

**Typing in comment sections: The production of meaning and sense on Facebook**

The self-explicative organisation of communication acts on and through Facebook

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### **Bio-notes**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the organisation of interaction through comments on the Social Networking Site Facebook. Facebook offers a range of affordances that allow communication between users. These include written language in various settings (messaging, commenting, posting), as well as a range of non-verbal resources, such as uploading photos, sharing links, the 'like'-button. Our analysis focuses on the post+commenting section, which users treat as a quasi-conversational space. Much as conversation is organised through the sequential unfolding of turns through time, the interaction in the comments section is organised according to a pattern that lets users 'make sense' of the communication as a coherent exchange. This *comment organising mechanism*, which is enacted through tying practices, operates on written language rather than spoken, thus it needs to accommodate different affordances than turn-taking does: it has to be able to co-ordinate verbal contributions not just through time, but through space as well. The theoretical significance of this research then is its exploration of a complex mechanism that is used by humans to maintain social order through writing and reading practices. In particular, it takes into account how the context of the website shapes people's communication through the resources made available.

## **Keywords**

tying, written language, Facebook comments, turn-taking, Social Networks, terms of address

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### **1. Introduction**

Conversations have many properties. From a sociological point of view, amongst the most interesting of these is how the structuring of the behaviour of those involved across time is managed by those involved. As Garfinkel and Sacks noted as long ago as 1970, conversations consist of various techniques that allow participants *themselves* to guide their own and others' actions. People use any turn-at-talk, for example, as a way of guiding future turns, and those who make those future turns will themselves refer to prior turns in such a fashion that the conversations they are participating in turn into jointly produced ensembles of orderly activities through time. One crucial technique in this patterning consists of the ties between one turn and another. This is not merely a mechanical or ritual property of conversations, however; it ensures that conversations are meaningful – and shown to be meaningful – to those involved. As Sacks puts it: “Tying an utterance to an utterance is the basic means of showing that you understood that utterance.” (1995: 718)

If this is the case for face-to-face conversation, then one reasonable question would be to see if and how other contexts of communicative acts afford similar techniques for the production of stable, meaningful actions through time, for tying in various ways. Communications on and through social networking systems could be a case in point. Up to now, a great deal of sociological and communications theoretic research

has looked at social networking sites as vehicles for social bonds (Baym 2010; Papacharissi 2011), for friendship (Ito et al. 2010) and other forms of collectivity (Castells 2009; Harper 2011), as well as investigated the type of content posted on these sites – the multimodal nature of that content being a particular topic for media studies (Farman 2012). But there has been, in our view, much less research looking at the ways interaction in and through social networking systems might create orderly systems of interaction that tie one turn to the next in a sequential patterning<sup>1</sup> that helps cohere the actions of the participants through time and, of course, since this is social networking systems, across space too.

In the first instance, an interest in these structures, turn-taking or otherwise, would not be in whether they mirror those evident in face-to-face conversation – a laudable topic in its own right – but rather, whether they exist and if so, how they produce predictable, coherent, accountable practices for the participants in the setting, the users of the social network. Key to this would be explaining how participants rely on these practices (acts of various kinds) as resources for interpreting any single communicative act such that subsequent (and prior) acts can be seen to make sense: at the minimum, as measures of, and guides for, orderly communicative conduct through time (even if the actual conduct of users reported through these acts of communication might themselves seem odd or inexplicable!).

This paper examines, in particular, *status updates* and, deriving from these, *comments* on Facebook to see whether there are such self-explicative resources. It seeks to identify tying practices between updates and comments in particular since these seem to be one of the more basic elements of structuring we are concerned with. The evidence it brings to bear shows that there are such tying practices and explains how they are used by people to make sense of each other's contributions in

the virtual world of Facebook. Thereby, this paper offers a first step towards identifying aspects of *status and comment organisation mechanisms* manifest in Facebook interactions, much as tying mechanisms function in face-to-face conversation. This will be shown as related to the functioning of turn-taking in face-to-face interaction.

Our methodology is in line with conversation analytic (CA) research in that it is not based on an intuitively derived, detached model of language structure. On the contrary, our observations are based on the sequential analysis of samples of actual language use on Facebook. This approach thus follows Watson's (1987) argumentation, who demonstrates that an oversimplified grammatical model is not sufficient to account for a "complex and interactionally delicate phenomenon" (284) that is conversation and communication between people.

For the purposes of this paper, our analysis will start with an initial act on Facebook, a social act that we will treat as prior and foremost, and which provides a field of play for all subsequent acts – and this is a *status update*. The acts subsequent to an update have a number of properties that can be described as structural mechanisms of sorts insofar as participants of the setting react to such updates in particular ways. Responses to status updates typically 'make sense' for example, or if this is not clear, then that itself becomes a reason for subsequent acts, acts which seek to clarify these prior acts. Acts that do not make sense would be, in this view, not obviously or evidently related to the initial posting. Some might have an ambiguity that make them seem like soliloquies that no-one understands because they refer to nothing before nor imply anything thereafter. Thus when we say structural mechanisms we are alluding to our assumption that there is a moral implicativeness in the way comments, 'likes' and sharings are treated as sequentially organised responses to

initial acts of status updating. Of course, just what these implicatures are beyond their mere sequential placement is key to our analysis<sup>2</sup>.

