"For she who knows who she is:" Managing Accountability in Online Forum Messages

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The recent application of Conversation Analysis (CA) to online forum communication has been successful in explicating the sequential ties among messages. In this article, we build on those foundations and show how CA's illumination of the structural resources of interaction can provide an analysis of accountable action in an online forum setting. We report a case study to illustrate how a user, in carrying off a 'declaration of love,' attends to her accountability in posting such a message. We analyse the message's placement as an initiating first turn; its prefatory work as an announcement; its selection of next speaker; and its internal design as a turn-at-interaction. We show how these features are oriented to in the first message sent in response. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the usefulness of CA in illuminating users' orientation to the accountable norms of online behavior.

Introduction

Online forums (or newsgroups) are Internet locations in which people can read and post messages singly or in a developing "thread." Participation in forums has been studied within the broader social sciences mostly through a variety of ethnographic methods, including diary studies, interviews with users, participant observation, as well as through textual and content analysis (see Paccagnella, 1997, for a call for such research, and Miller & Slater, 2000, for an overview of the results). Such studies have been valuable in exploring the degree to which people use forums, among other media, in developing personal relations (very little, in a sample of U.S. college students, according to Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004); in describing the wider social meaning of forums, for example as communities (see, for example Baym, 1999, on communities of television soap opera fans, and Preece, 2000, for a general overview); in examining people's perceptions of the opportunities and limits that forums offer;

and in understanding users' expressed motivations for using forums (Núñez, Gálvez & Vayreda, 2002). Discursive methods have also begun to be used in the analysis of issues of identity in forums (see Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003). But the methods so far described do not capture the ways in which users perform recognisable social actions by exploiting those aspects of the medium that correspond to, or are variants of, the turn-taking and turn-design rules that obtain in face-to-face interaction.

Conversation Analysis is an examination of talk-in-interaction precisely developed to explicate how people bring off social actions through their talk (for overviews of CA, see Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999; and the original lectures of Harvey Sacks, issued as Sacks, 1992). Although developed for synchronous human interaction, CA has been profitably applied to various aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (see Herring, 2001, 2004, for overviews of CA's application along with other forms of discourse analysis). Within CMC the majority of CA work has been from the perspective of human-computer interaction (e.g., Frohlich, Drew, & Monk 1994), with a developing strand of work on quasisynchronous interaction such as chat rooms (e.g., Garcia & Jacobs, 1999). What CA brings to these communicative environments is a perspective on people's use of the interactional expectations of turn-taking, the sequential placement of messages, and their internal design. These have been identified by Conversation Analysis as the basic tools with which people construct their actions. Our aim in this article is to build on recent applications of CA to the nonsynchronous medium of the online forum (see Reed, 2001). Our aim is to show how CA illuminates *accountable action*—that is, how people make their messages achieve recognizable social and personal objectives while attending to the discursive perils attendant on any contribution to the social scene.

"Accountability" is a term which usefully crystalises the notion of normative responsibility, first articulated for the social sciences in Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (1967), and taken up expressly by Sacks in his early lectures (see, for example, his analysis of a telephone caller's accountability in giving his name; Sacks, Vol. 1, pp. 3–11; the very first of his lectures as posthumously published). Thereafter it is present in the various analytic practices inspired by Garfinkel and Sacks, whether CA or ethnomethodological. The idea is that in any interaction, participants do things for which an account might, in principle, be called for and given; things that "make sense" interactionally and in the moral order. This is not an analyst's fiction; it is visible in the behavior of participants themselves, as they design their talk and actions so as to avoid, or disarm, query or challenge. Participants sometimes orient very visibly to the challengeable status of what they are doing (e.g., in such formulae as "*this may be a funny question, but . . .*" or "*I'm not a racist, but . . .*"), but can (and routinely do) exploit more subtle aspects of talk in interaction to address, disarm, or flaunt their accountability.

Although accountability is a running thread in much ethnomethodological and CA work (see Heritage, 1984, chapter 6 on the early take-up after Garfinkel), perhaps the most focused work on accountability, as it is played out interactionally, has been done within the tradition of Discursive Psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Discursive Psychology takes an ethnomethodological and conversation-analytic view of phenomena traditionally thought to be "mental" and examined by experimentation and survey. Examples of this approach are the study of categorisation (Edwards, 1991), explanation (Antaki, 1994) and attitudes (Puchta & Potter, 2004). Although the topical focus is determinedly on "psychological" matters, its close inspection of talk in interaction, and its reliance on (and contribution to) CA's conceptual apparatus, aligns Discursive Psychology with the Sacksian traditions of Conversation Analysis.[3] With respect to accountability, the general tenor of Discursive Psychology work is to see how, in the details on the interaction, the participants achieve their business while attending to the dangers involved.

