fetzer, 2007).

In mediated political discourse, political agents bring in their discursive identities – and at the same time they bring them about, to employ interactional-sociolinguistic terminology (Gumperz, 1996). The discursive identities brought into the discourse do not need to conflate with the discursive identities brought about in the discourse, as their discursive construction is negotiated and may be challenged in negotiation-of-validity sequences. Depending on their local and global communicative goals, participants may foreground particular parts of their discursive identity, for instance private-domain-anchored identities, while backgrounding others, for instance public, government-anchored identities. The foregrounding and backgrounding of particular identities generally goes hand in hand with a change in discursive style and a change in other constitutive parts of the discourse genre, such as e.g., turn-taking and interactional roles. For instance, political agents may intend to enhance their currency by doing leadership in context (cf. Fetzer & Bull, 2012), and they may do that successfully, but they may also fail to enhance or keep that part of their discursive identity and thus not be able to present themselves as credible, competent and responsible leaders. In Searle's (2010) *Making the Social World*, the bringing-in of discursive identities and of other discourse-relevant features is administered by 'Background presuppositions', and the bringing-about of discursive identities and of other discourse relevant features is done through practices: "The point I am making (...) is that democracies work not just on rules, but on Background presuppositions, on practices, and on modes of sensibility" (ibid., p. 168). Through the use of language, discursive identities and other constitutive parts of discourse can be represented as existing entities – that is, as how participants intend them to exist and how participants intend them to be represented.

This can be done with the strategic use of metacomments entextualising¹ those parts of the discursive identity to be foregrounded, such as *I – respectively you – as a family person* or *I am – respectively you are – the only party leader*. Through the use of co-referential pronouns and other deictic devices, participants refer to the entextualised identities and to their inherent normative expectations as entities, which have been accepted in the current discourse and which have been assigned the status of ‘Background presuppositions’:

[...] in human language we have the capacity not only to represent reality both how it is and how we want to make it be, but we also have the capacity to create a new reality by representing that reality as existing. We create private property, money, government, marriage, and a thousand other phenomena by representing them as existing. (Searle, 2010, p. 86)

Against this background, discursive identities are conceptualised as interactional achievements, as doing political agent or as doing leader, as may be deduced from Searle’s reconceptualisation of power: “Something has to be added to our core concept of power, and that is the notion of its *intentional exercise*” (2010, p. 148).

In mundane, everyday discourse as well as in media discourse, the interactional organisation of discursive identities is based on indexically realised self- and other references to discursive entities brought into the discourse and brought about in the discourse: the former utilises first-person-singular- and plural pronouns *I* and *we*, as well as generic *you*, while other-references are expressed by the second-person-singular and plural pronoun *you*, and by the more generalised forms *she* or *he*, and *they*. Particularised discursive identities are entextualised by metacomments and/or predications entextualising the political identity of party leader, foregrounding institutional power and relevant leadership qualities, for instance “*I am the leader of the party now*” (William Hague in an interview with Jonathan Dimbleby, May 30, 2001). This is also the case in the following excerpt from a political speech delivered by Tony Blair, the then leader of the Labour Party and prime minister, in which the private domain is connected explicitly with party politics: “*I don’t think as a human being, as a family man, I’ve changed at all. I have changed as a leader*” (Tony Blair, Labour Party Annual Conference, Manchester, September 28, 2004).

This chapter focuses on the discursive construction, the reconstruction and deconstruction of discursive identities in political discourse, in which collective

1. The use of ‘entextualisation’ in this contribution differs from the one promoted by Park and Bucholtz (2009), who define entextualisation primarily in terms of institutional control and ideology. It shares their stance of approaching entextualisation in terms of “conditions inherent in the transposition of discourse from one context into another” (ibid., p. 489), while considering both local and global contexts.

identities are seen as the default, irrespective of the use of first-person-singular or first-person-plural self-references. It concentrates on the analysis of entextualised identities and on inherent normative expectations, which are used strategically to foreground particular parts of the identities while backgrounding others. The discursive construction of identities is a dynamic, multifaceted endeavour which requires an integrated frame of reference for felicitous analysis, accommodating discourse-pragmatic intentionality of communication action, rationality and conversational inference on the one hand, and interactional-sociolinguistic indexicality of communicative action, negotiation of meaning and contextualisation on the other.

The chapter is organised as follows. The next section investigates the discursive construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of identities. The third section presents the contextual constraints and requirements of political discourse, paying particular attention to its mediated on-record status, to political identities and to hybridity in mediated political worlds. The conclusion argues for cognitive prototype-based scalar conceptions of individuality and collectivity, which – depending on the communicative goals of the participants – are fore- and backgrounded in interaction.

2. Constructing, reconstructing and deconstructing identities in discourse

The construction of discursive identities is connected with what Davies and Harré (1990) refer to as acts of positioning. Positioning “is a discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (ibid., p. 46). A discursive identity thus emerges as a product of ongoing interaction rather than being a fixed identity, which is simply encoded and represented. The dynamics of the discursive construction of identity does not mean that discursive identity is constructed from scratch in every instance of interaction. Rather, social agents are firmly embedded in their social worlds in general and in their mediated (political) worlds in particular, and they “draw on expectations about identity claims and stereotypes derived from previous encounters in a process of analogy” (Bolander & Locher, 2010, p. 168).

From an ethnomethodological perspective, acts of positioning correspond to membership categorisation (Sacks, 1992), which is referred to indexically in the discursive construction of identity with strategic use of pronouns, deictic expressions and entextualised roles with their normative expectations. The latter are generally realised as metacomments containing a self- or other-reference with an explicit mention of the role. In interactional sociolinguistics, identities are not static entities but also context-dependent interactional achievements, which are constructed, co-constructed, reconstructed and deconstructed in and through

discursive action. Discursive identity construction thus feeds on pre-identities brought into the discourse and identities that emerge in the interaction; that is, constructed, co-constructed, reconstructed or deconstructed identities.

The context-dependence and multilayeredness of discourse is reflected in Heritage's observation that talk-in-interaction is *doubly contextual* (1984, p. 242), i.e. an utterance relies upon existing context for its production and interpretation, and it is, in its own right, an event that shapes a new context for the action that follows. Arundale (2006) refines the doubly contextual status of discursive action by extending it to interpersonal aspects of communication:

To paraphrase Heritage's (1984) observations with regard to conversation and context, communicative action is both relationship-shaped and relationship-renewing (242), and like context, relationship is endogenously generated within talk, not simply exogenous to it. (Arundale, 2006, p. 201)

The doubly contextual status of discursive action and its extension to interpersonal aspects of communication, in particular to relational work is of importance to the discursive construction of identities as it entails not only content-based identity construction but also interpersonal and thus relational issues. Against this background, the discursive construction of identities is relational, relating discursive identities to other relevant identity constructions in the ongoing discourse as well as with past and future discourses. In other words, discursive identities – or discursive selves – can only be constructed, co-constructed, reconstructed or deconstructed in relation to other discursive identities or discursive others.

The discursive construction of identities is connected closely with their linguistic representation by definite descriptions, general nouns, pronouns or identity-specific predications, to name but a few. These linguistic devices function as social indexes which relate discourse-internal construction with social and sociocultural contexts. Once the discursive identity of a participant has been constructed in discourse and has been ratified by acceptance, the identity construction is considered to have been felicitous and the established discursive identity becomes part of the discourse common ground. In Searle's terms, the established discursive identity is assigned a "collectively recognised status" (2010, p. 7). The established identity may then be referred to by personal pronouns and other indexicals, which express co-reference with that identity construction. However, identity constructions may also be challenged in discourse. Analogously to the non-acceptance of presuppositions in discourse (Fetzer, 1999), discursive identity constructions which have been assigned the status of a discursive presupposition – or a 'Background presupposition' in Searle's terms – need to be made explicit and their contextual embeddedness needs to be spelled out. Only then it is possible to negotiate their validity in order to deconstruct or reconstruct them.

In the context of a political interview, for instance, references to the direct communication partner by first name, surname and title all function as social indexes concerning the construction of their discursive identity. In referring to an individual as *David Cameron, Prime Minister*, or even *the Right Honourable Member for Witney*, that particular individual is singled out and identified both for himself and the audience, and is assigned a particular discursive identity, which is being constructed: while the use of first and last name may relate the discursive identity to others on a solidarity-based dimension, the reference to his position in government signifies a higher social status and thus dominance. The reference to the individual's constituency is more neutral in that respect, foregrounding his role in the Conservative Party and in Parliament. This is not necessarily the case with the personal-pronoun reference *you*, whose domain of reference is indeterminate as it may, in principle, refer to any human being and their discursive identity in the local and global linguistic and social contexts. Naturally, possible referential domains of *you* are narrowed down by the local and global context in a political interview, but the 'addressed' addressee may still opt for a collective-based referential domain to *you* anchored to their political party rather than to their party-member-specific responsibility. Indeterminate referential domains allow participants to shift responsibilities in context, giving the pronoun a less determinate interpretation, as has been shown for the strategic use of pronouns in political interviews (Bull & Fetzer, 2006). If co-occurring with metacomments, such as *you as the leader of the Conservative Party*, *you as the former Director of Corporate Affairs* or *you personally*, the referential domain is further narrowed down and the discursive identity of the individual is entextualised. This may enhance the status of the individual, as is the case with the reference to party leadership, and it may contribute to lowering his status, as is the case with the reference to the status as former director. Referring to a political agent by individually-anchored 'you personally' does generally not enhance their social status but rather contributes to lowering it as it deviates from the default.