Amongst our concerns will be remarks on the systematic ways that users of Facebook:

- 1) identify who or what a comment is tied to and use this as a resource to guide their own commenting practices;
- 2) deal with and orient to the practical fact that users can self-select (i.e., themselves) to comment or 'like' and that this can make interpretation of those acts as being somehow tied to prior acts potentially ambiguous;
- 3) and how the above has implications for identifying and using as a known in common resource the apparent adjacency of acts such that users can infer what is prior and subsequent not just in terms of what is spatially displayed on Facebook but in terms of a meaningful arrangement of expressive acts in the 'real world'; that is to say in which virtual and embodied acts are treated as merely species of the same: as acts of various kinds.

All of this will allow some passing remarks on the implications these concerns have for the patterned form of topic management within and across comments and 'likes' and this, in turn, on the mutual production of the identity of creator and/or reactor to comments and 'likes'. As we say, we do not examine topic management in great detail, however.

## **2. A description of Facebook comments**

Facebook will be familiar to most readers if not all. Facebook profiles offer various opportunities for users to act. These include the ability to upload pictures, allowing users to create groups of connected individuals, and allowing users to post status updates, share photos, make hyperlinks between Facebook's and external web content (links), and comment on others' (and one's own) posts, etc. (see fig 1). All of these functions can be thought of as communication acts, in that Facebook users deploy them to get another's attention, whether it be in responding to another's post, sharing images and news with friends and family or just to anyone connected.

In many respects, the functionalities of Facebook are common-sensical, enabling users to behave in ways that they find resonate with their other communicative acts, though needless to say these acts have, in this setting, certain specific properties and constraints. Sharing with a friend face-to-face is evidently different from sharing Facebook with remote others through Facebook. Nor is Facebook just for remote communication; it can also be a resource for local interaction, when a user looks at elements, such as pictures and comments, together with others gathered around the screen. This too will have particular forms, though it will constitute a way of being together. These (and other uses) are not alien to everyday practices but then nor are they interpreted without regard to those practices – even if at times users find themselves lost in ways that seem particular to Facebook.



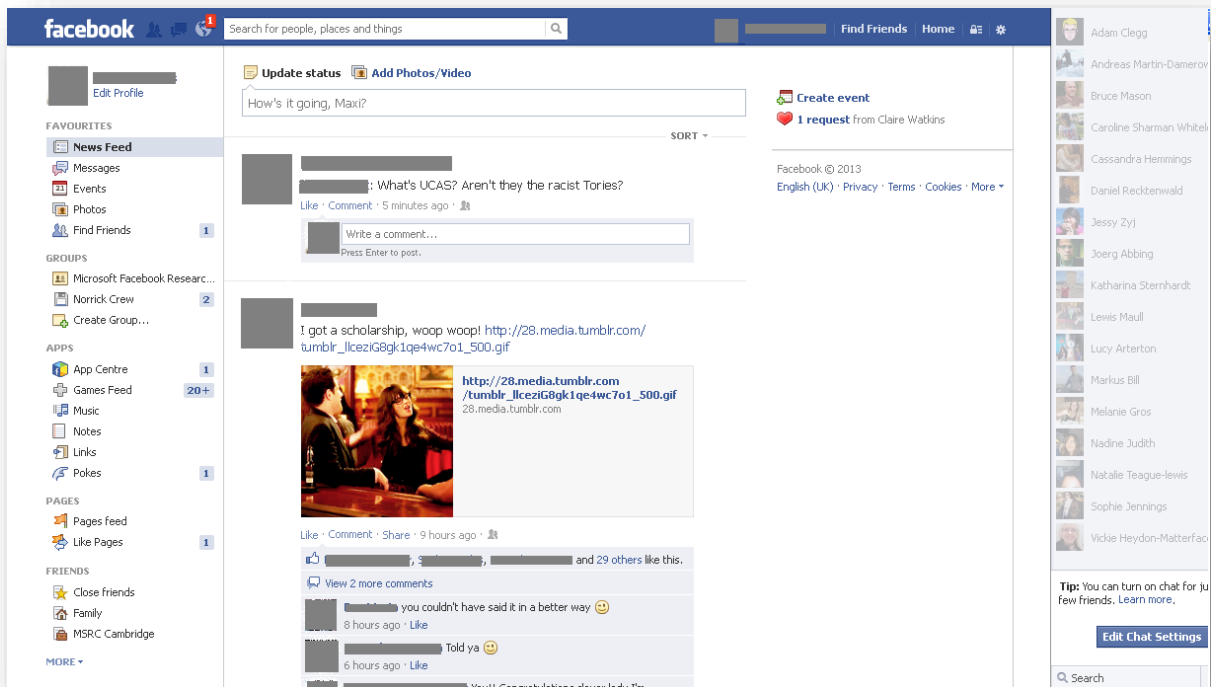


Figure 1: a screenshot of the newsfeed page that appears when a Facebook user first logs on, or when clicking on *Home* in the upper right hand corner.

