

# ‘Making Conversation’: Sequential Integrity and the Local Management of Interaction on Internet Newsgroups.

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## Abstract

*This paper argues for a detailed empirical investigation of newsgroup interaction. It presents a framework for analysis that emphasizes the machinic and human character of newsgroup activity with the concept of ‘(human) orientation to the (machinic) default’. By problematizing the notion of newsgroup ‘conversation’ the paper reveals the ‘sequential integrity’ of newsgroup practices through the detailed investigation of participants’ ‘local management of interaction’.*

*Newsgroup interaction is a-synchronous: participation does not occur in ‘real time’ and participants are geographically dispersed. Potentially, therefore, participation could be chaotic and disordered. Yet observation reveals it to be a highly ordered activity. A fundamental question, then, is how this interactional order is achieved; and achieved as conversational.*

*Newsgroup activity is characterized by sequential integrity. Messages are constructed in such a way as to exhibit both relational (between messages) and internal (in the text of messages) features that mimic and respect sequential ordering.*

## Introduction

There is a growing literature concerned with the *nature* of electronic textual interaction [2] [6][14] [18][27]. One view conceives of computer mediated textual interaction (CMTI) as part written and part spoken – or as Danet [5] puts it, ‘attenuated speech’ and ‘attenuated writing’. A second view conceives of CMTI as a natural development in language. Baron [2] for example, talks of the ‘creolization’ of language in the new media, denoting an historical development that parallels other language forms. A third view regards CMTI as a new linguistic form. Ball-Rokeach and Reardon [1] differentiated between *monologue* (one way mass communication), *dialogue* (interpersonal communication) and *telelogue* (dialogue among people at a distance via electronics), with email and newsgroup interaction falling

into the latter category. Ferrara et al [7] talk of ‘interactive written discourse’ as a new ‘emergent register’ (p.8).

Implicit within all these approaches is a comparison of text based computer mediated interaction and face-to-face communication. A consequence of this is that the geographical distance between participants and the temporal dispersion of messages is seen to play a pivotal role in determining its character. Black et al [3] note, for example, that unlike spoken interaction between co-present actors, ‘non-real time’ computer interaction allows for parallel message development in ‘threads’ (see also McCarthy et al, [15]). Further the ‘temporal delay’ between messages results in a lack of strict topic sequentiality. Both these features are quite unlike face-to-face communication.

Sequentiality can be thought of in a different way as the *achieved relatedness* of a message to one that preceded it (what ever the topic<sup>1</sup>). In this regard the threaded-ness of messages becomes an issue for study. Specifically the question is asked about what mechanisms are utilized in the human achievement of threaded-ness. A partial answer to this question is that various quoting mechanisms - the selective inclusion of text from the immediately preceding message - are actively used by participants to achieve a sense of context and conversation [25]. As Severinson Eklundh et al [25] have noted quoting can also denote the textual relationship of old and new text, where for example the total text is included from a previous message but the new text is interspersed within it (pp. 199-200). With this specific mechanism, the quoted text gains an immediacy and relevance, in relation to the new textual elements, in each new turn at participation. This mechanism allows for the development, over a series of turns, of a curious and media specific textual formation.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘topic’ adherence in computer mediated communication is a contentious issue. In the corpus of messages collected for this study, the sense of one single topic laid down in the first message and followed in subsequent messages was not perceived. The ‘topic’ (if one was perceivable at all) was an emergent and amorphous aspect; one might say retrospective consequence, of the messages. ‘The relevant topic’ through all its twists and turns was a matter for the participants to determine, criticise, argue about and the like (see Reed 1999).

This feature, described as a ‘turn-taking unit’, is the object of investigation in this paper.

The ‘turn-taking unit’ is curious because it *looks like* conversation. More accurately it looks like a transcript of conversation, with individual turn units represented in sequential order in a dialogic format. At a crude level these units make temporally dispersed newsgroup messages exhibit conversational characteristics. This construction is an empirically accessible feature of newsgroup messages. Rather than conceptualizing newsgroup messages as written-like or speech-like from the outset, this investigation concerns itself with the detailed analysis of an observed regularity of natural interaction. In the process it unearths particular human practices of structuration (rather than determined machine consequences) that construe at least parts of the interaction as conversation-like.