References utilising definite descriptions and general nouns function as social indexes and anchor identity constructions to the local discourse. Metacomments and identity-specific predications also anchor discursive identities to the discourse, but they generally go further by spelling out normative expectations, as for instance 'Director of Corporate Affairs', i.e. an individual with a superior position, or 'leader of the Conservative Party'. Normative expectations can also be expressed in a more indirect manner, as David Cameron did in a leadership contestant speech in 2006. In this speech he stands up for gay rights, but in the context of more traditional family values: "*And by the way, I think it matters and I think it means something whether you're a man and a woman, or a woman and a woman or a man and another man. And I am proud that we supported civil partnerships*". The re- and deconstruction of discursive identities is generally done with metacomments, which entextualise

normative expectations anchored to the identity-in-question and thereby assign them the status of objects of talk.

Definite descriptions, general nouns and metacomments as well as more implicit devices, such as presuppositions and implicatures, make explicit 'deviations' from a speech community's tacit norms and expectations about discursive identities. These tacit assumptions may concern code-of-conduct, expectations about participants' rights and obligations outside the interaction within society or participant-specific rights and obligations in the interaction.

The discursive construction of identities – or the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) – is of key importance to social agents in general and to political agents in particular. This is especially true for the presentation of political selves in the mediated political arena, where political agents present themselves not only as committed public figures but also as committed private-domain-anchored individuals, fore- and backgrounding their multifaceted discursive identities in line with their communicative goals, for instance as caring parents, loving husbands, wives or partners, or environmentally friendly people, as is going to be examined in the following.

3. Political discourse in context

Political discourse is a multifaceted notion which comprises discourse about politics on the one hand, and discourse by politicians on the other. However, not every instance of discourse produced by one or more politicians may count as political discourse, and not every discourse about politics may count as political discourse, either. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a stretch of discourse to count as political discourse? Political discourse in our westernised mass democracies is public discourse, it is institutional discourse, and it is – to a large extent – professional discourse. This is because the traditional concept of politics is anchored to the public domain of society. Since political discourse is also mediated and medialised discourse (Fairclough, 2006), it interfaces with micro domains, entering the private spheres of life through the media. In medialised mass democracies, this is the only way most people ever encounter politics (cf. Fairclough, 1995; Fetzer & Weizman, 2006, 2015; Lauerbach & Fetzer, 2007).

Political discourse in the media is a complex phenomenon: it is institutional discourse, it is media discourse, and it is mediated and medialised discourse. As institutional discourse, it differs from everyday conversation in being subject to institutional constraints. As media discourse, it is different from other types of institutional discourse by being, above all, public discourse addressed to a mass media audience. As mediated and medialised political discourse, it is the outcome of the

encounter of two different institutional discourses: (1) those of politics and the media, feeding on the inherent constraints of mediated discourse, i.e. communication through a medium and thus the uncoupling of space and time, and the movement of meaning from one text, discourse or event to another with the constant transformation of meanings; (2) those of medialised discourse, i.e. the professionalisation of politics and the management of mediation of political 'messages' by spin doctors or political branding, among others (Fairclough, 2006).

Political discourse uses various discourse genres, such as statements and speeches in the contexts of election campaigns, summit meetings, business meetings or party conferences: interviews in the context of TV or print media, multi-party discourse in the context of panel interviews, parliamentary debates and digital discourse. Political discourse may also be formatted as reports, analyses, commentaries, editorials or letters to the editor, to name but the most prominent ones. All of these discourse genres are employed strategically to talk politics and to talk about politics. Moreover, these discourse genres do not occur context-independently but rather are embedded in journalistic news discourse and may be repeated as sound bites in later programming. Ordinary people may also participate in audience participation programmes in mediated political discourse, for instance panel interviews, standing in for the interviewer and asking questions, or by members of the home audience, calling in or sending emails and texts. Most recently, the evolution of the internet and the professionalisation of digital discourse has brought about new forms of communication and opened up new arenas for political discourse, e.g. social networks, online discussion forums, Twitter or blogs (cf. Atifi and Marcocchia (2015) for an overview of the different types of digital discourse).

Political discourse has undergone important changes in our digitalised and medialised societies, and that is why a felicitous analysis of politics and of political discourse can no longer comprise *text and talk* (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002) only, but rather needs to consider political discourse as a multilayered, context-dependent phenomenon with fuzzy boundaries (Fetzer & Bull, 2012). This also holds for all of its constitutive parts, in particular for the discursive construction of identities and ideologies. The symbiotic relationship between political discourse and the media is interdependent on the medium-as-such in and through which political information, beliefs and opinions are transmitted and shaped. The impact of modern mass-media culture on communicative behaviour and performance is further reflected in the conversationalisation and professionalisation of political discourse (Fairclough, 1998).

From an ethnomethodological perspective (e.g. Garfinkel, 1994), politicians 'do' politics in and through their acts of communication as regards politics-as-a-whole as well as its constitutive parts: they do 'political talk', 'political ideology' and 'political identity'. In Gumperz's (1996) interactional-sociolinguistic terms, political

agents can be seen both as bringing their discursive identities into a communicative setting, and as bringing them about in that setting. However, politicians ‘do’ more than simply ‘talk politics in the media’. At the same time, they construct and reconstruct their multiple identities and functions in discourse against the background of others with whom they relate by aligning or dis-aligning with them and the ideologies they represent, contributing to the discursive construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of their own identities as well as to those of others. Prototypical occasions for politicians to demonstrate their multiple skills and dedications are political speeches, interviews and debates, which are broadcast as wholes or in part.

Political discourse is public, institutional, mediated and professional, to various degrees. It is discourse about politics done by politicians and thus discourse by elites – or discourse from above – but it is also discourse about politics by members of the non-elite – or discourse from below (cf. Fetzer, 2013, pp. 13–14). What is more, political discourse is both process and product: it is negotiated in discourse genres in the media and it is negotiated across discourse genres in the media and across the media.

In the following, metacomments referring to the contextual constraints and requirements of political discourse, that is public, institutional, mediated and professional discourse (Section 3.1), as well as to the constitutive parts of discursive identities (Section 3.2) are examined in more detail, and their contribution to the hybridisation of political discourse (Section 3.3) is discussed and illustrated.

3.1 Political discourse: Public, mediated and ‘on record’

This section examines the function of metacomments referring to political discourse as media discourse, which entails the latter’s status as public and institutional discourse. It demonstrates that metacomments trigger inference processes which challenge the taken-for-grantedness of domain-specific presuppositions (cf. Weizman, 2008). The argument is based on the premise that discourse-genre-specific presuppositions anchored to the genre-as-a-whole or the macro-validity claim (Fetzer, 2000) are ratified through default acceptance by all of the participants in the opening section. After that, their validity is taken to hold for the genre-as-a-whole. Should they be referred to in one of the topical sections, or even be made explicit, they indicate one or more critical incidents (Fetzer, 2006). The validity of presuppositions, and this also holds for genre-specific presuppositions, can only be negotiated if they are made explicit; only then can they be rejected. In mediated political discourse, making explicit genre-specific presuppositions is generally done with metacomments, as, for example, in an interviewee’s request to use interviewer-anchored first-part questions ‘can I ask you a question?’.

In the following, metacomments making explicit the mediated, institutional and/or public statuses of a communicative event are examined in detail. Excerpt (1)² is adopted from a political interview, in which the interviewer (IR) refers to the unprofessional management of the BSE crisis by a prominent member of the government:

- (1) IR Now, you've been saying this over the last few days, *you've been saying it till you're blue in the face*, **the public** remains at the moment *evidently* unconvinced. Do you think, in retrospect, it's easy to make mistakes, that it would have been wiser not to have a lot of comment about it. *Put your daughter on the screen*, force-feeding, **as the newspapers say**, force-feeding hamburgers down her.

In (1) the politician's handling of the BSE crisis is challenged. His³ attempts to convince the public are seen as unsuccessful, as is expressed in the IR's description "you've been saying it till you're blue in the face". The failure is also implied in the evaluation "it's easy to make mistakes", it is implicated with the comparative construction "it would have been wiser not to have a lot of comment about it" with the implicatum that it has not been wise of the politician to have over-used the media in his attempt to manage the handling of the crisis, and it is made fully explicit in the on-record statement "**the public** remains at the moment *evidently* unconvinced". This on-record statement is not only intensified with the evidential 'evidently', indicating that more evidence could be put forward, if required (cf. Fetzer, 2014), but it is also commented on by references to not just one, but a number of outlets, that is 'the newspapers', which have been following up the politician's handling of the crisis. What is more, the politician is also criticised for having misused the media by having mediated his daughter, who is a constitutive part of his private-domain anchored family life, by putting her "on screen" and "force-feeding", an expression which is generally associated with people on hunger strike, beef in the form of a hamburger. This strategic move of the politician to use his daughter as evidence to support her father's campaign counts as another challenge of his handling of the crisis, which has been followed up and criticised in the media.⁴

Excerpt (2) stems from an interview (Jonathan Dimbleby & Michael Heseltine, On the Record, BBC1, May 13, 1990) which starts in a conventional manner but

2. Since the focus of the analysis lies on lexical material, and to facilitate readability, the transcription adheres to orthographic conventions. *Relevant linguistic cues* are printed in italics and metacomments are printed in bold.