In general, however, acts on Facebook have a common sense form which provides some degree of self-explicativeness. A comment or a 'like' is treated by users as more or less always representing a reaction to another user's activity on Facebook for example, rather than being a meaningless posting of words. Comments appear underneath the posts they relate to (as opposed to original posts, which appear independently, organised through a design feature known as *timeline*, or alternatively the *newsfeed*, cf. Figure 1) and this spatial relation is used by people as a common sense key to understand their connection: what was first is commonsensically above what comes after, for example.

Nevertheless, the fact that common-sense knowledge is used to make sense of acts on Facebook does not mean that making such interpretations is always easy or for that matter correct. Indeed the phrase common sense elides some of the difficulties

that can entail when people post and comment on Facebook. In certain respects, people have to put work into their interpretation of Facebook acts, just as they have to put work into their own to ensure that others will properly understand what was meant in any instance. Furthermore, just as they have to do so, so others will in turn. In this sense Facebook use is, somehow, a jointly achieved collaborative enterprise of meaning making. This work is not special or entirely of a twenty-first century kind; it is at once constitutive of users' interaction with the system and typical of the tools those same users need to deploy in any and all domains of interaction.



Figure 2: A post with comments

Figure 2 illustrates the space where the interaction of concern manifests itself: here we see an original post on top (it consists mainly of a picture, which is complemented by a caption); and automatically generated information about when, where and by whom the original post was created. Beneath it there is a selection or all of the comments that have been left, each one again displaying when and by whom it was posted. Comments are presented in reference to the canonical grammar of textual production, namely with older text uppermost, newer text beneath. Finally, there is an automatic display of how many users have 'liked' the original post so far<sup>3</sup>, and these likes are also presented with regard to the presumed spatial grammar.

Facebook encourages participation by indicating that commenting is possible in two places on the screen, one directly underneath the post (as a hyperlink), and one at the bottom of the area, in the form of a box that prompts the user to *Write a comment...* next to the thumbnail image of the user's profile picture. This box with the thumbnail image is placed in relation to the other comments in such a way as if the comment had already been published, projecting the user's participation in the interaction.

This aspect of Facebook is designed, one presumes, to let a user predict very precisely the appearance of his or her comment, and its immediate surroundings on the display, in what is called in web parlance the chrome – the bunting and such like that ornaments the layout of the browser window. In being so designed and predictably so, a user can not only see the original post they are interacting with, but he or she will be able to see how many comments have been posted before, who posted them and when, and of course what those posts say. Likewise, users can thus

treat as a given that the interaction space that they see looks the same to all other users, as well.

Greiffenhagen's (forthcoming) study of pupils arranging speech bubbles on a storyboard, and the resulting discussion of a visual grammar, shows that the coherent placement of a written contribution within a certain space is no small achievement: work of a particular kind is required. Facebook posts and comments are mostly mediated through written language – image postings notwithstanding – and as opposed to spoken language, the words appear on a Facebook page to be perceived then and there and of course remaining so and thus producing a permanent record of interaction. This allows users at some later time to relate a new comment to an original post, or to any other post that has appeared previously in the same spatially organised place of text. It also allows them to comment. But doing so requires *work*: users need to distinguish between at least two possible readings: to read a comment as being related to the original post, for example, or being related to some other comment.

This choice, or rather this task of recognition represents what one might say is an instance where the users have to do work to determine just what comments pertain to: there is, if you like, an ambiguity inherent in the current design of Facebook comments sections<sup>4</sup>. These ambiguities pose a problem for the coherence of interaction taking place in and through comments. Users need to disambiguate what is the relevant act, another comment or a posting? Of course, this is not to say that other acts on and through Facebook don't also require work of sorts but this highlights just the kinds of work we are interested in. We now turn to explore and illustrate the ways that users organise their interpretive actions of these sorts of acts and in turn design their own acts so as to deal with these and other ambiguities.