To our knowledge, there is only one examination of forum postings that systematically attends to issues of accountability, and it is within the Discursive Psychology tradition. Lamerichs and te Molder's (2003) study investigates how the users of a forum for people suffering depression discursively manage their identities. As Lamerichs and te Molder note, posting a message to a forum exposes the poster (as any utterance does for any interactant) to the challenges of coming across appropriately and accountably. In the case they study, it exposes the user to the challenge of displaying being "depressed" in appropriate ways, while also acting as a supportive forum user. Lamerichs and te Molder's concentration on the content of forum messages (principally, users' deployment of descriptions of emotions, and their invocation of different category identity labels), however, means that they pay comparatively scant attention to the ways in which users exploit the structural features of forums (the opportunities, for example, to initiate threads, to address given recipients, to respond selectively to elements of previous posts, and so on) in order to attend to accountability issues. In this article, we focus intensively on these structural features of communication, for which Conversation Analysis provides a powerful conceptual apparatus.

Data and Analysis

Our data come from a Spanish-language Web-based Internet forum chosen to represent structural features typical of mainstream forums current at the time (early 2004). Our conceptual tools are already established—we are looking at the kind of interactional features identified by Conversation Analysis—and we mean to explicate how they are exploited in a given environment, so a "single-case" approach is in order. This single-case logic is familiar from Sacks' early lectures (Sacks, 1992) and is well established in CA; see, for example, its defence by Schegloff (1987), and Schegloff's use of the approach to exemplify what CA reveals that a Goffmanian analysis would not (Schegloff, 1988). For a more general extended defence of single-case studies in CA, see Hutchby and Woofffitt (1998, chapter 5).

We will first give a simple synopsis of the messages that are the focus of this article, without any characterisation or analysis for the moment. The messages appear on a public, Web-based Spanish-language newsgroup, accessed in winter

2004.[4] The portal www.ya.com gives free access, among many other services, to a portal for newsgroups (*foros*) at http://foros.ya.com/. Once at their chosen forum, users can read or post a message (asynchronously). Below, we will say more about how one navigates to the specific forum, and thence to the messages we will be studying, but for the moment we need only describe them briefly: "Lourdes" posts a message with the subject line: "For she who knows who she is;" the message itself is brief but contains a poem of several verses. This message initiates a thread, that is, it is sent in by the user as a new posting, and is available to others as the reference for further postings. It is followed up by posts from others, but, in the time frame of our sample, there is no response from the ostensible target of the declaration. Of these subsequent posts, we concentrate on the first (message 2, in the latter part of the article).

This article is organized schematically as follows: First, we describe how one gets to the particular messages that we take for analysis. The bulk of the article is then spent going through a line-by-line analysis of the first message, starting with how it is indexed in the list of available threads, and ending with its author's parting salutation. Along the way, we note how the author (who we shall refer to as "she," in line with the author's online identity) mobilizes various communicative practices to attend to her accountability as a contributor to the forum. The last part of the analysis is of the first response; we see how it vindicates, in the participant's own terms, the analysis we provided of the original message.

Message 1. The Thread-Initiating Message

First Appearance: Its Subject Line in a List
The issue of what context to provide the reader is fraught with problems (see the debate between Billig, 1999; Schegloff, 1997, 1999; and Wetherell 1998). Here we feel it is appropriate to tell the reader what the reader of this set of forum postings must have seen on their way to be exposed to the messages that we analyse. We reserve judgment, however, until and unless the participants make it relevant, on whether any of this preliminary material is germane to the understanding of the messages.

On joining the Spanish-language www.ya.com general portal, we navigate to the Foro (*forum*) section (http://foros.ya.com/). Of the many families of such forums available, we select Miscelánea (*Miscellany*) which, on loading, is described as: "de todo un poco: conspiraciones, chistes, teléfonos móviles, rumores, etc." (*A bit of everything: conspiracies, jokes, mobile phones, rumors, etc*). This category has many subdivisions, of which we select the one with the most posts. This is called "Vivir, compartir y crecer"[5] (*Living, sharing, and growing*) and is described as "Para lesbianas con arrugas en la piel y sin arrugas en el cerebro; entra con nick, participa y comparte con respeto, gracias." (In capitals throughout in the original). This translates as *For lesbians with wrinkled skin but unwrinkled brain: enter with nickname, participate and share with respect, thanks.*

Within this subsection there is a list of current threads, each identified by a header followed by an indented listing of "responses" (that is, messages that were

posted using the automatic resource of "replying" to a message). At this point we only see the subject line of messages. One of these initiator messages has a header that reads:[6]

> Para "ella que sabe quién es," de Lourdes [escrito] 15.37 hoy [autor] Invitado
> *For "she who knows who she is," from Lourdes [written] 15.37 today[author] Guest*

Note that the "*For "she who knows who she is," from Lourdes*" component has been written by the user; the rest of the header is generated automatically. It informs the reader that the message was written (posted) at 15.37 on that day, and authored by "Guest"—that is, that the poster logged on as a guest, and either does not have, or did not use, her or his stored forum login name.