3. In this chapter, the use of grammatical gender corresponds to natural gender.

4. Fetzer (2002) analyses politicians' references to private-domain-anchored discursive identities as attempts to enhance the politician's credibility.

then turns into a highly antagonistic exchange in the topical section, where both IR and interviewee (IE) make explicit genre- and media-discourse-specific presuppositions, including (political) interview (IR₂), audience and viewer (IE_{1,6}), contracts and agreements (IE_{2,4,6}), information and manipulation (IE₁):

- (2) IE₁ no but you and *now you are going to get the last word* in which you leave an impression in front of your viewers
 IR₂ no I have the right to say this is an interview and I'm sure you will recognize it because you understand the nature of political interviews Mr Heseltine as well as I do
 IE₂ *well I understand the nature of the agreement (...)*
 IE₄ I've agreed to come on this programme *not to discuss these issues, to discuss important factors about ideas, about the direction of policies, about where we should go in the nineteen nineties. That's what I agreed to do (...)*
 IE₆ *Jonathan, you are wasting your time* and what viewers happen to be watching. *You are wasting their time as well* so let us now continue with the agreement that we had to discuss issues (...)

The metacomments to the constitutive parts of the media frame and media genre make explicit tacit presuppositions concerning participants' rights and obligations; that is, that the IR has the right to open and close the communicative event-as-a-whole as well as its opening, closing and topical sections. IE₁ implies that the IR does not exercise his right to close a section in an appropriate manner but rather misuses it in order to mislead the audience about the IE's true beliefs and intentions, since the IR will "leave an impression in front of your viewers", which the IE cannot comment upon, as the IR is "going to get the last word". This is refuted on-record in IR₂ with the IR referring to genre-specific participants' rights and obligations by saying "no I have the right to say this is an interview and I'm sure you will recognize it because you understand the nature of political interviews Mr Heseltine as well as I do". By referring to the clear-cut division of labour in political interviews (cf. Blum-Kulka, 1983), that is the IR's right to close topical sequences, he makes explicit that he is acting in accordance with the genre-specific rights and obligations, while at the same time implying that the IE is not acting in accordance with these rights and obligations. The IE rejects this and makes explicit another tacit presupposition, namely that in the genre of political interview, participants generally agree upon the topics to be discussed. By echoing a shared conception of the situation reflected in "I understand the nature of" and by replacing the reference to the genre-specific presuppositions with "the agreement" and by specifying the agreement going on record about its contents "I've agreed to come on this programme *not to discuss these issues, to discuss important factors about ideas, about the direction of policies, about where*

we should go in the nineteen nineties. That's what I agreed to do”, he contributes to the interview becoming more and more antagonistic. This is also reflected in the references to media-frame-specific presuppositions, that is “**viewers happen to be watching**” implying that the programme does not have a regular audience, and to the IR’s communicative performance as not only “*wasting your time*” but also that of the audience.

The metacomments and references to the genre- and media-specific presuppositions have the communicative function of challenging the communicative style of the communication partner while at the same time supporting the discursive deconstruction of identities, for instance, the professionalism of the IR who is not neutral but rather attempts to manipulate the audience, or that the IE who is not only evasive but also does not act in accordance with IE-specific rights and obligations. Because of the mediated status of the interview, the metacomments are directed both towards the face-to-face communication partner and towards the audience, who is invited to draw inferences of the kind that the communicative performance of the IR, respectively the IE, has been inappropriate. Against this background, metacomments are functionally equivalent to Scannell’s (1998) design features:

[...] the design features [...] indicate that it is meant for reception by absent audiences. And this, in turn, establishes the intrinsically public nature of broadcast talk. Talk-in-public, especially political talk, is ‘on record’ and this has consequences on what can and cannot be said and for ways of saying and not saying.

(Scannell, 1998, p. 260)

Political discourse in the media is public discourse and thus ‘on record’. In that frame of reference, metacomments provide participants with the tools to comment upon their communication partners’ communicative performance and to their construction of discursive identities, contributing to their reconstruction, if the metacomments reflect positively on the identity, or to their deconstruction, if the metacomments reflect negatively on it. In general, metacomments tend to challenge the communicative performance of participants referred to, thus contributing to their discursive deconstruction while at the same time enhancing the positive presentation of self. Political discourse in the media is part of a mediated political world, and thus of mediated political action and mediated political identities.

3.2 Political discourse and political identities

This section examines the discursive construction, and re- and deconstruction of identities in political discourse. It shows that the discursive construction of collective identity is the default in that context, discussing the role of pronominal preferences, that is self-reference with 1st person plural pronouns, as well as the orchestrated

interplay between 1st person singular and 1st person plural self-references. In line with Iedema and Caldas-Coulthard (2008) identity is seen as

relational (that is, a performativity achieved in social interactions in the here-and-now) but also extends materially across non-local timescales. Identity is linguistic/discursive and multi-modal or semiotic: identity is the things we say, do, gesture, posture, wear, create, and so on (acknowledging that not all sites/activities call for multi-modal repertoires in the same way).

(Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008, p. 8)

Political agents are generally affiliated to one or more collectives, that is political parties, (shadow) government, trade unions or pressure groups, and thus bring in collective pre-identities, which are brought about in discourse. Against this background, the discursive construction of political identities utilises the strategic use of pronominal self- and other-reference co-occurring with entextualised political functions and the corresponding normative expectations. Political agents bring their political identities into a particular communicative exchange and they bring them about in that exchange. This can be done implicitly with pronouns and other deictic devices, or it can be done explicitly with meta-comments, entextualising particular roles and expectations. The bringing in and bringing about of discursive identities in mediated political discourse can be described in Lemke's words as "[i]dentities are contested public terrain" (2008, p. 32).

The discursive construction of identities is relational by definition building on the dichotomies of 'us' versus 'them' while at the same time generally expressing positive evaluations of 'us' and negative evaluations of 'them'. The degree of explicitness of evaluation may vary from fully explicit to getting in a particularised conversational implicature. Analogously to the default construction of collective identities in political discourse, it is generally collective identities, and not the political agent as a private-domain-anchored individual, which are objects of discourse and thus negotiated in discourse, as is illustrated with the following Excerpts (3) and (4). Excerpt (3) stems from a political speech delivered at a party conference (David Cameron, Conservative Party Conference, October 4, 2005), and (4) from a political interview (David Dimbleby & Tony Blair, BBC1, April 7, 1997):

- (3) (...) real change is 'bout changing **our culture and identity** and making it right for today. *It's not* some slick re-branding exercise or *marketing exercise in spin*. It's about making sure that at the next election when all of *you* and when *I* when *everyone in this room* goes out and fights the greatest battle of **our lives** street by street, house by house, flat by flat that **we have a message that is relevant to people today**, that shows **we love** this modern country as it is and that shows that **we think our best days lie ahead** as a country ...
- (...)

Although *we agree with Labour* about trust schools, there's still a profound divide between *our approach* to education and *their approach*. *They think equality means treating every child the same. Including kids with learning difficulties in classes with the brightest. Forcing schools to accept disruptive pupils, putting up with bad behaviour, no matter what the damage does to other children. We think equality means something else. Individual children have individual needs, individual abilities, and individual interests. Real equality means giving individual children what is right for them. (...) It should mean clear rules of behaviour – so that our children grow up knowing the difference between right and wrong.*

Using first-person-singular self-reference (*I*) in the context of first-person-plural self-references (*our, we*), the politician does not construct a contrast between himself as private-domain-anchored politician and that of a public-domain-anchored politician. Rather, he foregrounds his affiliation with the Conservative Party and its ideology with the first-person-plural self-reference, as for instance in '*our culture and identity*'. The pronominal shift from first-person-plural to a first-person-singular self-reference is embedded in the context of further pronominal shifts from 'all of *you*' to '*I*' to '*everyone in this room*', relating the politician and the party he represents with some heterogeneous and indeterminate audience as well as with the less heterogeneous and more determinate face-to-face audience 'in this room'. The politician's explicit connection of political and thus collective '*I*' with generalised '*you*' and '*everyone in this room*' allows him to align with the face-to-face audience as well as with other mediated audiences. The positioning of self and other thus does not necessarily need to be binary but can also be scalar, positioning self against the background of allies, as has been the case with the audience above, and opponents, as is reflected in '*we agree with Labour*', while at the same time making explicit '*a profound divide between our approach*' and '*them*' and elaborating on what '*they think*' and what '*we think*'.