### 3. Achieving pertinence through co-participation identification practices

Communication that involves more than two parties is typically characterised by interactants' assigning and adopting roles to others, the putative participants (see, e.g., Goffman 1981, Bell 1984). Speakers design their talk for participants in specific roles, such as *addressee*, *by-stander* and *overhearer*. These roles are partly achieved products of conversation rather than being something that simply pre-exists at the start of the interaction. Speakers assign, for example, in their talk direct addressee status to another participant by using their name as a term of address: their putative status thus comes into being at the moment it is declared. On Facebook, the number of potential participants in a *commenting event* tends to be much higher than in regular conversational interaction and thus managing this task – who is involved, who is being addressed, and more generally the question of the status of other participants requires determination. Theoretically, everybody on a user's friends list can leave a comment at any time, whereas in conversation, only those who can hear another's voice will be able to participate: the volume of members on a friends list is thus far greater than is possible with the auditory footprint of the spoken word. By addressing another directly, a speaker can forcibly make their utterance relevant to the addressee, inviting them to search for the relevance of the content of the utterance (Sacks 1995; Grice 1975). This requires a different set of skills and work on Facebook.

The following example illustrates a commenting event on Facebook in which the original poster would appear to need to disambiguate the participation structure of those involved in actions that seem to follow on and thus might appear consequent to that first post. The poster in the case does this by the simple expedient of using

another's name as term of address in a subsequent comment on, as it were, their own posting.

More particularly, the original post (marked as A in Figure 3 below) is followed by other users' comments (marked as B and C). C, a negatively evaluative comment (cf. interjections expressing disgust and the expressive punctuation), is taken up by the original poster in comment D. She offers an interpretation of the commenter's evaluation, suggesting how she would make sense of the potentially face-threatening assessment of her indulgence expressed in the original post (A).



Figure 3: Example 1

Comment D is formulated as a question, *Are you more of a Chardonnay man,*. Content-wise it is not necessarily recognizable as exclusively related to comment C, and so it is at risk of being read as relating to *either* of the two foregoing comments. The original poster solves this problem (this ambiguity of meaning and thus implied appropriate next act) by clearly stating whose comment she is taking up, adding after the comment a term of address, *y*.

Thus, she accomplishes several tasks:

- a) she demonstrates that she has been following the interaction and understands it by producing a relevant response that is tied to a previous contribution. The tie in this instance demonstrates that understanding.
- b) she demonstrates recognition that the co-presence of two foregoing comments can cause confusion regarding whose strand will be oriented to in that she disambiguates the relevance of her response: she states whose comment she is orienting to by using a term of address. Thereby, her tying activity shows not just understanding of what is said but how the meaning of these texts needs disambiguation through reference to participation structures.
- c) Her selection of next speaker, by asking a question with the name of the person she is addressing being stated, tacitly demonstrates her desire to reduce the interpretative burden of her co-participants and so shows grace. Orderliness can be achieved in lots of ways, hers is one that requires less work. Selecting next speaker makes it easier for all involved to know what is required next.

The author of comments C and E, likewise, orients to the event in ways that seem to demonstrate a desire for a communicative turn-taking practice that seeks some kind of commonly understood and oriented to orderliness, even if it does not seek the graciousness mentioned above. Here, the view seems to be: 'If I do this you can do that and vice versa'. He places C in the comments section underneath the post. Considering the many other options Facebook offers, e.g. personal messaging, posting an update on his own or the other user's timeline, posting a photo, 'liking'

etc., this choice would appear to be making it especially clear to others that he self-selects so as to be part of the written verbal interaction initiated by the original post (A). Thus, the choice of placement within the interactional space of communication acts on Facebook represents a tying option of a particular kind: 'this' is related to 'that'; his self-selection equates to 'I am telling you so'.

More particularly, E is placed in that same comments section, and the user acknowledges the fact that he was addressed in the prior turn, and that he was selected to answer a question in the text. Content-wise he not only ties his answer to the question by the expedient of answering it; he also ties his turn to the interaction generally by echoing the binomial that combines a drink and food that goes with it, i.e. the red wine/cheese image evoked in the original post. This is alluded to by a coffee/biscuit analogy. The repetition of this 'food and drink' structure can be labelled format tying (cf. Goodwin 1990). Again, this demonstrates the commenter's uptake and understanding of previous parts of the interaction.

It seems to us that these strategies and techniques are not simply a reflection of each individual having their own interpretive problems: rather, these solutions (if solutions they are) would appear to be available as resources for each and all of those involved, the users of Facebook, to address questions of ambiguity and of 'what to do next' type considerations. Moreover, the manner of these textual acts is suggestive that our account is not merely an analytical construct of our own devising, produced from the outside, but is something that is demonstrably a concern for the people themselves, as members of this setting. Even if our evidence does not suggest that these individuals treat all questions of ambiguity in the same way, our evidence does show that their various choices would seem to reflect a commonly known set of techniques key to which is the presumption that making sense on Facebook



requires work. The examples above don't simply report that work but show how that work entails ways of making communicative acts come to be explicable, as things that 'I want you to respond to' or things 'which are referring to this (and not that)' etc. The behaviours we report above produce a rationality, an accountability to the acts of communication in question.

#### **4. Achieving pertinence through time indices on Facebook**

The time stamps of the comments are of specific interest in this case too, being resources for and obstacles to creating the accountability we have just mentioned.