This is the message, and the thread, we take for analysis. The analysis can start just here; the material in the subject line is under the user's control and is available for analysis by any reader.

Sequential Placement of the Message
Perhaps the most central contribution that CA has made to the study of language in interaction is to display the power of the sequential placement of messages, or turns at talk. The concepts of the adjacency pair and of sequential implicativeness (both in Schegloff & Sacks, 1967) were among the earliest contributions to the developing armory of CA. In equating messages on newsgroups with turns at talk, we are following what is now an emerging thread in CA accounts of CMC; see, for example, Herring (1999) and, with specific reference to forums, Reed (2001). Here we have a message, or turn, that is designed to be not immediately relevant to an existing thread. Being placed so as to come first in a potential thread provides for a message not being understood (or at least, not without further evidence) as part of some pre-existing business. What are the implications of this?

A "permitted" new action. In forums, starting a move that launches a new action has a different set of implications from face-to-face (FTF) or other synchronous and copresent media such as telephone conversation (TC). In FTF and TC the need to establish contact before launching some further action means that it is impossible for a speaker to combine, without incurring a set of implications, the launch of the interaction itself and a new piece of business within it. Opening routines (Sacks, 1992) have developed so as to synchronise participants' attention to the fact that an interaction has begun, and only then can the business of the interaction meaningfully be broached. What seem to be exceptions, where a speaker apparently starts something "cold," turn out to be cases where there has been some temporary suspension of previous activity (e.g., a phone call temporarily abandoned; Hopper, 1992) or a long-standing communicative relationship established (e.g., a joint task involving long periods of silence, as in flight cockpits; see Nevile, 2004). It is open, of course, for a speaker to knowingly exploit the expectation that joint intersubjectivity must be sought before actions are launched, and to signal that what they are doing over-rides just that convention (e.g., in shouting "Fire!"). In FTF and TC, then, if they

make a start without preamble, speakers run the risks of implying overriding and urgent need.

In forums, on the other hand, the opt-in quality of the medium means that if the reader has reached any given message, then he or she must already have engaged with the medium and be ready to be addressed. There can be no equivalent of an interruption like a shout of "Fire" (the only such possibility would be for the system administrator to break in, in real time, but to do so would be precisely to negate the normal logic of the forum). The logic of the medium is that messages are sought out: One does not stumble upon them, or receive them unbidden (as is the case, say, in e-mail). The content of a forum message might be novel, or its author unexpected, but the reader has positively navigated to a position where he or she can see it. The poster, then, does not run the implication of sounding as if she is overriding the norm of establishing contact with your hearer before launching an action. She will not sound (at least, not on this basis) "abrupt" or "impertinent" and so on.

How does this color the action? Recall that we want to understand not just how the user manages the structural affordances of the medium, but how she actually carries off some consequential action. One important element of what she is doing here is managing her *accountability*, and this is the theme we pursue throughout our analysis.

Consider an interactant's accountability in opening a topic. What we are seeing in Lourdes' message is that she is taking advantage of the comparative *non*accountability of posting her message as an unoccasioned first-in-a-thread. In posting as she does, she is not doing something especially accountable or challengeable. In the self-selecting environment of a forum, a first-start turn is not especially vulnerable to criticism or query. In FTF or TC it would come across as signaling overriding urgency, for which she would indeed be accountable. She would have to deal with implications of abruptness or even rudeness. Here she does not. She can assume (or be taken to act as if assuming) that the reader has navigated positively to this point, and that she is licensed to do what she now does.

The text in the "subject." Recall that the header reads:

Para "ella que sabe quién es," de Lourdes [escrito] 15.37 hoy [autor] Invitado
For "she who knows who she is," from Lourdes [written] 15.37 today [author] Guest

In the part of this header that is under the user's control, she has formatted her ostensible "subject" merely as a nomination of an addressee (*"she who knows who she is"*) and explicitly identifies the sender (*from Lourdes*). Again we ask: What does CA, with its insights about the sequential organisation of turn-taking, reveal about what this is doing? There are three aspects to the way it works: its design as an announcement, its nomination of a selected (but un-named) addressee, and its ambivalent provision for a response. We take these in turn.