Rather than a theoretical view, then, this work takes a pragmatic stance and asks: ‘how does newsgroup written text become conversation-like?’ ‘If this written interaction is speech-like, how does it get that way?’ The empirical investigation of natural textual interaction follows that found in Mulkay’s [16][17] investigation of letters between biochemists. This approach based in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis is growing in popularity in the examination of textual computer mediated interaction [10], as well as the future design of such media [4]. And it compliments a wider interest in ‘computer conversation’ [19][20] and ‘computer talk’ [27]. A feature of these latter approaches is the recognition of the importance of ‘turn-taking’ [8]. That is how participants negotiate access over time to the conversation, and how each ‘turn’ builds into a conversation. Turn taking is seen as a ‘participant concern’ and an ‘achievement’ of participants in the situation of interaction.

What the current work does is take this participant focus one step further. Not only is the accomplishment of ‘turn-taking’ a recognized concern for the participants (in that they *do* turn-taking) it is also seen as the product of knowledgeable and competent social actors who are themselves aware of the importance of such structures in interaction. The assertion is then that participants *actively construct* turn-taking units through particular practices and that these practices act to *construe textual interaction as conversation-like*<sup>2</sup>.

In contrast to earlier research into electronic discourse, the present study reinvests textual interaction with a ‘strict sequentiality’ in its discovery of participant constructed

‘turn-taking units’. It does this by returning to Grimes [11] conception of sequentiality, where ‘Discourse constituents follow one another in time and follow a “pattern of linear organization” [3]. It is true, however, that the temporal relationship between textual elements is an apparent, and not real, one. The text is arranged so as to infer temporal relatedness. In this way the participants in newsgroups construct the text as though it were face-to-face communication.

The current analysis forms part of a wider interest in newsgroup interaction. This interest starts from a basic premise and moves through a systematic methodology. It should be emphasized that the current concerns are the product of this broader project rather than an isolated and premeditated research exercise. We need to briefly outline the broader research approach to understand how the turn-taking unit became an interesting object for research.

### Basic premise

Newsgroup interaction is a-synchronous: participation occurs ‘non-real time’ [3] and participants are geographically dispersed. Potentially participation could be chaotic and disordered. The development of personal relationships through interaction might seem an impossible task. Yet observation reveals it to be a highly ordered activity: numerous conversations occurring in parallel in a multitude of ‘groups’, with various conversational tributaries existing effortlessly alongside one another. A growing literature is documenting the very intimate, interpersonal, and social nature of newsgroup interaction (and other types of text based computer mediated interaction) (see for example Kiesler, [13]).

### Research Strategy

The project takes up a research strategy envisioned by the late Harvey Sacks. Starting from a position of ‘unmotivated observation’ [21] it seeks to engage a sociology that amounts to a ‘natural observation science’. Specifically it looks to study ‘what actually happens’ by employing rigorous observation of mundane activity. And by doing so, reveal the human practices of sense-making common to all newsgroup activity. Sacks can be seen to employ a ‘machine metaphor’ for human activity that allows the progressive understanding of human activity [22].

‘We ... want to think of that particular sequence as really one machine product. ... we can begin to see machinery that produces this as a series of moves, and to appreciate it as a series of moves among the potential sets of moves that are otherwise to be actualized for some people’ [24] (p.169).

<sup>2</sup> A note needs to be made here about ‘intentioned action’. What is not claimed is that participants cognitively decide on each occasion to produce the turn-taking unit. Instead it is the product of occasioned, situated and chosen practices of doing interaction. The ‘turn-taking unit’ is the co-production of participants’ mundane activity.

An example of the application of this idea is Gray [10] who, in a study of interaction and hypertext, talks about the ‘technology’ of conversation. In the present study, we are interested in the quoting mechanisms that produce the observed features. In an ethnomethodological sense we are interested in the *technology of quoting* as a member’s method of sense-making.

This approach is in keeping with an ethnomethodologically inspired Conversation Analysis (CA) that concerns itself with ‘... the analysis of those processes or practices through which objective, stable, transsituational features of social environments are continually achieved’ [26]. Which is itself based on the assertion that ‘properties of social life which seem objective, factual, and transformational, are actually managed accomplishments or achievements of local processes’ [28] (p.11).

To achieve this we are going to ‘bracket out’ the computer/software structuring and conceive of a *default position*. A basic interactional technique is to ‘reply’ to a previous message. This action is accomplished through automatic features of the computer program. The resulting message has features that are the result of the program. Specifically it contains a full copy of the previous message<sup>3</sup>. Without human intervention, these ‘quoted’ segments would accumulate, as a sequence of messages was produced – resulting in large textual sequences within a message. By comparing this default position to what actually happens the human activity of participation is foregrounded.