One can see from the performance incarnate in the commenting that the relationship between time and commenting turns, a relationship that might be presumed to have putative characteristics similar to the temporal patterning in turns-at-talk in face-to-face contexts, has a different nuance here, on Facebook. The work it implies in terms of accountability is thus different too.

B, C and D were all posted within one hour of the appearance of the original post A, thus within a relatively close range of time compared to E. Comment E, the answer to the question asked in D, was posted with a delay of 9 hours. Clearly, the author of E orients to D as a still valid question that calls for an answer, even after one night. Thus, this example of a question-answer sequence treats time in a way that is particular, particular to Facebook.

In face-to-face conversations certain turns-at-talk demand an almost immediate response; summons and answer sequences being one case, for example, certain aspects of topic management another, and techniques for appointing a next person to talk a third. Loosely speaking, certain types of face-to-face conversational acts

consist of adjacency pairs where the production of second part following the first part has a particular kind of moral implicativeness: it has to be done now or else something other is implied – a disregard for the first speaker, for example. Typically, though not always, the speed with which such a pair is produced is one measure used by members to see that the work sought for – implied by some prior act – is achieved in some subsequent act. Temporal immediacy stands as proxy for the moral burden of the act in question, in other words, showing that the conversational imperative to provide the next step (an answer, say) is given without delay.

The use of temporal patterning is a resource of a different character in Facebook comments, however. Next turns can appear considerably after the initial turn – indeed hours later, as we remark above. To determine if answering a specifically directed question is subject to some kind of normative constraint, the rules of behaviour represented by the logic of adjacency pairs as in face-to-face talk for example, is not something that our data allows us to comment on, however. In our data corpus we do not have any instances of users complaining about a lack of response to a posting, nor to the tardiness of a comment. We have no evidence that askers (or others) orient to their unanswered question as making an answer conditionally relevant, for example by repeating the question in the same or another setting on Facebook. This does not mean that there are no applicable rules of conduct here, interpretative schemas used by participants to make their actions accountable. For one thing, the demands for a response might be dealt with outside of Facebook, on the phone, face-to-face etc. We do not, however, have systematic access to all interaction sites where this could take place, limiting our observations to Facebook actions. From this, however, it does seem reasonable to claim that there is a kind of suspension of the face-to-face need for temporal immediacy; the prosody of Facebook comments is other. This prosody would appear to be something that

participants are alert to, but it would appear they treat time and more generally the temporal patterning of updates and comments as a loose framework for guiding interpretation and actions. In this respect, the common sense of everyday chit-chat is cast aside in the temporal rhythms of Facebook, but it would appear that doing so itself reflects common-sense about Facebook: not all participants are participating all the time, notwithstanding efforts by others to summon, identify, rebuke and point toward in their own turns at talk. People have to wait until their Facebook friends come back on line.

#### **5. Achieving sense through spatial relations of text acts on Facebook**

Given this discussion, a next step in describing the aspects of the comment organisation mechanisms of interaction on Facebook is to ask what norm is actually demonstrably oriented to by users if time is not such a strong one as it may be in other contexts. The following example can be used to show that spatial immediacy is one other resource that users rely on and indeed their actions seem to suggest it is a mode of organisation that they have some preference for.

A

x

The stew has been on for hours....Love my slow cooker.... It smells amazing.... Who is this person- I'm freaking myself out?!?!

Like · Comment · Tuesday at 17:15 via Mobile · 🗨️

👍 11 people like this.

👤 [redacted] Lol I've used our slow cooker today poor Jonathan actually had a proper cooked meal! Shit I'm turning into a proper housewife! Help!!!!!! Lol x  
Tuesday at 17:16 via mobile · Like · 🗨️ 1

👤 [yellow] Haha it's mad ay!!! I am secretly enjoying it too but don't tell anyone xxxx  
Tuesday at 17:17 via mobile · Like · 🗨️ 1

👤 [redacted] I've considered getting one for years.. Might have to get one x  
Tuesday at 17:48 via mobile · Like · 🗨️ 1

👤 [redacted] [yellow] ...domestic queen or step queen? ..you decide 😊 x  
Tuesday at 17:52 via mobile · Like · 🗨️ 2

👤 [redacted] Great on a dark, wintery evening - they are the way forward.....  
Tuesday at 18:10 · Like · 🗨️ 1

👤 [redacted] slow cookers are the best  
Tuesday at 20:47 · Like · 🗨️ 1

B

y

👤 [green] Be careful, I'll b expecting a big homemade hot pot to be accompanying u to London 😊

Shah, righty - we r hitting the town mrs 😊 xxx  
Tuesday at 22:52 via mobile · Like · 🗨️ 1

C

z

👤 [red] I have to put mine in the garage when its cooking. Don't you find the house stinks of food all day then all night?.  
Yesterday at 07:30 via mobile · Like

D

x

👤 [yellow] [red] you are forgetting that we usually have 2 litters of baby bulldogs on the go.... So the smell of a slow cooker is heaven haha! Xxxx