An announcement of a message to one person. Lourdes announces to whom her message is addressed (*For "she who knows who she is"*). Let us leave aside for

a moment the issue of who that person is. Consider just the issues of accountability that are relevant when a message is advertised as being "for" one of a number of possible hearers. Here it is useful to compare this with the situation in face-to-face interaction. In FTF, if a speaker announces, to a general group, that an upcoming spate of talk is intended for a limited (indeed, single) recipient, then the group can take it to be private and absent themselves, or, on the other hand, merely "rhetorical," and stay. But the speaker can monitor what they do, and proceed or not, accordingly. To illustrate with a fictional example, a mother may, around the dinner table, point to one of the children and say, "I have something to say to you, young man." The others round the table may take this as being exclusive to that child, and begin to leave the table, or display nonrecipiency in other ways. But this can be monitored by the mother, who may call them back if she had been (say) intending to admonish one child in full view of the others. Alternatively, the family might take her announcement to be the preface to a public scolding, and stay to watch the fun, but, if the mother means in fact to speak to the child privately, she will delay her message until the others are gone. The point is that, in FTF, an announcement of a message for just one of a group of hearers forces the others to visibly opt in or visibly opt out. The announcer monitors this and proceeds accordingly. If the mother goes ahead and scolds the child even while the others are there, she is accountable for it: She cannot plead ignorance of who was listening.

But in the textual medium of the forum, the readers are invisible; the poster has no sanction over the presence of the audience in front of the screen, and so no control over whether they read the message or not. No *control*; but also, therefore, no responsibility. Anyone who goes on to open Lourdes' subsequent message does so under the proviso that it was announced as being directed at a certain person. Lourdes is not then liable for any adverse reaction to it on the part of a reader who is not that specified recipient. Whatever her messages turn out to be, Lourdes has protected herself from at least the charge that it was inappropriately private: unlike the mother who is accountable for delaying her scolding of one child until the others had left the table, Lourdes cannot see who is around to receive her message, and so cannot be held accountable for proceeding with it. She is exploiting a feature of the medium to achieve "safe" interactional grounds for proceeding.

The identification of the sender. Notice that the forum software automatically reveals the author; in this case, this message was (as far as the software is concerned) written by a "Guest:"

> Para "ella que sabe quién es," de Lourdes [escrito] 15.37 hoy [autor] Invitado
> *For "she who knows who she is," from Lourdes [written] 15.37 today [author] Guest*

In other words, this user chose to log on either without subscribing officially to the forum or by forgoing her established username, if she had one. She could have maintained this anonymity, but she chooses to break it by specifying, in the subject line, who her message is from. What does that do?

To answer that, note the substance of the subject line. The sender has defined not its topic or content, but its ostensible addressee: "*she who knows who she is*." But this nomination is unspecific; it is not a name or description that would publicly identify the intended reader. If it is to work, the user must do something to make it obvious who that is. It is in that environment that *de Lourdes* operates. This very explicit, nonautomatic self-identification provides the recipient—before opening up the yet-unseen message, which might offer yet more evidence—at least some, and perhaps enough, information to work out who he or she must be.

Again we notice an important difference with FTF, which Lourdes is exploiting. In FTF, it is not normally possible for a speaker to give such a controlled indication of who she is. Were Lourdes to have launched this very same announcement among a co-present group of people, its source would be obvious; her identification is available on sight.[7] In the forum medium, greater control is possible within the available textual limits (of course, the subject line only allows so many characters, and it does not allow photographs, and so on). She has avoided her normal username (if she has one) in order to exert still greater control.

Perhaps the implication to draw is that the person who she wants to read this message doesn't know Lourdes by her username, or not just by her username; perhaps "Lourdes" is a name she reserves for talking with just this one special person on the forum. In any case, using "Lourdes" implies that the name alone is *enough* for the appropriate recipient to make the correct identification. In other words, it implies that "she who knows who she is" must already have some knowledge of who Lourdes is, and that knowledge is enough to make her understand that Lourdes means the message for her. Of course, we do not know that there *is* actually such a person, or that she in fact would recognize herself as the intended recipient of the message; we (and the online readers) know only that Lourdes has designed her message on that basis. Lourdes has exploited the features of public hinting and controlled self-identification, not available to her in FTF. In doing so, she has constructed an ostensible recipient who may or may not exist, and who may or may not recognise herself, something which, in FTF, would require an extremely unusual set of circumstances to make sense.