## Method

A two part methodological strategy was employed to examine ‘what actually happens’. An initial ‘orienting strategy’ comprised of the descriptive coding of one thousand and eight messages, collected from five different newsgroup over a two week period. Coding involved the description of each message in terms of identifiable segments of text – quoted text, new text, automatically generated text – and the relation of these elements to one another i.e. how they were arranged in the message. By formulating the individual messages in terms of structural features, the coding exercise revealed repeated features. These repeated elements motivated an in-depth analysis of the actual content of the messages. This second stage looked to trace the ‘contingent history’ of each message

<sup>3</sup> In the study by Servinson-Eklundh and Macdonald 1994, only 15 percent of those interviewed said that the computer program they used ‘automatically’ inserted quoted text. However a thorough survey of current software ‘newsreaders’ found the inserting of the text from the ‘replied to’ message to be largely standard.

by retrospectively following the construction of the particular textual formation observed in the orientation strategy. Through this process it was possible to identify the textual moves – in terms of editing and quoting - of each constituent interactional turn.

The data for this paper comes from one of the observed newsgroups. Uk.media.tv.friends is a lively discussion of issues relating to an American situation comedy. In the sample 40 participants contributed a total of 243 messages. Message rates ranged from a single message to 23 messages by one participant. Compared to the other newsgroups in the corpus, this group is by far the busiest, generating the most ‘posts’ and the longest and most complicated sequences of ‘posts’. However it should be noted that the following structural features were found in all the newsgroups studied.

## Example of a turn-taking unit

The following message was identified in the descriptive coding exercise as containing a turn-taking unit of text:

### Example one

14	[header information]
15	
16	>>> > ooh fun!
17	>>> > Can we feed pigeons too?
18	>>>
19	>>> We can mug em too :)
20	>
21	>Nooooooooo!
22	>We can't!
23	
24	yes we can, they deserve it i had one sit on
25	my shoulder and peack my head i
26	had sunburn on my shoulder tooo!!

(uk.media.tv.friends, 12/10/99)

In example one, the lines from 16 to 25 contain a series of textual elements. Lines 16 to 22 are quoted textual elements denoted by the use of the ‘>’ and ‘>>>’ ASCII characters<sup>4</sup>. By counting the number of quoting characters, the participants can determine (as can the analyst) from ‘how many messages ago’ the particular textual element comes.<sup>5</sup> Hence the ‘new’ text, written by ‘Lovebug’, is contained in lines 24 to 26.

<sup>4</sup> The character, or characters, that denotes ‘quoting’ is set by an option in the particular computer application used. Typically the program defaults to representing quoting with a carot ‘>’ symbol, however participants can change this. In the above example one of the participants has changed the default ‘>’ symbol to ‘>>>’. Other variants include ‘:’ and ‘:->’.

<sup>5</sup>It should be noted that the current page formatting has meant that some quoted elements now appear on two lines instead of one. Additional characters were added to reflect the original quoted elements

The effect is a series of textual elements fitted together in a conversation-like manner. In that it ‘appears’ conversational, it also mimics or represents a textual representation of verbal interaction – it has a script like quality. However each textual element (quoted or new) does not come with identifying text, instead each text element appears unannounced and dependent upon the content of the previous textual utterance for its relevance or context. In this way it engenders a sense of immediacy and contextual relevance that mimics the temporal relatedness of verbal interaction

It was this conversational construction that struck me as interesting. It furnishes a temporally separated series of written textual messages (generated by geographically dispersed interactants) with a character akin to face-to-face communication.

So far these observation are similar to those in other works that recognize the unique features of textual computer interaction that encourage a sense of face-to-face conversation<sup>6</sup>. However the wish here is to go beyond a mere recognition of these features and ask how these features come about and are used by participants to get the job of interaction done. One way to do this is to chart the development of a particular message.

### Tracing the ‘contingent history’ of a message

The phrase ‘contingent history’ conveys the notion that a newsgroup message, and its constituent elements, develops over a series of turns at interaction; and that the eventual outcome (the current message content) is dependent upon a specific set of activities carried out in the *preceding* messages<sup>7</sup>.

The message that immediately precedes message one is the following:

#### Example Two

```

20 [Header information]
21
22 In article <37FA62CE.5125451D@riptide.com>,
23 Alex Washtell <al@riptide.com>
24 wrote:
25
26 o> Kewl! You can come? Excellent.. this
27 o> sounds like it could be *the*
28 o> meet.. with a poss 8 or so people, and
29 o> maybe more :)
30
31 yes but like I said @ 2pm
    
```

<sup>6</sup> These include the use of paralinguistic cues, e.g. called smileys, particular language structuring, e.g. the lengthening of vowels within words, such as a lack of personal pronouns, the relaxing spelling and grammatical rule adherence [7].