Little sis we are soooooo hitting all our faves xxx  
Yesterday at 07:51 via mobile · Like · 🗨️ 1

E

z

👤 [red] Ahhh. Like an airfreshner?!?!??  
Yesterday at 08:16 · Like · 🗨️ 1

F

x

👤 [yellow] That's exactly it! I think i'm getting a bit addicted.... I have woke up thinking about stew xxx  
Yesterday at 08:18 via mobile · Like

z

👤 [red] Novelty wears off....  
Yesterday at 08:43 · Like · 🗨️ 1

Figure 4: Example 2

Figure 4 contains an interaction that is driven by three commenters (the original poster, her sister, and a third woman) who discuss two parallel topics. The main topic thread, which is introduced in the original post and subsequently taken up in every single comment, is related to food and cooking; the parallel strand is concerned with making plans for a night out (comments B and D), which is only discussed between the two sisters.

Our discussion of this example starts with comments E and F, as they represent a question-answer sequence (or more generally an action-reaction sequence) that does not require any special problem solving on the interactants' part, as illustrated above: these turns are sufficiently self-explicative for the participants to know what each entails and implies.

Moving on to B, C and D, we begin to see traces of the commenters' orientation to spatial immediacy as an interpretative resource which, when not available, members need to address or find alternative interpretative resources to ensure that next acts maintain a sensible, accountable, practical order. These alternative resources consist of particular tying techniques, namely the use of terms of address, which create a reference between a previous contribution and a later one by demonstrably identifying authorship of the tied-to contribution and addressee status of the later one, and thus make recognisable the connection between the two posts to all other participants. This technique is particularly useful to perform a similar operation to the one Sacks calls *skip-tying* (1995), in that it allows tying a contribution to another that is not spatially adjacent. In these ways participants make sense of the communicative event as an orderly interaction whose meaning comes to be commonly shared through disambiguating spatial clues about meaning.

Comments E and F were posted within a two minute time span, and they appear adjacent to one another. As F represents the answer to the question asked in E, coherence is given regarding both temporal and spatial parameters, as well as with respect to the content. The author of E expresses her understanding of the previous comment (D, which is partially directed at her) through the interjection *Ahhh.*, which at the same time relates E to D thematically. This allows her to formulate the subsequent question/remark *Like an airfreshner??!?!??* as a fragment rather than a complete sentence: she can rely on her interlocutor's knowledge of what has previously been said, especially because there is a written record of it available to all participants.

Comment F takes up the propositional content of E, replying to it through an answer or confirmation. The commenter thus demonstrates that she understands comment E as directed to her, and as containing a yes/no-question or remark that requires an answer or a confirmation. Note that neither E nor F contains any terms of address or other elements that are specifically included to signpost coherence structure to other participants; they are not necessary as spatial and temporal immediacy, as well as topic coherence, are preserved and relied on; the absence of terms of address does not thereby create confusion: it directs participants to turn to other resources.

Comments B, C and D, on the other hand, can be used to show how commenters address ambiguity in the structural arrangements of who is involved here when spatial clues and resources are not so effective. The problem that the three commenters are facing in this instance is in the temporal and spatial discontinuity in their actions, which is mainly caused by the delay of one night between comment B and C (cf. time stamps). Comment B was made in the evening, and it not only continues the food-related topic, it also opens another topic which is mainly relevant

to the original poster *Shah, righty – we r hitting the town mrs.* It is followed by comment C early the next morning, but this is not a reaction to B in that it doesn't relate to B content wise (C seems to be a comment related to the original post A). C itself contains a question directed to the original poster.

Comment D (made by the original poster) finally treats both comment B and C as loose ends that require a reaction – B because the new topic raised, and the content expressed, is apparently of such importance that it deserves confirmation (*we are soooooo hitting all our faves xxx*); and C because it contains a question. The author of D, when making her comment, is facing the problem of attending to two parallel strands of interaction at the same time; however, for the first one (B), temporal and spatial immediacy has been made impossible, because C already occupies the spatially immediate slot. The commenter addressed in B and C chooses not only to answer the remark made in B, but she indicates that it is inadequately placed as it doesn't follow B immediately. She does so by using *Little sis* as term of address to inform all participants who this is directed to, and so she skip-ties D to B. In the same comment, she ties up the other loose end, i.e. the question asked in C *Don't you find the house stinks of food all day then all night?*. Again, the commenter makes the relevance structure obvious by using a term of address and thereby tying the comment to the act it reacts to.

This analysis of comments E and F shows, then, that if spatial immediacy is given, i.e. where the turns are spatially adjacent, there is no need to disambiguate other structures of potential relevance: the participants do not need to rely on address terms, for example, or conversational topicalities. The turns are self-evidently connected because they appear one after another. Comments B, C and D show that

users employ spatial referents as a means to define the relevance of turns at communication.