The ambivalent provision for a response. There is one further, and perhaps crucial, feature of the forum environment that Lourdes is exploiting. Unlike the case in FTF, where the audience is visibly present, the readership of the forum, at any one time, is unknown. It is a feature of the system that no one can be sure that any given user will ever visit the site again, or read this message even if they do visit it. That is not true of anything spoken aloud in the presence of co-acting others in FTF: They would be expected to be attentive and, unless they wanted to look as if they were "ignoring" what you said, would be expected to give reasons such as temporary distraction and so on. Indeed, the same logic applies in online chat-rooms; see Rintel, Pittam, and Mulholland (2003), for a CA account of users' treatment of nonresponses. In the forum environment, making an announcement is far less risky than making it in FTF, as nonresponse can be explained away by attributing it to nonresponders not

having seen the message. Lourdes' invitation to "she who already knows who she is," then, cannot be snubbed if "she who knows who she is" does not reply. Silence in FTF is attributable and meaningful; in the newsgroup, since there is no guarantee that the intended recipient has actually read the message, it can be explained away. Lourdes' announcement, then, whatever it is, is far less risky than it would be in FTF.

Summary of Implications of the Message Subject Line
All the features we have listed point in the same direction—the user is using the interactional affordances of the medium to project her upcoming message as requiring work to make it "safe" in interactional terms. Let us now see what this message is.

The Message Itself: Lines 1 to 5
Supposing that the reader has clicked on the message header above, with all its implications of announcing a message which has needed advance work to protect accountability. She/he then sees a page of material. We will examine it line by line, again concentrating on how it is that the message exploits the kind of conversational structures identified by CA.

> Line 1 Autor: **invitado**
> Line 2
> Line 3 **Para "ella que sabe quién es," de Lourdes** 15.37 hoy
> Line 4
> → Line 5 Para ella, que ya sabe quién es, con todo mi amor
>   *For she, who already knows who she is, with all my love*

(Bold in original. Line numbers added by authors. The English translation in this and subsequent extracts has been added by the authors.)

The first four lines are generated automatically and simply reproduce information displayed on the previous screen—the (logon) identity of the author of the message, the time posted, and the subject line given by the poster. Let us turn then to line 5 (arrowed).

Further specification of the announcement. Lourdes repeats the announcement in the message subject line, with one small change (the insertion of "*already*" in "*she who already knows who she is*" and one large one: the addition of "*with all my love.*" The small change first: *already* confirms the obvious implication of the subject line, that is, that there is one person who will recognise herself as being the intended addressee. (Of course, as we noted before, there is no guarantee that the person Lourdes has "in mind" does indeed "already" know that Lourdes thinks of her this way.)

"*With all my love*" is a salutation that has a conventional form, but, if it is to be used at all, is usually reserved for the end of messages; putting it at the start encourages a less formulaic reading. By prefacing the message "with all my love," Lourdes keys the reader into understanding the subsequent material in a certain way. Whatever it will be, it is being offered with all her love. Such prefaces are powerful devices in talk. One of Sacks' first discoveries was of the routine power of prefaces

(in his pioneering case, story prefaces) to do a number of interactional things, not all of which translate into the non-synchronous environment of the online forum. One important feature that does translate, however, is the power of the preface to signal to next speaker what sort of class of eventual reaction would be consistent with the material in the upcoming story, laughter, wry appreciation, sympathy and so on (see Sacks, 1992, e.g., vol. 1 p. 682; vol. 2 p. 10ff).

This helps us see what Lourdes' announcement accomplishes. As a preface, it sets a key for what sort of responses will be appropriate, namely, to be consistent with the positive emotion implied by offering someone something with all one's love. At this point Lourdes specifies what it is that she is offering "with all her love:" a poem.

Analysis of Lines 6–54

> Line 6
> Line 7 La noche en la isla
> Line 8
> Line 9 Toda la noche he dormido contigo
> Line 10 junto al mar, en la isla.
>
>> *Night on the island*
>>
>> *All night I slept with you*
>> *next to the sea, on the island*
>
> [. . .]
> Line 54 (Pablo Neruda (1904–1973)

(We have not reproduced the body of the poem here, although it appears in the original post. Once again we have added line numbers and an English translation.)

Because the object being brought into the action is being produced as a cultural artifact—a quotable poem—CA needs at this point to turn to a broader-based discourse analysis; that is, one that "reads" or interprets cultural symbols as such. Here we confess that we are on unfamiliar ground. But we might observe that the poem gives every sign of being what would count (to us, as members of the culture) as a conventional "love poem:" just at first sight, it is "about" the writer's romantic reflections on sleeping with a lover. A member would, we submit, read it as "yearning," "tender" and so on. A conventional love poem, then, offered to "she who knows who she is."