<sup>7</sup> An advantage of newsgroup message forums is that it is possible to collect all the messages that preceded the current one. In that messages are routinely recorded archived they are available as for study. In addition the messages are archived in such a way as to make identifying which message preceded which message easy

```

32
33 o>>> Activities: Mug old ladies..
34 o>>> seriously, anything is up, suggest now!
35 o>>
36 o>> ooh fun!
37 o>> Can we feed pigeons too?
38 o>
39 o> We can mug em too :)
40
41 Nooooooooo!
42 We can't!
43
44 Only if they chase me - btw if I'm going near
45 pigeons is neil coming?
46
47 o> Al - Who adds Chis, Fiona and Chis' laddo
48 o> to the list
49
50 Put a question mark by Chis' Laddo btw,
51 because he may or may not come -
52 DON'T READ INTO THAT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
53
54
55
56 [signature]
    
```

(uk.media.tv.friends, 12/10/99)

Message example 2, written by Chis, is larger than that written by Lovebug (example 1). By comparing the two messages we can trace the textual changes that have occurred. When a reply command is carried out in a newsgroup application, the total text (excluding the ‘header information’) is included in a new message window. This is the ‘default position’. The person who carries out the reply command has the option to edit the automatically generated text and add new text. The ‘quoted’ text in example one (lines 16 to 22) appears in lines 33 to 39 in example 2. This means that Lovebug, the writer of example one, has removed the remaining text - lines 21 to 35 and lines 43-56.

The message by Chis (example two) already contains a number of quoted elements. Lines 26-29, lines 38-39 and line 47-48 contain text from one message ago. Lines 33-39 contain quoted elements from three messages ago, two messages ago and one message ago. The segment 33 to 42 (that includes the quoted segments, 33-39) looks like the conversational segment from the first message we looked at. This segment has the same number of quoted messages as example one, in that the messages stretch from three messages ago to one message ago. We might ask about the utility of maintaining a similar sized quotation history in example one. It is noticeable from the coding exercise that turn-taking units typically have two or three quoted elements. There are occasions when this reaches four quoted elements i.e. elements of five messages alongside one another, but this is rare. There were no examples at all where a current message contained six or more message elements, even when the message thread had continued over a large number of turns. As a recognizably consistent feature of newsgroup activity it lead to an awareness of the ‘local’ character of newsgroup interaction.

That participants are interested in local concerns add to the conversational feel of the messages. However it also speaks to the *achieved* nature of these messages. That is they are the product of particular human practices that limit the relevancy span of each successive message. This realization allows us to talk about *the local management of newsgroup interaction as a participant concern*.

Another noticeable feature of this message, and other messages in the corpus, is that quoted segments typically represent and maintain the historical order of the message from which they were produced. That is the current message's text follows the text from the previous message, which follows the text from the message that preceded it, and so on. In addition it is rare that quoted elements jump a message and leave out the previous message's text while quoting the text from the last message but one. We might say that messages exhibit an *internal sequential integrity*.

Let us turn to the message that preceded example two. Example three was written by Al:

**Example three**

```

18 [header information]
19
20 Chis wrote:
21 >
22 >In article
23 > <37F9217F.A377BB8B@riptide.com>, Alex
24 >Washtell <al@riptide.com>
25 > wrote:
26 >o>
27 >o> Okay, it is getting reallly hard to
28 >o> organise a meet here with so many
29 >o> people saying something like "Yeah,
30 >o> sounds cool" but not actually giving
31 >o> me any more information when I ask
32 >o> them...
33 > o>
34 > o> This is what was originally planned:
35 > o>
36 > o> Place: London
37 o> Date: Sat October 16th (A week this
38 > Sat)
39 > o> Time: 10am (Negotiable)
40 >
41 > Hmm can I meet you guys at 2pm somewhere???
42 > Preferably paddington...actually if
43 > anyone whos goings got a moblie I can
44 > ccall them to tell them what time I'm
45 > gonna get in and blah blah, I'll
46 >probably bring Fiona and maybe my laddio
47 > if he's down.
48
49 Kewl! You can come? Excellent.. this sounds
50 like it could be *the*
51 meet.. with a poss 8 or so people, and maybe
52 more :)
53
54 >o> Activities: Mug old ladies.. seriously,
55 >o> anything is up, suggest now!
56 >
57 > ooh fun!
58 > Can we feed pidgeons too?
59
60 We can mug em too :)
61
62 Al - Who adds Chis, Fiona and Chis' laddo to
63 the list

```

```

64 --
65
66 [automatically generated signature]

```

(uk.media.tv.friends, 12/10/99)

The quoted segment in Example two (lines 26-29) are the lines 49-52 in example three. Lines 33 to 39 in example two are lines 54-60 in example three, and line 47-48 in example two are lines 62-63 in example three. This means that lines 20 to 48, line 61 and lines 64 to 66 have been removed from example three.