This does not mean that spatial reference is always sufficient. What we said about temporal immediacy above might also apply in the examples here: we do not have access to other channels where questions of interpretation reliant on spatial immediacy might be disambiguated, or for that matter, the question of their ambiguity made visible. However, this lack of data from our point of view (as analysts), while forcing us to restrict the reach of our conclusions, has, in a sense, a similar effect on the interactants themselves. Facebook users are not required to limit themselves to using posts and comments by other users to find guidance as to what their own next contribution could be. They could use other resources – things said elsewhere, face-to-face or in other digital domains. But a problem for participants is that though they might turn to external sources, doing so might not be self-evident to other users. Thus, a rule of thumb that seems implied in our studies is that participants endeavour to co-produce appropriate interaction with others that makes use of only those resources that others have available, too. *Appropriate* here means the resources relied on are assuredly known in common for all: namely the spatial and temporal coding of texts on a Facebook page.

## **6. Comment organisation in a different social network: Renren**

Following on naturally from this, a contrasting SNS might help illustrate the issues we are highlighting. The Chinese SNS renren.com offers its users a slightly different design in the commenting section than Facebook does. Thus, the resources for interpretation and mutual understanding are different. Renren allows replying to a



previous comment as an inbuilt function of the website. If a Renren user chooses to reply to a comment x left underneath a status update, they can click on a link that will automatically tie their reply specifically to that comment x. In other words, the expression of relevance structure of a reply to a comment can be relegated to a function of the website. Thus, Renren offers a resource that is not available to Facebook users: where Renren automatically inserts the text *reply [commenter's name]*, Facebook design does not allow to distinguish between replies to comments and replies to updates. This has to be done by the Facebook users themselves – and the examples discussed so far have shown that this task is often solved using terms of address.

The following screenshot and subsequent translation shows how Renren commenting works.

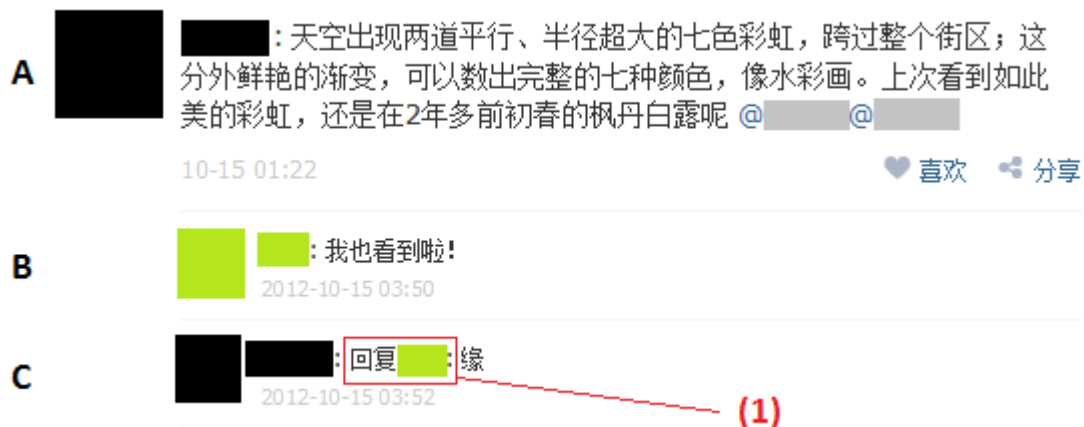


Figure 5: The reply function on a different SNS

Translation:

**A** *updater: There are two rainbows with seven colours in the sky, stretching across the entire block – like a watercolour. Last time I saw such a beautiful*

*rainbow was in Fontainebleau, a little over two years ago, in early spring*

*@name a @name b*

**B** *commenter: I saw it, too!*

**C** *updater: reply to commenter: Absolutely*

Comment C in Figure 5 illustrates the use of the reply function: the author of comment C makes her reply recognisably relevant as an answer to comment B which is directed at the author of B via the automatically generated text which consists of *reply* and the user name of the author of comment B (cf. (1)). In this example, the comment and its answer happen to be immediately consecutive; but parallel to the use of terms of address in Facebook, the design inherent reply function in Renren allows users to create coherent interaction across several comments by multiple users.

## **7. Testing the limits: pertinence across Facebook profiles**

So if all contributions to an interaction orient to, or in a way, are tested against previous contributions, and at the same time, they serve as standards for future contributions to be tested against, we can describe Facebook commenting as a site of constant negotiation, where a contribution emerges from a cycle and feeds back into it. One can presume, too, that most contributions will fit the pattern of expectations nicely, and will thus not cause reactions that question their appropriateness or else the appeal of Facebook would not exist.

Nicely is the rub here, however. Our analysis turns around the assumption that this constant negotiation of meaning is just that, a constant negotiation, ebbing and

flowing, sometimes more felicitous than at other times. The resources at hand will alter too, dependent upon the choices users made. There might well be contributions that manifest unusual techniques or means, e.g. through exploring the various affordances that Facebook offers that are not exploited very often.