Quoting another's words. We are on stronger ground when we observe what the poem is *not*; that is, it is being set up as manifestly not the poster's own words. Quotation of others, especially of verbatim (or ostensibly verbatim) speech, is a powerful device in talk (see, for example, Holt 1996; see also Buttny, 2004, especially chapters 4 and 5, and the new collection edited by Holt & Clift, forthcoming). One of the strongest features of quotation is that, by attributing words to a third party, the speaker disavows personal accountability for the exact words used (though

the speaker is of course accountable for the decision to quote at all). This unaccountability is still more true when the quoted material is a poem in the public domain: For one thing, a poem is conventionally somewhat opaque (this poem, for example, does not actually say "I love you"); for another, even it were absolutely unambiguous, it is nevertheless "poetic" and therefore conventionally nonliteral. So Lourdes can get across the *spirit* of her message without being actually accountable for the words being used; they are those of a third party, and expressed in a not-to-be-taken-literally poem.

Analysis of Lines 55 to the End

So far we have seen Lourdes set up, while protecting her interactional accountability, a romantically-loaded "offering" to a single, but not publicly specified, recipient. She ends her message with the following lines (which follow on immediately from the lines described above):

Line 55
Line 56
Line 57 Para ti, que ya sabes quien eres, mi amor, de tu Lourdes.
Line 58 (con perdón de todo el personal de este foro).

> For you, who already know who you are, my love, from your Lourdes.
> (with apologies to all the members of this forum).

As is common in turns which have begun with a preface, this one ends with a restatement of the opening material (see Header and line 5) that signals that what the preface promised has been delivered (in FTF and telephone interaction, this restatement can be a way of signaling the end of such turns, and the upcoming requirement for next speaker to take the floor in the appropriate way; see, for example Sacks' account of the transition point for "second stories," 1992, vol. 2 p. 11).

Lourdes takes the opportunity offered in the restatement to add some extra material: the recipient of the message is now addressed as *my love*, and the message is cast as from *your* Lourdes. These are two embellishments which, in the context just established of a love poem, serve to personalise the general message of the poem. If there is love "in the air," then it is to this addressee, from someone who feels confident enough of it to style herself as "yours." Lourdes does not actually have to pronounce the words "I love you." We are seeing, once again, how she exploits the context she herself has set up, to freight a line with a charge which may remain unstated in so many words.

Nominated Recipient and a Last Orientation to Accountability
The reprise of *For you, who already know who you are, my love,* nominates the (self-identifying) addressee of Lourdes' declaration as the relevant next speaker. Yet Lourdes signs off with a change of register. She turns from a message ostensibly

addressed to one person to address the forum members as a whole, and "beg their pardon." In doing so she makes clear that she is aware of the possible accountability of using this broadcast medium to send an ostensibly narrow-cast message. Displaying an awareness to one's accountability is to disarm accusations of thoughtlessness and lack of care. Paradoxically, of course, it also calls attention to the to-be-accounted-for nature of the message that Lourdes is in the process of sending, and in that sense furthers her project of getting a delicate social action on record while doing as much as the medium allows to render herself unaccountable in doing so. That action, we have come to see, is the offer of a love poem—conventionally, a declaration of love.

Summary of Lourdes' Message

Lourdes has, we have argued, designed her turn so that it delivers a delicate message while protecting itself against challenges to her accountability in starting a thread, in broaching a personal message, and in ostensibly addressing one recipient in a medium where multiple recipients would see it. She signs off with an implication that the proper, provided-for response would be from that one recipient. That is the context in which a next message is to be read.

Message 2: The First "Re:" Response

So far we have analysed the message that initiated the thread. In the rest of the article we concentrate on the first of the responses: that is, the one signaled by the forum's automatic timing of message-receipt as the first message to be posted using the "with reference to" ("Re:") facility.[8] We reproduce it below:

line 1 Autor: **London_derry**
line 2
line 3 Re: Para "ella sabe quién es," de Lourdes 15.39 Hoy
line 4
line 5 Vaya manera de ponernos los dientes largos, chiquilla. . . . Poz
line 6 ná, a aguantarse, digo!!!!
line 7 muakis a las dos.

> *What a way to make us green with envy, girlie . . . well,*
>
> *we're gonna have to live with it, I guess!!!!*
> *kissy-kiss to both of you.*

We will spend less time on this message, as we want only to call attention to the way that it ratifies our CA reading of what was being done in Lourdes' original (and how it does something further in its own right, as turns always do). We concentrate on two aspects: the user's understanding of who it was that Lourdes had nominated as next speaker, and her understanding that Lourdes' message had been designed to come across as a hedged, but nonetheless personally directed, declaration of love.

Managing the Accountability of Next Turn-Taker

The first issue that the message has to address is the accountability of its sequential placement, coming at a point where what has been (ostensibly) provided for is a response from "she who knows who she is." Unless the message is marked as not coming from that person, it will run the risk of being assumed to come from her. We see that this user orients to that immediately with the use of the first person plural in the phrase "*What a way to make us green with envy, girlie.*" The "us" must refer to the readership at large, and cannot be the single indicated respondent ("she who knows who she is"). This user is not that person, and has taken care to make that clear. In so doing she has oriented to the implication in Lourdes's message that there is such a person as *she who knows who she is*, and that that person might well be expected to provide a reply.