Lines 57-60 contain the text that will end up in example one as part of the turn-taking unit. But even here in example three they already have the characteristic of a series of textual turns.

The message that preceded example three is the following written by Chis (example four). For the first time we see a message that does not contain a turn-taking unit. Instead the message contains quoted elements from only the message that preceded it (This is not surprising, given that example four is the second message in a message sequence). Lines 49 to 53 contain the textual elements that will eventually form part of the turn-taking unit in example two.

**Example four**

```

21 [Header information]
22
23 In article <37F9217F.A377BB8B@riptide.com>,
24 Alex Washtell <al@riptide.com>
25 wrote:
26 o>
27 o> Okay, it is getting reallly hard to
28 o> organise a meet here with so many
29 o> people saying something like "Yeah,
30 o> sounds cool" but not actually giving
31 o> me any more information when I ask
32 o> them...
33 o>
34 o> This is what was originally planned:
35 o>
36 o> Place: London
37 o> Date: Sat October 16th (A week this Sat)
38 o> Time: 10am (Negotiable)
39
40 Hmm can I meet you guys at 2pm somewhere???
41
42 Preferably paddington...actually if anyone
43 whos goings got a moblie I can
44 ccall them to tell them what time I'm gonna
45 get in and blah blah, I'll
46 probably bring Fiona and maybe my laddio if
47 he's down.
48
49 o> Activities: Mug old ladies.. seriously,
50 o> anything is up, suggest now!
51
52 ooh fun!
53 Can we feed pidgeons too?
54
55
56 --
57
58 [automatically generated signature]

```

(uk.media.tv.friends, 12/10/99)

If we look to the first message in the sequence, example five, we can identify the editing move performed by Chis in example four.

**Example five**

```

18 [Header information]
19
20 Okay, it is getting reallly hard to organise
21 a meet here with so many
22 people saying something like "Yeah, sounds
23 cool" but not actually giving
24 me any more information when I ask them...
25
26 This is what was originally planned:
27
28 Place: London
29 Date: Sat October 16th (A week this Sat)
30 Time: 10am (Negotiable)
31 Activities: Mug old ladies.. seriously,
32 anything is up, suggest now!
33
34 That's all the details you need to know
35 right now.. either you can make
36 it or you can't.. IF you can, I know that at
37 least 4 or 5 people are
38 coming, then I'll discuss details...
39
40 But because I received few replies, this
41 meet date may seem to early for
42 you, so be my guest to rip it to shreds and
43 suggest a new one.
44
45 And for god sake, PLEASE R*S*V*P as I want
46 to get this sorted...
47
48 Thanks,
49
50 Al - MMM... Meet
51
52 [automatic signature]
    
```

(uk.media.tv.friends, 12/10/99)

What Chis has done is separate out one line from example five (lines 31-32) for comment. These separated lines ‘Activities: Mug old ladies.. seriously, anything is up, suggest now!’ is separated out because of the insertion of text after the line ‘Time: 10am (Negotiable) that generates comment on the time and place of the ‘meet’. The writer of example four has removed all the text that comes after the ‘activities...’ line. The ‘separating out’ of the single line is what informs the foundation for the building of the (various) turn-taking units that follows. One of which being the eventual incident identified in the coding exercise. This separating is a reflexive move that defines a previously continuous part of a message as a part individually comment-on-able. It construes the particularized text and worthy of comment

We might say that the occurrence of an isolated turn-taking unit - that is a series of single lined textual elements arranged as a conversation - is dependent upon the separating out of a line of text at some point in the contingent history of the message. There needs to occur the formulation of a *single turn unit*.

An important point to note is that both the single turn unit and the turn-taking unit, are the product of human activity. They are not a product of the computer software. The potential for such features written into in software in the possible moves that each participant can make, but they require specific activity, on the part of a series of participants, to bring them about. Both the turn unit and the turn-taking unit are the *accomplishment* of participants in their mundane activity.