In the dialogic setting of a political interview the discursive construction of political identities is more dynamic and the referential domains of the personal pronouns may not always be that clear-cut (cf. Bull & Fetzer, 2006). While politicians construct collective identities by default, the default discursive identity of IRs is generally institutional and individual, as can be seen by the IR being addressed with his first name '*David*':

- (4) IR I know that but did *you* have *you* abandoned have *you* did *you* believe what *you* said *you* believed in the eighties
- IE Look of course *we* always *believed* in the idea of a more just a more fair society *and the Labour Party* believed for a long period of time that the way to do that was for example greater nationalization erm was for example simply more increased state spending. The whole process of modernization *David* has been to take *the Labour Party* away from that to keep true to its principles but put those principles properly in a modern setting now...

In (4) the IR requests the IE to comment on his political ideologies in a sociocultural context coloured by massive changes in the Labour Party, using the second-person pronoun ‘you’ and the predications ‘believe’ and ‘say’, which would usually be interpreted as a reference to the politician’s personal beliefs, especially as both are embedded in a past temporal frame (*‘the eighties’*). The politician, however, adopts the default collective identity and encodes it explicitly with the first-person-plural self-reference ‘we’, which allows him to present a mediated political world in which he can speak on behalf of his party (*‘and the Labour Party believed’*; *‘the Labour Party’*), which – like him – has adapted its principles to a ‘modern setting’.

In media discourse politicians present their multiple discursive identities, they may express individuality, foregrounding their private domain-anchored identity constructions, which tend to have different functions, if initiated by the IE, such as shifting responsibility for a controversial claim by the politician himself as in Excerpt (5) (Jonathan Dimbleby & Charles Kennedy, BBC1, April 25, 2001), or attempting to unbalance a politician, if initiated by the IR, as in (6) (Jeremy Paxman & Tony Blair, BBC2, April 17, 1997):

- (5) IR₁ But you’re also the only party leader who *says, as you said to me*
 IE₁ Indeed I did.
 IR₂ not so long ago, erm, when I asked you whether users of cannabis were criminals, you said, I don’t regard them as criminals. And you say – I’m right, aren’t I? – you don’t regard them as criminals.
 IE₂ I- I- that’s what I said to you, in a- in another studio, in an equivalent programme some time ago, *that is my personal view. It is not the position of the Liberal Democrats, let me be quite clear about this*

Excerpt (5) does not only contain instances of entextualised private-domain-anchored identity constructions of the politician (*‘that is my personal view’*), which is taken up in the co-referential metacomment (*‘let me be quite clear about this’*), but also explicit distancing from the politician’s collective identity and the ideology which he should have represented (*‘It is not the position of the Liberal Democrats’*). The local non-default as regards identity constructions is also reflected in the explicitly negotiated quotation used by the IR, making explicit the local and temporal embeddedness of the original statement.

In (6), both IR and IE use entextualised private-domain-anchored identity constructions. While the IR uses the reference to John Major and his childhood (*‘the boy who came from Brixton’*) to relate it to the IE’s background (*‘your background and your appeal to middle England’*) in order to contextualise his private-domain-intended request for information (*‘Do you still consider yourself a socialist’*), the IE uses private-domain-anchored identity constructions to provide information about his personal background (*‘my father’*, *‘my dada’*, *‘and you know Jeremy my father came from a very poor background indeed’*, *‘his father erm his adopted father’*) in

order to account for his refined political beliefs ('I do in the sense of the values. I don't share the idea that socialism's about some fixed economic prescription'):

- (6) IR well John Major is presenting himself as *the boy who came from Brixton* and ... and by contrast we all know erm **your background** and **your appeal to middle England**. Do **you** still consider yourself a socialist
- IE I do in the sense of the values. I don't share the idea that socialism's about some fixed economic prescription. *And you know Jeremy my father came from a very poor background indeed*. He was brought up in in Govan, *his father erm his adopted father* was a rigger ... but in fact **my dada** always used to see to **me** and I think this is true *he said it's not where you came from that matters it's what you are and what you can do for this country*. And you know I've I read all the stuff that the the Conservatives've got *in the papers this morning* about all this *you know* his background, **my background** I really think we should argue about the future of the country or debate over and I think that would be more constructive a viewpoint

The IE's response does not only use private-domain anchored identity constructions strategically to account for the changes of the Labour Party as regards their economic policies, but also to attack the Conservatives for having used his private-domain identity and that of his father in the press ('I've read all *the stuff* (...) *in the papers this morning*') to attack the political party the IE represents, thus connecting private-domain-anchored identities ('**my background**') with the default collective ones ('I really think **we** should argue about the future of the country (...) I think that would be more constructive a viewpoint').

Politicians and other actors in the political arena do not only strategically use different types of media, that is print media, television, and social media, and genres, such as speeches, interviews and other types of debate, to persuade the electorate but they also mix styles, for instance using conversational styles, such as discourse markers ('you know') and lexical expression ('stuff', 'dada') and genres, such as the accommodation of narratives in election campaigns (Duranti, 2006), or of small stories in political speeches and interviews (Fetzer, 2010), and the presentation of self as private-domain-anchored identity constructions as well as the default collective and public ones. These are all clear-cut cases of the on-going process of hybridisation, which is discussed in the following.

3.3 Hybridities in mediated political worlds

The concept of hybridity is not only well established in postcolonial studies but also in dialogue-centred, critical-discourse-analytic and sociopragmatic approaches to language and discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Linell, 1998). While the former focus on the connectedness between discourse, participant and context, dialogue-centred approaches examine how polyphony or multi-voicedness is reflected in the production and interpretation of text. In the late modern discursive formation of political discourse, access to political decision-making processes and political action are no longer the sole privilege of an elite and its political agents. The major transformations in the public sphere concern the role and actions of civil society and its citizens who may take part in the formation of political opinions, which takes place in the media and through the media. There are, however, different logics that control public media commodities, namely that of technologisation and commercialisation. Technologisation of communication enables social agents to have a greater number of mediated encounters using diverse genres, such as forum discussion, chats and weblogs, and construct respective discursive identities, and as a consequence, the contexts in which political topics emerge multiply (Charaudeau, 2005, p. 30) furthering the distribution of political ideologies and politics. Fairclough (1992) points out that the media tends to be based on economic principles according to which it needs to produce attractive and well-selling products, contributing to the commodification of political discourse and of politics. Hybridisation is thus not only reflected in the function of media as providing both information and entertainment but also in the heterogeneity of the audience who varies according to its options to access and willingness to participate in encounters provided in and by the media, selecting topics ranging from local to global, and national to supranational, and constructing discursive identities as elite or non-elite political agents.

The concept of activity type (Levinson, 1979) informed by Wittgenstein's language game and cognitive pragmatics allows for the accommodation of the fuzziness and dynamics of discourse, and thus for the hybridisation of discourse. Activity type is "a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with *constraints* on participants, setting and so on, but above all on the allowable contributions" (Levinson, 1979, p. 368, original italics). These constraints capture the interactional and media-specific presuppositions of a communicative exchange, such as a political interview, and allow for the conceptualisation of the exchange as a context- and activity-type-dependent achievement. Additionally it accounts for meaning-making processes:

[...] there is another important and related fact, in many ways the mirror image of the constraints on contributions, namely the fact that for each and every clearly demarcated activity there is a set of *inferential schemata*. These schemata are tied to (derived from, if one likes) the structural properties of the activity in question. (Levinson, 1979, p. 370)

References to activity-type-specific constraints in the topical sections of a political interview, for instance, or entextualised metacomments are used strategically by the participants to signify participant-specific violations of normative expectations, if not norms, and they tend to be interpreted accordingly.

The hybridisation of discourse in general and of discourse genres in particular makes manifest their multilayered status, blurring taken-for-granted boundaries thus turning a once predictable event into a fuzzy, locally non-predictable media encounter. By acting in dis-accordance with genre-specific constraints, for instance by presenting themselves as multiply voiced and thus as both collective as well as private-domain-anchored identities, politicians and other social agents transcend boundaries and go beyond linearity and predictability. In those local non-defaults, the staged performance of the encounter and of its constitutive parts is surfacing and both may be assigned the status of an object of talk.

In Excerpt (7) (Jeremy Paxman & Tony Blair, BBC2, February 6, 2003), the hybridity of the exchange surfaces in references to the private domain of the IE in the IR's turns ('*your personal feelings*', '*smile*') as well as entextualised discursive identities and their respective expectations ('*Christians*', '*pray together*')

- (7) IR₁ ...I want to explore a little further about **your personal feelings** about this war. Does the fact that George Bush and you are both *Christians* make it easier for you to view these conflicts in terms of good and evil?
- IE₁ I don't think so no, I think that whether you're a Christian or not a Christian you can try and perceive what is good and what is is evil.
- IR₂ **you don't pray together** for example?
- IE₂ *no we don't pray together Jeremy, no.*
- IR₃ why do you *smile*?
- IE₃ because erm erm erm erm *why do you ask me the question?*
- IR₄ *because I'm trying to find out how you feel about it*

The entextualised discursive identity as well as the entextualised normative expectations and implied expectations make the exchange unpredictable for the IE, who responds with private domain-anchored information regarding his religious beliefs, but at the same time exploits the scenario by a non-default nonverbal reaction, that is smiling, which the IR assigns the status of an object of talk in IR₃ and which is taken up by the IE in IE₃ with a deviation from the default division of labour by the IE asking a question himself, to which the IR responds by providing an account in IR₄.