Ratifying What Lourdes has Done

This message uses conversational features, familiar from the CA and discursive psychology canon, to ratify the reading of Lourdes' original message as being a declaration of love, hedged though it was. We offer an analysis of four such features: adjacency pairs, selective description, speaker identity, and idiomatic expression. We deal with each separately in an abbreviated analysis below.

   Adjacency pairs. In CA terms, we can think of messages coming in "adjacency pairs:" the first part will call up a certain kind of second part (for the origin of the concept in CA, see Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson's classic paper, 1974; for a recent general account, see Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, chapter 2). Questions call up answers, greetings call up reciprocal greetings, invitations call up acceptances or rejections, and so on. Here, recall that London_derry has put this as the first phrase of her message: "*What a way to make us green with envy, girlie . . .* " This treats Lourdes' message as the kind of first part that calls up *appreciation* as an appropriate second part. Consider what else London_derry might have done. She might have responded instead with something like "I support Lourdes' use of the forum for a personal message" or its opposite, which would have treated Lourdes' message as begging for pardon; Lourdes did after all sign off to that effect (see line 58, in Lourdes' message, above). By sending an appreciation, she signals her understanding that the crux of the message is indeed its status as an announcement, or declaration—an "appreciable."

   Choice of description. We observed that Lourdes' message was careful to deliver her declaration without actually pronouncing the words "I love you." London_derry orients to this discretion by not, herself, making Lourdes' implied love for "she who knows who she is" explicit. Rather, she refers to what is going on as being something enviable, something *to make us green with envy*. In this version, Lourdes' agency is deleted, and the precise nature of what is enviable is glossed over. One intriguing reading that has been suggested to us is that London_derry's *envy,* by its very positivity, presumes that Lourdes' love is either requited, or has a fair chance of being so (it would hardly be enviable otherwise). What London_derry puts into play here, we think, is an implied narrative of events; what Edwards (1994) calls a "script formulation." This is a cultural story that any member of a culture can mobilize

(indirectly and implicitly) in order to convey a raft of implications. Here the implications are those that can be drawn from Lourdes' situation being a romantic (rather than a tragic) one: To put it in more vivid terms, London_derry casts Lourdes in the script of (say) *As You Like It* and not *Romeo and Juliet*. This is a good-news receipt; that is, an assessment of the first message as providing for a positive response, whether, of course, it "objectively" does so or not.

Speaker identity. By using the first person plural, London_derry takes on the identity of a representative of "the forum;" so when she treats Lourdes' actions positively, she is asserting the general acceptability of Lourdes' actions, not just to London_derry herself, but to anyone who could reasonably be understood to be included in "*us*." This addresses once again Lourdes' multiple efforts to guard against criticism, and to deliver an acceptable message. London_derry is protecting what the discursive psychologists Edwards and Potter (1992) would call Lourdes' "stake and interest" in her initial message—her vulnerability to be seen to have a specific, personal agenda and to be pursuing her own interests.

Use of an idiomatic expression. London_derry's sign-off with *we're just gonna have to live with it I guess* is a good example of what Holt and Drew (1988, 1998) describe as the terminating use of an idiom. According to these authors, idioms, by their generality and axiomatic quality, are a powerful means of bringing a spate of action to an end; they are "unanswerable" both literally and metaphorically. To "just have to live with something" is a fatalistic expression that has no answer and cannot (easily) be challenged or denied. Of course one *could* do other than "live with it," but to say so would require explanation and debate, treating London_derry's words as more serious than they are.

Summary of the First "RE:" Message

We inspected this first "RE:" message to see whether it ratified our reading of the original to which it responded. We found that it did orient to the implications that we identified in Lourdes' message. It treated it as an announcement meant for one person, delivered in such a way as not to make the announcer liable to criticism either for the timing, design or content of the message; indeed, it ratified the appropriateness of the message, in spite of the multiple dangers that it had navigated. Moreover, in responding to the message as if it contained something to be envious of, it gave it an up-beat, good-news spin, perhaps to the point of mobilising a romantic script-formulation (Edwards, 1994). In other words, a fellow user of the forum displayed her understanding of just those aspects of Lourdes' message that we had identified as riding on the exploitation of sequential placement, speaker nomination, and turn design.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to illuminate the Spanish forum users' exploitation of the interactional "grammar" of the medium to handle their status as accountable

communicators. In a case study of an initial message and its first response, we saw how a user could accomplish a "declaration of love," and how this social achievement was ratified by a subsequent user. Our analysis concentrated on the participants' displayed concern with *accountability*, a term well established in the ethnomethodological and CA literature, and introduced into work on forums by Lamerichs and te Molder (2003). Where Lamerichs and te Molder based their analysis on a discursive reading of the content of message posts (the lexical choices made and the deployment of category labels and their associated activities), we kept more strictly to an analysis in terms of users' exploitation of structural features of the medium.