**Tracing the contingent history and finding practices that maintain sequential integrity**

The notion of *internal sequential integrity* asserts that messages exhibit a respect for the order in which text was produced – that quoted elements appear in temporal relation to one another and that new text always follows the related quoted elements. As messages are answered not only is the order in which the text appeared in the previous message maintained but also new text is placed in sequentially respected positions. This is exemplified in the building of the turn-taking unit. Without a respect for the order in which the various turns have construed the accumulated text the turn-taking unit would not take the form that it does

There are occasions however where the automatic functions of the software program can potentially unsettle this internal sequential integrity. When a reply command is carried out and the previous message’s text is automatically copied into a new message window the cursor can be automatically positioned in two different places: either before or after the quoted text segment. It might seem an unimportant and analytically uninteresting point but it has very real consequences for the structure of the new message. Put simply the new text *precedes* the quoted text. Now if the assertion made above is true, that the internal sequential integrity is a fundamental feature of newsgroup messages, we should see the participants actively reinforcing the appropriate order of text elements through particular editing techniques.

One such example occurs in the corpus of ‘turn-taking units’ collected for this paper:

**Example six**

```

19 [Header information]
20
21 On Sat, 9 Oct 1999, Chis
22 <spam@cornbeef.co.uk> stated this considered
23 view. Waking from my doze, I hastily
24 scrawled -
25 >> PS, Loads of great potential vidcaps
26 >>from this show - check out my
27 >> website in the next day or so.
28 >
29 >ooh fun!
30 >
31 >Paul do you do sound waves too?
32
    
```

```

33 Well I (foolishly) downloaded an 'upgrade'
34 to my WinTV software, and now
35 I can't capture sound files.
36 --
37 Paul 'US Sitcom Fan' Hyett - The Wild Frame
38 Grabber of the Net!
39
40 Website at
41 http://www.activist.demon.co.uk/USsitcoms/

```

(uk.media.tv.friends, 12/10/99)

Example six is some way into a sequence of messages. To give the message a descriptive history the writer of the present message is also the person that wrote the lines form 25-27 in which a conversation about 'Friends' the American sitcom has turned to the recordings of elements of this show on computer ('vidcaps', line 25) and their presentation on Paul's web page. The previous message writer has responded with an affirmative 'ooh fun!' (line 29) and asked whether these recordings contain sound. In this message Paul admits that he has upgraded the necessary software but now cannot record sounds (lines 33-35). The message that follows this one is written by Taggs:

#### Example seven

```

18 [Header information]
19
20 Cool, I have a Hauppage WinTV card - could
21 you give me the URL for that
22 upgrade please? I couldn't find it on the
23 hauppage website.
24
25 Cheers,
26
27 --
28 Tags
29 web design - http://www.limitwebdesign.co.uk
30 html help -
31 http://www.limitwebdesign.co.uk/htmlhelp/
32 search -
33 http://www.limitwebdesign.co.uk/search/
34 --
35 "I watched the stars crash in the sea"
36
37 Paul Hyett wrote in message ...
38 >On Sat, 9 Oct 1999, Chis
39 <spam@cornbeef.co.uk> stated this considered
40 >view. Waking from my doze, I hastily
41 scrawled -
42 >>> PS, Loads of great potential vidcaps
43 from this show - check out my
44 >>> website in the next day or so.
45 >>
46 >>ooh fun!
47 >>
48 >>Paul do you do sound waves too?
49 >
50 >Well I (foolishly) downloaded an 'upgrade'
51 to my WinTV software, and now
52 >I can't capture sound files.
53 >>--
54 >Paul 'US Sitcom Fan' Hyett - The Wild Frame
55 Grabber of the Net!
56 >
57 >Website at
58 http://www.activist.demon.co.uk/USsitcoms/

```

(uk.media.tv.friends, 12/10/99)

Taggs's message has a full copy of the text from Paul's message (lines 37 to 58). This quoted text comes *after* the new text that Taggs has contributed (lines 20 to 36). In this new text Taggs asks for the URL ('Unique Resource Location') of the 'upgraded' software mentioned by Paul.

The fact that the new text written by Taggs appears before the quoted text - to which he is referring - would seem to go against the notion that the sequential order of text is an important feature. That the message structure seems to contradict the notion of sequential integrity is a matter for the participants themselves. As we can see this if we look at Paul's response to Taggs's message:

#### Example eight

```

19 [Header information]
20
21 On Sat, 9 Oct 1999, Tags
22 <tags@limitwebdesign.co.uk> stated this
23 considered view. Waking from my doze, I
24 hastily scrawled -
25
26 >>>Paul do you do sound waves too?
27 >>
28 >>Well I (foolishly) downloaded an
29 >>'upgrade' to my WinTV software, and now
30 >>I can't capture sound files.
31
32 >Cool, I have a Hauppage WinTV card - could
33 >you give me the URL for that
34 >upgrade please? I couldn't find it on the
35 hauppage website.
36
37 You want an upgrade that PREVENTS you from
38 saving sounds? :)
39
40 The upgrade I have is 2.1 for W95, but that
41 was several months back so
42 there may be a letter one by now.
43
44 I DID find it on the Hauppage website
45 though.
46 --
47 Paul 'US Sitcom Fan' Hyett - The Wild Frame
48 Grabber of the Net!
49
50 Website at
51 http://www.activist.demon.co.uk/USsitcoms/

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(uk.media.tv.friends, 12/10/99)

First then let us notice that the structure of this message (example eight) has a turn-taking unit in it (lines 26 to 38) (This is actually the message that was collected in the corpus of examples of turn-taking units.). However if we work out which textual elements have come from where we notice that Paul has rearranged the text from the previous message. Lines 26-30 in example eight have come from lines 48-52 in example seven and lines 32-35 in example eight have come from lines 20-23 in example seven. This second segment comes *before* the first in the original message, but here comes after. Paul has selectively edited the message so that the message elements follow each other in a sequentially relevant order. He has reinvested the new message with *internal*

*sequential integrity*. This rearranging of the text, in it self, does not follow the principle of sequential integrity (in that it does not respect and maintain the order of the text in the previous message). However in breaking with the principle Paul has ‘repaired’ the sequential order of the message elements. The result, as has been stated, is the turn-taking unit.

**‘Sequential integrity’ and ‘local management of interaction’**

Through a strategy of investigating the contingent history of two examples of the turn-taking unit it was found that the formation of the unit was precipitated upon a series of quoting and editing practices employed by participants. In the first example we traced these practices back to an instance where a participant formulates a single turn unit. We might say then that at some point in the history of the formation of the turn-taking unit for a piece of text to be formulated as a conversational turn. That is by answering a particular comment, assertion etc. the second part of a turn is made and this reflexively defines the first element as a first part of a turn. The formation of that first part as a first turn is the result of the reflexive activity of the second part. In the example above it was the editing of example five that resulted in the focus on one line. Note that the line in question was part of a much bigger textual item. The editing/quoting was the action that particularized it retrospectively.

The construction of a single turn unit, through the reflexive formulation in the second part, is fundamental to all newsgroup interaction. When a person answers a message they always make a part of the original relevant by quoting it and ‘answering’ it in some way (continue it, oppose it, etc.). We might say that the text in the original is dead until the second person re-creates it as relevant and noteworthy (The ‘ongoing-ness’ of a newsgroup interaction is instigated in every next turn - Garfinkel [9]). That is, by singling out a particular line through a quoting mechanism the line becomes the first part of an adjacent structure that is, in turn, completed by the inserting of new text.

This is similar to what Conversation Analysts call the ‘second turn proof procedure’ [12]. What stands as an *analytical point* in CA appears to manifest itself as an active practice in newsgroup interaction. CA researchers do not trust their own reading but look to see how the other participants read what has just been said or done in an interaction. Likewise text in a newsgroup message does not have a particular character until it is answered or responded to. In newsgroup interaction is that participants actively utilize the indexicality of language to achieve their own ends. They reflexively construct previous text as a relevant turn unit in their ‘answering’.

What is clear – and often taken for granted - is that newsgroup activity is characterized by sequential integrity. That is messages are constructed in such a way as to exhibit both relational (between messages) and internal (in the text of messages) features that mimic and respect sequential ordering. Where this is not the case there is accountable marking of messages. These features are explainable in terms of local management of interaction. That is the building of textual structures precipitated on contingent and immediate concerns. Specific editing devices are actively used by participants (as opposed to construed by the computer program) to facilitate these features.

**The participants’ orientation to the default.**

In an investigation of ‘rule-telling’ and newsgroup interaction, it was found that the sequential ordering of text was discussed and formulated by participants [23]. It was noticed for example that the placing of new text before the quoting of previous messages was construed as a breaking with convention.

This is borne out in a series of messages when a participant, identified as ‘Giles Jovoth’, reprimands another, called ‘Looney’. Looney has sent a message in which his the new text precedes the quoted text from the previous message. Giles Jovoth’s reprimand includes the following text:

**Example nine**

21	
22	1) You reply AFTER you quote
23	2) You only quote the previous message that
24	was relevant to what you are
25	replying not the ENTIRE message!!
26	
27	If you are going to post here, you are
28	going do it properly - GETTIT?
29	
30	GJ