In discourse in general and in political discourse in particular, identity constructions as well as identity relations emerge in interaction. They are brought to the discourse and they are brought about in the discourse utilising several related indexical processes, including the entextualisation of identity categories and labels, implicatures and presuppositions regarding identities and normative expectations, as well as footings and interactional roles (cf. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 594).

4. Conclusion

Political discourse has been described as public discourse, media discourse and professional discourse. It has a particularised recipient design, comprising a more or less particularised set of addressees with a ratified participation status. As regards its production framework, political discourse is produced by one or more individuals, whose footing may be author, principal or animator, and who may speak for a more or less particularised collective. In interactional-sociolinguistic terms, politicians and other agents in the political arena bring their personal and collective identities into the discourse, and they bring them about in discourse. Personal and collective identities may thus be assigned the status of a presupposition for the discourse as a whole.

Prototypical – or default – political discourse is in accordance with clear-cut participant-specific rights and obligations, clear-cut public-domain-anchored discourse topics and discursive styles, and clear-cut collective identity constructions for political agents anchored to clear-cut public domains of society. Non-default political discourse is more or less hybrid, exploiting the constraints of an activity type, turning a predictable monolithic encounter in a – more or less – unpredictable multi-dimensional one. Participants do not solely act in accordance with their clear-cut participant-specific rights and obligations, with clear-cut public-domain-anchored discourse topics and discursive styles, and clear-cut collective identity constructions for political agents anchored to clear-cut public domains of society.

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Nations as persons

Collective identities in conflict

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The paper analyses the construal of collective identities in the Middle East conflict, with special regard to the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor. This metaphor has been highlighted by proponents of *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* and *Critical Metaphor Analysis* as being instrumental in conceptualizing collective political entities as (pseudo-)personal identities. On the other hand, it has been critically argued that the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor should not be over-generalized and it has even been condemned as a fallacious theoretical construct. In view of the metaphor's controversial status, the paper studies a corpus of ten speeches delivered by the Israeli and Palestinian political leaders B. Netanyahu and M. Abbas to the UN General assemblies in the period 2011–2015. Instances of emphatic use and enactment of the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor by the speakers are analysed in detail for their contextual implications and their function in collective identity-construction. The main finding is that whilst the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor is not ubiquitous in a statistical sense, it informs the fundamental pragmatic stance of the speakers as personifications of their nations' collective identities vis-à-vis other nations. In conclusion, it is argued that such collective identity construction both expresses and shapes the progress of conflict communication.

Keywords: body politic, conflict communication, face, identity, Israel, metaphor, Palestine, scenario, United Nations

1. Introduction: Speaking for a nation

- (1) Ladies and gentlemen, Israel has extended its hand in peace from the moment it was established 63 years ago. On behalf of Israel and the Jewish people, I extend that hand again today. I extend it to the people of Egypt and Jordan, with renewed friendship for neighbours with whom we have made peace. I extend it to the people of Turkey, with respect and good will. I extend it to the people of Libya and Tunisia, with admiration for those trying to build a

democratic future. I extend it to the other peoples of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, with whom we want to forge a new beginning. I extend it to the people of Syria, Lebanon and Iran, with awe at the courage of those fighting brutal repression. But most especially, I extend my hand to the Palestinian people, with whom we seek a just and lasting peace. (Netanyahu, 2011a)

This passage marks the start of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's address to the 66th session of the United Nations' General Assembly in New York on September 23, 2011. It illustrates what Gavriely-Nuri (2010) has called the "postmodern model" of the *hand extension* metaphor in Israeli peace discourse, which can be traced back to the beginnings of the modern state of Israel. Unlike its more meaningful previous incarnations since the late 1940s (i.e. the "European", the "Sabra" and the "Peacemaker" models), this version of the agreement-inviting *hand extension* metaphor is judged by Gavriely-Nuri as being mainly a "device belonging to the world of public relations" (2010, p. 460).

Netanyahu's above-quoted use of the metaphor may strike listeners and readers as the ritual invocation of a mantra: after referring first to Israel as the supposed agent of the peace-symbolizing hand gesture, he takes over himself and rhetorically offers a seven-fold handshake to Israel's Arab neighbours, with some of which his state is still technically at war. He extends his hand most emphatically to the Palestinians, with whom his nation has been repeatedly at war since its inception in the 1948 "war of independence",¹ which was experienced by Palestinians as a national catastrophe (*Nakba*), as they lost most of their home territory.² Viewed from their side, Netanyahu's claim that his own state had "extended its hand in peace" to them even back then must have sounded cynical.

The sincerity of Netanyahu's peace-gesturing formula towards the Palestinians is called further into question when shortly after his rhetorical hand-extension he accuses them of having consistently "refused to negotiate" with Israel, both under their former president Yassir Arafat and the current one, Mahmoud Abbas, who had addressed the UN earlier on that day. A scenario is depicted in which one participant, i.e. Israel, has been extending its peace *hand* for more than 60 years whilst the other, i.e. Palestine, has always refused it and holds sole responsibility for continuing hostilities. One might expect that Israel would lose patience after such a long time of unilateral *hand-extension*; however, at the end of his speech, Netanyahu 'magnanimously' allows Abbas a last chance to make peace:

1. See e.g. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/aboutisrael/history/pages/israels%20war%20of%20independence%20-%201947%20-%201949.aspx>.

2. Masalha (2003), Morris (2004), Pappé (2010). For present-day Palestinian usage of the term *Nakba* see, for instance, State of Palestine – Ministry of Information 2009.

- (2) Let's listen to one another. [...] I'll tell you my needs and concerns. You'll tell me yours. And with God's help, we'll find the common ground of peace. There's an old Arab saying that you cannot applaud with one hand. Well, the same is true of peace. I cannot make peace alone. I cannot make peace without you. President Abbas, I extend my hand – the hand of Israel – in peace. I hope that you will grasp that hand. (Netanyahu, 2011a)

What is happening here? Netanyahu, as the formally authorized representative of a UN member state (legitimized by his political function as “head of government”), uses a metaphorical formula that indicates the will of his government (and thus, in terms of its international legal commitments, his state) to “make peace”. The video recording of this speech shows that Netanyahu actually raised his hand during this passage, possibly simulating the initiation of a handshake (Netanyahu, 2011b). By both gesturing and verbally expressing peace ‘on behalf of his nation’, Netanyahu emphatically ‘personifies’ Israel as one unified, sovereign agent. He thus confers on his own national collective a quasi-personal identity that is epitomised in his own person delivering the UN address at a specific place in a particular moment, almost as if he could immediately make peace with his counterpart there and then.

The theatricality of such a rhetorical performance in the context of a UN Assembly session is evident and nobody would earnestly expect the two nation-leaders to fall into each others’ arms on the spot. Any direct negotiations would be much more likely to happen ‘backstage’, long before an actual symbolic handshake (such as that between Abbas and Netanyahu’s predecessors, Yassir Arafat and Yitzchak Rabin in Washington in 1993) could take place. Nonetheless, the theatricality of even only a preparatory gesture-cum-text such as Netanyahu’s *hand extension* metaphor use underlines the ‘constructedness’ of the concept of national communities as collective identities. This paper analyses the construal of the Israeli and Palestinian collective identities at the current stage in the Middle East conflict. It argues that the *hand extension* metaphor presupposes a more basic conceptual metaphor, i.e. that of the NATION-AS-PERSON.³ This metaphor is of fundamental importance for the notion of collective national identity; hence, its usage and enactment may be indicative of tendencies in the mutual perceptions and attitudes among the respective communities.

3. Following the conventions of Cognitive Linguistics (see below), concepts, including conceptual metaphors, are indicated by SMALL CAPITALS, linguistic examples by *italics*.

2. Nations as persons?

The relationship between a national community and its ‘virtual’ collective identity as a sovereign political agent, and the further representation of that identity by a concrete living person who acts as ‘head of state’ or ‘head of government’ is not only of interest for international relations theory but also for metaphor research, especially conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) as developed by G. Lakoff and other cognitive linguists. They have explained such representations as being grounded in the conceptual metaphor THE (NATION) STATE IS A PERSON:

As persons, states enter into social relationships with other states, which are seen typically as either friends, enemies, neighbours, neutral parties, clients, or even pariahs. States are also seen as personalities [...] Our policies are designed to be consistent with such metaphorical estimations of ‘national personalities’.

(Chilton & Lakoff, 1995, pp. 38–39)⁴

As evidence, Chilton and Lakoff refer to the famous tradition of conceptualising the sovereign state as a human body, which is lexicalized as the *body politic* in English and has informed political philosophy and the theory of international relations in the West since the Middle Ages, with additional preceding traditions reaching back to Greek and Roman Thought in Antiquity (Hale, 1971; Musolff, 2010). It has to be stressed, however, that body- and person-based metaphors are not the same. For instance, famous political philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, have discussed in detail theories of body-(or at least, head-) less ‘state-persons’ (Hobbes, [1651] 1996; Rousseau, [1762] 1990, [1755] 2002). Apart from philosophical speculations, the NATION STATE-AS-PERSON metaphor plays an important role in the theory of the sovereign right of states to go to war and make peace with each other (see, e.g. Grotius, [1625] 2005; Schmitt, [1927/1932] 2002; von Clausewitz, [1932] 1998).