We saw how the user who posted the initiating message exploited the forum's deletion of copresent interactional expectations requiring conversational moves to be "occasioned" by previous talk. She set up a message that would not be interactionally accountable, neither for its placement, its content, its implicit nomination of next speaker nor, indeed, for the possible absence of uptake by its intended recipient. All these, of course, are highly sensitive and accountable when what is on the table is hearable as a "declaration of love." Using the expectable implications of the forum's turn-taking system, and importing existing conversational interactional expectations from face-to-face interaction, allowed the user to accomplish her work economically and obliquely.

Looking at how users attend to the accountability of their messages is, we think, a useful perspective on a range of online phenomena. Most immediately for those who already apply Conversation Analysis to CMC, the notion of accountability puts social flesh on the sequential skeleton which is currently the main focus of CA work in online forum messages (along with the problems such messages can experience; see Reed, 2001). For CMC research more broadly, an illuminating contrast can be made between the analytical language we have been using here, and the different analytical techniques thus far used to study such online phenomena as (to take three prominent examples) identity, netiquette, and appropriate usage, and authenticity. The bulk of research has tended towards the use of surveys, user interviews, or interpretative readings of the content of online postings. While there is a great deal to be learned from such methods, they are to some degree dependent on the standard dangers of self-report and of imputing hidden motivations and ambitions to users. Moreover, they miss the sense the participants' postings make in, as it were, their own terms: that is, in the accountability that the participants display and (in subsequent messages) ratify.

Accounts based on interviews, or on informants' descriptions of what they understand to be the sensitivities, risks, and dangers of online interaction, or on surveys of such perceptions, or participant observation of them at first hand, must perforce be limited to what informants have an adequate vocabulary to express. Paradoxically, the rules of interactional exchange uncovered by CA, though fully mastered by every competent user of the language and the medium, may not be readily articulatable. They are performable skills, but not necessarily expressible

knowledge.[9] So while we see a Lourdes exploit the first-position placement of a turn at talk to launch an announcement without risk of seeming to break up whatever other business the forum has in hand, and gain the corresponding advantage of setting the terms of the thread that may follow, we doubt that she would be conscious of what she was doing in quite those terms. Her terms would be normative and retrospective, and be illuminating about her theory of online practices, and about the terms in which she and her community thought of them, but those accounts are not so much explanations of what she does as further data, themselves available for analysis.[10]

Our hope is that this study can take its place alongside those studies of online forums, and of CMC in general, that attempt to get at what people do through the more traditional means of self-report or by semiotic or discursive interpretation of the content of messages. The kind of work we exemplify here offers a means of triangulating the findings of researchers in the different traditions: If ethnographic interview suggests that users are conscious of not offending local rules of etiquette, for example, CA can confirm this empirically and show in detail how users manifest the rules and protect themselves against challenges that they have offended against them. Or, if participant observation suggests that the feeling of being anonymous while online allows users to attempt social moves they would normally avoid, CA can show if even such normally illicit moves nevertheless play to systematic rules of engagement. More radically, CA may uncover users' displays of accountability that are not available from interview accounts, by user survey, or by participant observation: What users display to each other, in the detail of the organisation of their turns, may be the prime site where online meaning is made visible.

Notes

1 The authors form the Almibar group. Order of authorship of this article is alphabetical.
2 For a general account of Discursive Psychology's program, see Potter (2003) and Potter and Edwards (2003).
3 For more on the relation between Discursive Psychology and CA, see Wooffitt (2005, ch. 6).
4 The forum we refer to here is no longer accessible.
5 This forum has not been accessible on the ya.com list since October 2004.
6 The English translations of the Spanish text are provided by the authors of this article.
7 Controlling "who one is" in the face of on-sight recognisability is itself a significant interactional achievement; see Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) for a general set of reading on identities in interaction, and Drew (1989) on the management of "recognition."
8 It is not, however, the message displayed most contiguously in the list. The default on this forum is to order "RE:" messages by the most recent, so when there is more than one such message, the reader has to go to the bottom of the list to find the one that was closest in time to the original. This may or may not affect readers' order of exposure to messages in a thread, but we do not explore that issue here.

9   For a comprehensive recent discussion, from an ethnomethodological perspective, of the many issues involved in interview accounts, see ten Have (2004, chapter 4).

10 For a theoretically sophisticated exposition of the case for treating accounts as normative and interactional, rather than journalistic and report-oriented, see Edwards (1997, chapter 10).

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