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The next message in the sequence is interesting because it foregrounds the machinic aspect of ‘replying’. It is written by a new participant called ‘Jacqui’. The important lines are highlighted:

**Example ten**

25	>1) You reply AFTER you quote
26	>2) You only quote the previous message that
27	>was relevant to what you
28	>are
29	>replying not the ENTIRE message!!
30	
31	
32	<b>A lot of newsreaders (MSOE included) want</b>
33	<b>you to type at the top of the</b>
34	<b>message not the bottom. It is just one of</b>
35	<b>those things.</b> No need to
36	bite people's heads off. I'd sooner see
37	them reply at the top than
38	include every single attribution and posting

39	detail like some people
40	do... there is no need to include e-mail
41	addresses in quoted replies,
42	but - oh, *you* do it! Silly me, that must
43	be alright then. As to
44	quoting whole messages - sometimes it is
45	relevant, despite appearances.
46	There's nothing more annoying than one-line
47	replies that make no sense
48	at all (known as OLFs in some groups, and
49	likely to get you flamed)
50	because the poster has snipped almost an
51	entire post.

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The first point is then that the participant makes the computer program a relevant issue. She foregrounds the notion of the 'newsreader' application in general and gives a specific example

A lot of newsreaders (MSOE included) want you to type at the top of the message not the bottom (Example ten, lines 32-34)

By introducing the subject of newsreaders and ascribing a causal connection between the computer application and the action of the participant, Jacqui formulates a form of technological determinism. The newsreader 'want[s] you to type at the top' (line 32-33) which leaves the automatically quoted element at the bottom. This then contradicts Giles Jovoth's rule telling that the quoted element should precede the new text and that it is the responsibility of the previous participant to act this way. Jacqui, by introducing the machine, eradicates the *responsibility* of the participant by engaging the agency of the machine.

To summarize then, a message by Looney is criticized for employing a particular quoting technique – the placing of quoted elements after the new textual elements – by Giles Jovoth. This criticism is accomplished by a rule telling event that formulates correct behavior. This rule telling event however is undermined in part by the formulation of the automatic features of the computer program by Jacqui. The 'telling of the machine' works to alleviate the criticism of Looney by removing the responsibility to act in a particular way in this situation.

What this sequence shows is that even the default features of a computer application - in this case the automatic full 'quoting' of previous messages in a newsreader application - is open to interactional accountability. Whether the activity should be seen as a product of the machine – in some sense automatic and hence beyond individual responsibility and the appropriateness of chastisement – is a product of interaction. The 'machine telling' event works interactionally to address troubles, alleviate blame, and do a range of other interactional work.

This example brings to mind and supports the notion that the machine's presence in interaction should not be

presumed but instead should be seen in the activity of participation. That Giles Jovoth could criticize Looney and that the position of the quoted elements (however generated) could be a cause for concern and interactional work, shows that for the participants the automatic features of interaction in a newsgroup are far from presumed and set.

The research strategy, outlined above, presented the orientation to the default position as one determined by the writer. However such orientations are also seen in the text of the participants. The default position – the inclusion of a complete copy of the previous message – is oriented to in the above exchange between Jacqui and Giles. Giles ascribes full responsibility for the appearance (and ordering) of the quoted and typed elements to Looney, and so ignores the automatic functions of the newsreader. While Jacqui's evocation of the machine to alleviate human responsibility – in saying that different newsreaders place the quoted elements before or after the position of the new text – presumes and takes for granted that the machine will carry out the activity of quoting the previous message. Both Giles and Jacqui orient to the default position.

### Conclusion

This paper starts by considering the prevailing position in research into computer mediated textual interaction. The implicit comparison of this interaction with verbal communication was turned on its head and the conversational character of newsgroup messages was problematized. By tracing the contingent history of a conversation-like structure –the turn taking unit – various features were identified. These included the use of quoting mechanisms in the reflexive formation of turn units, as well as an assertion of transsituational principles of sequential integrity through the local management of interaction by participants. The result is an understanding of newsgroup activity in terms of empirically identifiable features of textual interaction.

These identifiable features can form an understanding from which future design efforts can emerge. Sequential integrity and the local management of interaction are foundational to the interaction. As with turn taking in verbal conversation, the construction of turn-taking units are indicative of the primary nature of local sequence management. That these processes are contingent and situated should warn against so-called 'plan based' design initiatives, and encourage design that recognizes human mechanisms of sense-making within the boundaries set by the application. With regard to the particular sense making practices here, design should enhance, rather than restrict, those human quoting mechanisms employed by the participants.

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