This aspect is of particular significance for the Israel-Palestine relationship as part of the Middle East “conflict system” (Starr & Dubinsky, 2015), in which the leading politicians ‘personify’ their states as agents in conflict: Netanyahu’s assertive performance of the collective identity of Israel in the UN provides a good example of such a personification. The symbolic hand-extension, which he offers, can be interpreted as special scenario of the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor that carries the implication of peaceful intentions. This reading of the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor’s meaning-in-context is, however, not completely identical to Chilton and Lakoff’s

4. For further cognitive work based on the STATE-AS-PERSON metaphor see in particular Charteris-Black (2004, p. 76; 2005, p. 44, pp. 173–174), Kövecses (2002, pp. 60–62), Lakoff (1992; 2004, pp. 71–72).

position. Whereas they stress its universal conceptual status, the emphasis here lies on the metaphor's integration within a specific discursive scenario that suggests to the hearer(s) specific solutions (Musolff, 2006). In classic CMT, these suggested implications are modelled as "entailments" that follow from the metaphor's semantic structure and leave the recipient no interpretative choice (Lakoff, 1993, 2004). From the discursive perspective adopted here, such a claim is too strong because it assumes that metaphor understanding is a kind of 'blind' automatic processing of the speaker's intended meaning, without considering the possibility of discursive and interpretive modifications.

Recently, the CMT account of the STATE-AS-PERSON metaphor as proposed by Lakoff and other cognitive linguists has been subjected to further criticism in a book entitled *The Language of Interstate Relations: In Search of Personification*, on the grounds that the person-metaphor interpretation of interstate relations is unnecessary and can be replaced by one that analyses the respective references as "semantic extensions" (Twardzisz, 2013, pp. 184–198). On the basis of a large corpus of uses of state names in the British and US political news magazines *Economist* and *Newsweek* between 1997 and 2010, Twardzisz reaches the conclusion that across the five most relevant grammatical environments, only a tiny section of maximally 5.7% statements lend themselves to an interpretation of state names "in a human sense" (2013, pp. 131–132, p. 149).⁵ The author concedes that this interpretation is "burdened with some subjectivity" (ibid., p. 131) and tries to illustrate his distinction between + HUMAN and -HUMAN cases with examples. State name + intransitive verb constructions such as *Syria repented*, as well as state name + transitive ones (e.g. *The US promised fresh beef*) are classed as + human, but other transitive constructions, such as *Vietnam ordered six submarines*, are excluded because the direct objects in such statements "do not designate [...] entities normally associated with humans" (ibid., p. 132). As a justification for excluding 94% (!) of all cases of his data set in this way, however, Twardzisz's +/- HUMAN distinction seems implausible, because it confuses the non-linguistic fact that most normal people do not order submarines with the semantic question of whether ordering something should be classified as + HUMAN activity (which it can).

The effect of Twardzisz's selection method, i.e. the exclusion of more than 90% of all possible cases, suggests that the search criteria simply do not match the data. His corpus is solely defined by lexical and syntactic criteria, whilst the search for metaphor tokens targets a semantic-pragmatic phenomenon which is notorious for

5. The respective grammatical environments are: subject of active sentence, subject of passive sentence, object position, passive constructions with a state name in the 'by + name' phrase, and Saxon genitive constructions (Twardzisz, 2013, pp. 128–130).

being manifested at the textual rather than the sentence level. Twardzisz takes it for granted that simple references to states by their names in isolated clause constructions suffice as evidence for his interpretations, whereas co-textual information and pragmatic analysis are missing. He thus makes it impossible to verify or falsify his interpretations, in contrast to other corpus-based studies where search criteria are designed to fulfil the specific needs of metaphor research (Charteris-Black, 2004; Deignan, 2005, 2008; Moon, 1998; Musolff, 2004; Semino, 2008).

Twardzisz also tries to disprove the interpretation of state names and national leader names in agentive roles as metonymies of the ‘part-for-whole’ or ‘whole-for-part’ type. He argues, to some extent plausibly, against over-interpreting metonymies as always being ideologically loaded in the sense of either pinpoint-targeting or concealing specific referents; one of their main functions is, as he correctly underlines, that of “shorthand names”, which allow sufficient, albeit referentially vague, topical referencing (2013, pp. 178–179). However, this function of shorthand referencing has been highlighted by many metonymy theorists (Barcelona, 2000; Benczes, Barcelona, & Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2011; Dirven & Pörings, 2003; Littlemore, 2015) and it is not completely incompatible with Twardzisz’s preferred reading of the data as “semantic extensions”.⁶ His analysis confirms previous findings that the special register of news reports is indeed not replete with vivid metaphor in the sense of a high statistical frequency (Nerlich & Koteyko (2009) and Steen et al. (2010) as cited by Twardzisz (2013, p. 126) himself). However, this finding does not contradict metaphors’ and metonymies’ importance in other genres and registers, such as speeches. It thus seems still promising to analyse Netanyahu’s and Abbas’s UN addresses as regards their metaphorical nation-construal.⁷

3. From “extended” to “outstretched hands”

How ubiquitous and formulaic the scenario of a nation *extending its hand* through its state leader had become even by 2011 is evident when we consider its precedent use in the UN speech by the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Netanyahu’s counterpart, only an hour or so before Netanyahu:

6. For up-to-date semantic treatments of metaphor (unmentioned by Twardzisz, 2013) see Stern (2000) and the related treatment of metaphors as class-inclusion statements that can be paraphrased as similes by Glucksberg (2001, 2008).

7. The texts of the ten speeches (delivered by Netanyahu in English and by Abbas in Arabic) have been compiled from online media and crosschecked with the versions on the official UN (2015) website; they amount to 33,753 words.

- (3) I am here to say on behalf of the Palestinian people and the Palestine Liberation Organization: We extend our hands to the Israeli government and the Israeli people for peace-making. I say to them: Let us urgently build together a future for our children where they can enjoy freedom, security and prosperity. Let us build the bridges of dialogue instead of checkpoints and walls of separation [...]. (Abbas, 2011)

By referencing the meaning of “we” to both his nation and to the political group that formed its government and was his power base – i.e. the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – Abbas may have been a bit more specific than Netanyahu in explaining who he ‘stands’ for, but his rhetorical *hand-extending* gesture rested as much on the nation-personification as the Israeli Prime Minister’s did. In addition, Abbas extended his *hand*-metaphor to Palestinian peace-oriented policy-making (“build ... a future”, “[build] bridges of dialogue”) and Israeli-authored, concrete constructions such as “checkpoints and walls of separation” which obstruct the peace process.

But Abbas did not restrict himself to describing the *extending* or *building hands* of the national collective he represented; in a passage that matched Netanyahu’s rhetorical flourish, he depicted his own side as a (virtual) person with the utmost ‘openness of mind’ for any peace offerings:

- (4) We entered [...] negotiations with open hearts and attentive ears and sincere intentions, [...] Over the past year we did not leave a door to be knocked or channel to be tested or path to be taken. (Abbas, 2011)⁸

Earlier in his speech, Abbas had reminded the Assembly of the 1974 address to the same forum by his predecessor as Palestinian leader, Yassir Arafat, which even then had contained a *hand*-based rhetorical formula that gained notoriety in its day. In this first-ever Palestinian address to the UN, Arafat had issued a stark warning: “Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom-fighter’s gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand. I repeat: do not let the olive branch fall from my hand”, which was accompanied by a ‘wagging’ gesture with his raised index finger (Arafat, 1974a/b).⁹ Thirty-seven years later, Abbas only quoted the “Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand!” imperative as evidence of Arafat’s “affirmative pursuit for peace” whilst omitting his predecessor’s more threatening hint at the gun

8. After emphasizing his own nation’s continuous striving for peace in his 2011 address, Abbas went on, like Netanyahu, to depict the opposite side as being opposed and unresponsive to this openness, always putting “obstacles”, “blockages” and “rocks” in the “path” leading towards peace. However, in contrast to Netanyahu, he ended his speech not on a (pseudo-)personal appeal to his opponent to engage in mutual *hand-extension*, but in a request to the whole Assembly and to the UN Security Council to formally recognize his nation as a UN member State.

9. On other uses of the extended hand metaphor by Arafat, see Gavriely-Nuri (2010, pp. 461, 464).

in the other “hand” (Abbas, 2011). By selectively echoing Arafat, Abbas not only assumed that leader’s authority but also construed Palestinian leadership as always having sought to make peace with Israel, which is at least as problematic a position as Netanyahu’s stance. Traditionally, and for much of Arafat’s term of office, the PLO was committed to armed resistance against Israel. Since then, the PLO-backed “Palestinian Authority”, which Abbas took over from Arafat, has renounced war against Israel, but it cannot realistically claim to represent all Palestinians on this issue because their peace negotiation policy vis-à-vis Israel has been defied by rival power-holders in Gaza and South Lebanon – i.e. Hamas and Hezbollah, respectively – for several decades (Norton, 2007; Roy, 2011).

Notwithstanding the details and differences of Netanyahu’s and Abbas’s power- and legitimacy-bases, we may regard them as being communicative ‘equals’ in the 2011 UN Assembly, for they treat each other as such in terms of personifying their respective nations and taking the stance of offering peace to their opponent. In this respect, their speeches mirrored each other to the point of repeating the metaphor scenarios of *extending hands*, *building peace together*, and *being ready to talk to each other* almost verbatim.

Significantly, this close match disappeared to some extent in Abbas’s and Netanyahu’s UN speeches during the following years. In 2012, Abbas warned of a new *Nakba* and announced a unilateral initiative to achieve official UN-recognition of Palestine as at least an “Observer State” (i.e. not yet “(Full) Member State”), against Netanyahu’s proclaimed preference for a bilateral peace treaty (to be concluded before any such international recognition). Abbas still used the *extended hands* scenario to signal his acknowledgement that “ultimately the two peoples must live and coexist, each in their respective State, in the Holy Land” (Abbas, 2012), yet provided no details about how this end-goal could be practically achieved. Netanyahu, for his part, devoted most of his 2012 speech to an appeal for sanctions against Iran’s alleged nuclear armament program (Netanyahu, 2012). He briefly dismissed Abbas’s speech, which again preceded his own, as “libelous” and recycled the formula of *sitting down together* with Abbas, to reach a “compromise” that mainly fulfilled his own demands:

- (5) We [Abbas and Netanyahu] have to sit together, negotiate together, and reach a mutual compromise, in which a demilitarized Palestinian state recognizes the one and only Jewish State. (Netanyahu, 2012)

Netanyahu’s insistence on dictating the terms of any peace deal as a bilateral Israel-Palestine agreement instead of a UN-mediated treaty again belied his proclaimed willingness to “negotiate together”. Whilst not denying the Palestinian claim to statehood outright, he allowed for it only under the specific condition of “a demilitarized Palestinian state”, whereas he consistently identified Israel with the totality of the

Jewish people in the world and throughout history, harking back, as he did, to the days of King David, Joshua and the Maccabees, to prove that there had always been a Jewish national identity and presence in the Middle East and in its “eternal capital”, Jerusalem (Netanyahu, 2012). Compared with the trans-historical identity of his Israel, the prospect of negotiations with the Palestinians appeared in his speech as being of secondary importance, i.e. a kind of short-term technical arrangement.

In 2013, the mismatch between the two leaders’ UN speeches was even more pronounced. Netanyahu again started by invoking “the Jewish people’s odyssey through time” that began “nearly 4,000 years” ago with “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Netanyahu, 2013). This provided a link to compare present-day Iran’s nuclear threat against Israel (which again formed his main topic) unfavourably with an alleged “historic friendship between the Jews and the Persians”, for which he cited as ‘evidence’ Cyrus’s decree ending the Babylonian exile of the Ancient Israelites more than 2,000 years ago! The themes of Jewish resilience in the face of persecution and of Iran’s topical nuclear threat were then linked by a reminiscence of Netanyahu’s own grandfather being attacked by an anti-Semitic mob in Europe at the end of the 19th century, which had led him to become a Zionist and enabled his grandson to “stand here today as Israel’s prime minister” and defend his state against a new, deadly threat. Concerning Israel’s relationship with her Palestinian “neighbours”, he repeated the 2012 formula, i.e. the goal of “mutual recognition, in which a demilitarized Palestinian state recognize[d] the Jewish state of Israel”; however, he left out any detailed “sitting down and speaking together” scenario (Netanyahu, 2013).

Abbas’s 2013 speech was more upbeat: he started by thanking and celebrating the recently ratified UN decision to accord Observer State status to Palestine, which he took to be a diplomatic victory for his Palestine Authority government and a chance to emphasize equality with Israel in the new round of US-brokered negotiations that had started a few months earlier:¹⁰

- (6) Our message stems from the idea that the two peoples, the Palestinian and the Israeli, are partners in the task of peacemaking. This is why we keep reaching out to the Israeli side saying: let us work to make the culture of peace reign, to tear down walls, to build bridges instead of walls, to open wide roads for connection and communication. (Abbas, 2013)

Abbas again used the literal/figurative polysemy of phrases such as *reaching out* and *building bridges/roads* to appeal for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation as he had done two years before (see Example 3); his change from an exclusive (Palestinian) “we” to the inclusive (Palestinian and Israeli) “us” expressed his confidence in negotiating on an equal footing with Israel.

10. See Ravid (2013).

Compared with Abbas's emphasis on a Palestinian-Israeli peace "partnership", Netanyahu's silence about the latest round of negotiations then in progress indicated a profound lack of recognition for such a partnership on his part. In actual fact, the negotiations were accompanied by increasingly hostile comments in both the Israeli and Palestinian public spheres, and the talks were abandoned in spring 2014.¹¹ After their breakdown and a further increase in missile attacks on Israel from Hamas-controlled Gaza, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) launched a military offensive involving a sustained bombardment and a temporary invasion of Gaza with ground troops in July–August 2014.

Predictably, Abbas's and Netanyahu's subsequent UN speeches in September of that year were largely devoted to blaming the other side for the casualties and destruction. Less predictably, both speakers seemed to agree on the notion that Abbas, as "President" of the "State of Palestine", also spoke for the Palestinians of Gaza. Since 2006, Gaza has been controlled *de facto* by Hamas, who explicitly opposed Abbas's negotiations with Israel and organized their military campaign in defiance of them. Nonetheless, Abbas denounced the Israeli campaign as a "new war of genocide perpetrated against the Palestinian people" and as the "new Nakba" that he had warned against back in 2012 (Abbas, 2014). As to the negotiations, he claimed his side had entered them (again, compare (3) above) "with open minds, in good faith and with a positive spirit", whereas Israel, "as usual [...] did not miss the opportunity to undermine the chance for peace" by allowing "at best" only for "isolated ghettos for Palestinians" (Abbas, 2014).

Netanyahu defended the IDF's campaign by highlighting its "defensive" character in general, and specifically its attempt to carry out "surgical strikes" against military targets alone. This endeavour was, however, thwarted by Hamas' tactic to use civilians as human shields, for which Netanyahu blamed Abbas because they were "your Hamas partners in the national unity government which you head and you are responsible for" (Netanyahu, 2014). Netanyahu thus used Abbas's nominal presidency over all of Palestine to treat him as an ally of the "war criminals" of Hamas. In doing so, he effectively denied Abbas the status of a national leader that could at least in principle be a partner in peace negotiations. As part of this disqualification strategy, Netanyahu reverted to the historic Israeli position of allocating political responsibility for Palestinians to Arab states (Pappé, 2010, pp. 239–240). Instead of appealing to Abbas as he had done in previous speeches, Netanyahu now emphasised "the indispensable role of Arab states in advancing peace with the Palestinians" (Netanyahu, 2014). His 2014 UN address signalled a deep mistrust of Abbas's ability to speak for the Palestinians – it amounted to a rejection of Abbas's claims to represent a coherent collective Palestinian identity.

11. See Ahren (2014) and Karmi (2014).

It might therefore come as a surprise to find Netanyahu addressing Abbas twice in his 2015 UN address, seemingly re-acknowledging him as a dialogue partner. After again spending most of his speech on the alleged nuclear threat from Iran, the Israeli Prime Minister referred explicitly to Abbas's speech on the preceding day, which included the announcement of Palestinian disengagement from the Oslo Peace process due to the continuing Israeli settlement policy in the occupied territories of the "West Bank" and alleged access restrictions to the Muslim Holy sites on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (Abbas, 2015; Netanyahu, 2015). Unsurprisingly, Netanyahu, in turn, blamed Abbas for "walking away from peace" by refusing negotiations and admonished him – switching as he did to the third person ("What President Abbas should be speaking out against") – to denounce Palestinian violence. On the other hand, Netanyahu insisted on their *mutual* obligation to "actually negotiate", albeit in a conditional construction:

- (7) [...] if we actually sit down and try to resolve this conflict between us, recognize each other, not use a Palestinian state as a stepping stone for another Islamist dictatorship in the Middle East, but something that will live at peace next to the Jewish state, if we actually do that, we can do remarkable things for our peoples. (Netanyahu, 2015)

Netanyahu thus kept up the pretense of potentially successful negotiations between himself and Abbas as national leaders but only as a hypothetical scenario. The alternative he painted was the horrifying picture of "another Islamist dictatorship in the Middle East" (against which Israel would presumably have to conduct all-out war). He thus managed to convey – in the guise of a conciliatory offer of mutual recognition – a maximally strong suspicion of Palestine as a terror threat in contrast to what he called "the true face of Israel", i.e. "defending freedom and progress", as "civilization's front line in the battle against barbarism" (Netanyahu, 2015).

Abbas's 2015 speech included a direct address to his collective opponent, i.e. Israel, but not to Netanyahu, as peroration: namely, a plea to "accept for the Palestinian people what you accept for yourselves" and to enjoy "security, safety, peace and stability." He did not "extend" his own hand anymore as in 2011–2013 but kept it "outstretched for the just peace" (Abbas, 2015), thus again ostensibly displaying his willingness to accept that peace from whoever was able to give it. The Israeli Prime Minister, however, seemed an unlikely candidate for such an action: Abbas (as in all the other UN speeches) refrained from addressing or mentioning him directly but appealed to the UN in general and the "Israeli people".

Overall, Abbas's and Netanyahu's rhetorical performances in their UN speeches between 2011 and 2015 reflect a steep decline in the political relationships between their governments and states. In terms of collective identity construal, they maintained a minimal degree of mutual recognition as potential partners in negotiating and acknowledging each others' collective agency and sovereignty. At the same time,

however, the concrete individual persons who were in a position to enact the respective sovereignties appeared to have given up any hope of ‘coming to terms’ with the other side in the foreseeable future. In fact, they both undermined and questioned the ‘other’ government so fundamentally – as suspected allies of (if not de facto) ‘terrorists’, ‘war criminals’ and ‘genocide-perpetrators’ – that negotiations and peace deals with such an opponent would now seem ethically and practically impossible. What function could the continuing construals of the ‘other’ collective as a potential partner in mutual peace-making – metaphorically: hand extension/outstretching – serve in such a context of deteriorating chances for actual negotiations?

4. Nation-persons’ SOCIAL FACE

This overview of the 2011–2015 UN addresses by Netanyahu and Abbas shows that they do not just argue their case as individual politicians or as power-holders of specific parties or governments in their states, but as national leaders who speak for and on behalf of their peoples. The UN General Assembly is a special environment, in which such symbolic role-play is presupposed to apply to (and be accepted by) all participants. For the purpose of the Assembly, all invited state leaders are formally regarded as representatives of their nations, equal to one another, irrespective of any reservations one may have about the validity of their authority on account of the real political clout they hold in their home states.

This official conceit enables even the leaders of nations at war or in war-like conflicts to present their positions publicly and to signal their intentions about how to continue or end the conflicts. It would be unrealistic to assume that Abbas and Netanyahu (or any other national leader-speaker) would really sit down and negotiate together as a result of their public expression of willingness to do so; even if such a face-to-face conversation did take place, it would most likely happen in secret. The scenario depictions of *extending hands towards each other, stretching them out, sitting down, discussing with open hearts and open ears*, etc. thus primarily serve the purpose of rhetorical/theatrical performance of collective identities in front of a global public. This performative aspect makes them no less meaningful; on the contrary, it provides crucial indications of how the respective collectives (as represented by at least a powerful part of their political elites) *wish* to be seen.

Taking up the Chilton-Lakoff (1995) terminology quoted earlier, such performances include projections of state-“persons” that are meant to appeal to a worldwide audience as legitimate, coherent and likeable. Unlike Chilton and Lakoff, however, we do not assume that such personalization is “pervasive” in the sense that every time a state is referred to as the agent or patient of a grammatical clause construction, it is thought of as a person. *Pace* Twardzisz, on the other hand, we neither assume that the implausibility of such an interpretation in press reports

entails that it is improbable in all other text genres. Unlike routine press reports, public speeches by national leaders do provide a context in which the use and elaboration of the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor make good sense. First of all, nation-personifications are useful to create an image of a unified social collective that is able to *speak with one voice* and *act* as a singular, independent *agent*. Such an image is more desirable as the basis for efficient diplomatic operation than a ‘polyphonic’ Self-presentation. As to the more strongly figurative depiction of specific *character traits* of the respective NATION-PERSON, it is obvious that they should (be made to) appear in the best possible light for the purposes of an address to the most widely recognized global political institution, i.e. the UN General Assembly. UN recognition and support is sought by all state leaders as backing for their diplomatic endeavours. The annual Assembly session provides the most prominent forum to do so. Hence, the most positive and plausible national Self-presentations and, in case of conflict, the starkest vilifications of the enemy-Other are only to be expected – and can easily be found – in Abbas’s and Netanyahu’s speeches in the characterizations of their own side as always ready to *extend hands in peace*, *negotiate with open hearts*, etc. and in the Other-portrayal as a state-person that is stubbornly *undermining* or *rejecting* any chance for peace.

Such Self-vs.-Other identity construction is the object of socio-psychological “face theory”, as pioneered by E. Goffman and further developed in linguistic pragmatics and communication research.¹² According to face theory, individuals have an interest to protect their own self vis-à-vis others as well as that of their in-group from face-threats and face-attacks that could destroy their self-esteem and their ability to act socially. SOCIAL FACE is thus established and negotiated in every communicative encounter and serves to create expectations and obligations for future behaviour, which are assumed to be shared by the participants in the social situation in which they communicate.

In the context of ‘inter-national’ communication as performed by national leaders in the UN as part of their International Relations policies,¹³ both the respective

12. See Goffman (1959, 1967, 1972); for further developments: Brown and Levinson (1987), Culpeper (2011), Watts, Ide, and Ehlich (2005), and for face in political discourse also Mollin (2018).

13. Within International Relations research, the face-theoretical approach has been applied not just to individuals speaking publicly on behalf of states but also to non-public or only partly public negotiation behavior; see, for instance, Epstein (2010) and Mikalayeva (2011). Epstein (2010) highlights the fact that – *pace* critics such as Twardzisz (2013) – the application of the STATE-AS-PERSON metaphor does not force analysts or media commentators to “essentialise” the respective referent into a supposedly 100% personalized entity; instead it can be used as a propaedeutic fiction for their respective communicative purposes. One does not have to believe that nation states are real persons to treat them as engaged in face-work!

leader and that of the collective that he or she represents require identity-building face-work (Goffman, 1972). The relationship between these two aspects is intricate: the national Self's communicative acts only take place through the individual speaker; the latter produces them primarily on behalf of the collective that he or she represents, and only secondarily as an individual engaging in social contact (see also Mollin, this volume, for parliamentary discourse). Insofar as the speaker is part of a government which in turn is part of the nation, he or she could be said to stand in a metonymic relationship to the nation (but see Twardzisz' (2013) critique cited above). More informatively, however, at least for the UN Assembly context, the relationship can be said to be a ritual-symbolic one. Irrespective of their real power or representativeness, speakers in the General Assembly are treated *as if they were* each a national Self.¹⁴

The special register of UN-speeches presupposes a framework in which speakers appeal to the Assembly as an ideologically neutral forum and also that – in view of the Member States' assumed commitment to abide by the UN Charter – they must be seen to do everything to achieve a peaceful resolution of their conflicts, however strongly adversarial their relationship with the 'conflict partner' is. These institution- and situation-specific conditions of UN speeches help explain the contradiction in Netanyahu's and Abbas's speeches between portrayals of the national Other as stubbornly refusing any compromise, while still *extending* their national Self's *hand in peace*.

In terms of face theory, such inconsistencies can be viewed as the expression of limited face-threats that attack the national Other's social standing within the UN as a *family of nations* but do not attempt a complete face-destruction that would make further negotiation, mediation and compromise wholly impossible. As much as Netanyahu and Abbas may mistrust each other's political elites and nations, they cannot afford to be seen as burning all bridges. Arguably, Netanyahu comes close to doing so in his 2014 address, when he allocates political responsibility for Palestine to Arab states, but he provides some mitigation by also addressing Abbas directly (though critically). In his 2015 speech, he reverts to the pre-2014 position of pretending that the main obstacle to peace lies in the difficulty of conducting negotiations rather than in a principled negation of Palestine's right to sovereign Self-statehood. For his part, Abbas emphatically acknowledges Israel's right to

14. Journalistic reports and comments on the national leader's communicative performances are often couched in popular versions of the SOCIAL FACE-metaphor. Thus, Greenwood and McElroy (2012) judged that "the price paid by [...] Abbas for being the 'acceptable face' of Palestinian nationalism" had been "humiliation" and Donnison (2011) warned that if Abbas came "back from New York empty-handed" (as regards UN membership for Palestine), he would "lose face in front of Hamas".

nationhood in order to demand her reciprocal acknowledgement for his national collective Self. Whether this reciprocal fence-sitting is sustainable as a political diplomatic position in the medium to long term is of course questionable; rather, it appears to be the eloquent but still unimaginative expression of a check-mate situation, in which neither side dares to make a concession.

The UN addresses data provide evidence for the contention that the metaphor of the NATION AS A PERSON functions as a platform for constructing collective identities. Locating this function in discursive scenarios of nations *extending* (or *withdrawing*) *their hands* to others, *building bridges* or *walls*, etc., rather than in abstract conceptual entailments, allows a deeper understanding of its significance. However clichéd the respective formulaic expressions may be, they acquire new implicatures – new pragmatic significance – in their argumentative contexts and thus help to re-construct and re-negotiate the collective identities of the respective national Selves and Others. The construction of collective national identity is thus not simply an automatic entailment of the conceptual metaphor of the NATION AS A PERSON; rather it results from its discursive enactment and performance of the impersonated SOCIAL FACE of nation-agents.

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This volume explores linguistic identity construction across online and offline contexts. The contributors focus on 'clusivity' as an overarching aspect and offer a multifaceted operationalisation of the linguistic processes of identity construction. The studies address three major strands of human identity, each of which can be thought of as an aggregative abstraction with its own complexities: *personal identity*, *group identity* and *collective identity*. The contributions pay special attention to the interplay between the public and private dimensions of the interactions and audiences, as well as the potential impact of social and technical affordances of different communicative settings and online and offline modes of identity construction. The volume is aimed at all researchers concerned with the complex notion of identity, both in linguistics and in neighbouring disciplines.

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