The example that follows illustrates an instance where spatial immediacy is at issue because there is a fairly radical break in the use of spatial proximities in just this way – through exploiting a property of interaction on Facebook in an unusual way. This example technically consists of two posts, one left on the poster’s own profile (user x), the other on the commenter’s profile (user y), and a comment underneath each, both posted by the same person.

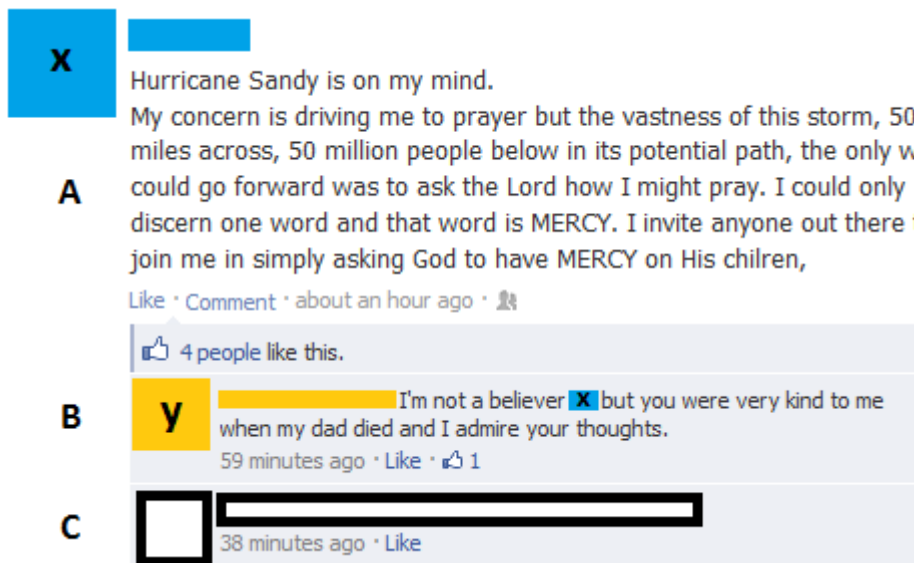


Figure 6: Oct 29, 16.14 pm, on x’s profile

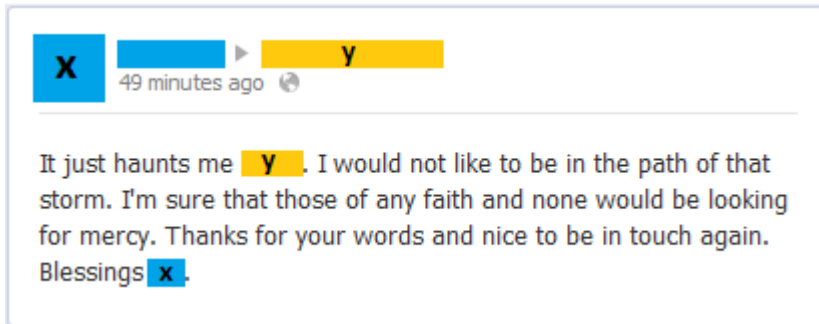


Figure 7: Oct 29, 16.14 pm, on y's profile

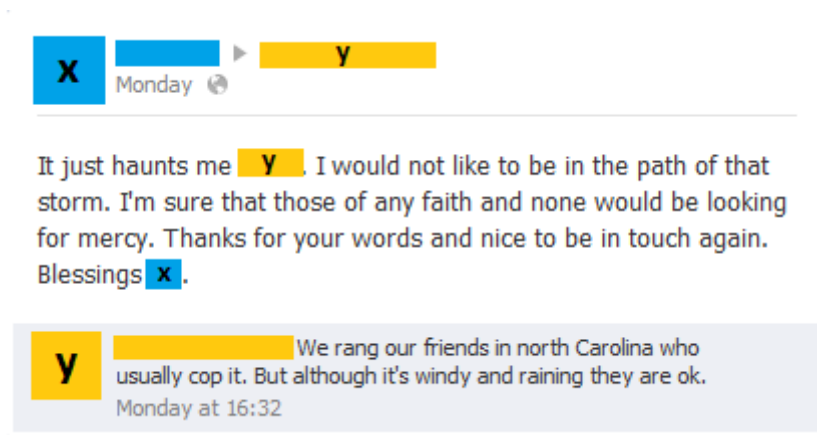


Figure 8: Oct 30, 10.29 am, on y's profile

Figure 6 shows the pattern observed in previous examples: a status update (A) posted by a user on his own profile is commented on by another Facebook user who addresses the comment (B) to the original poster using a term of address. Content-wise, the comment also ties to the post. As it happens, it seems to express a controversial opinion; this can be deduced from, among other things, the conjunction *but*, which indicates a contrast in propositional content. Be that as it may, A and B were posted in both spatial and temporal immediacy (cf. time stamps). The interaction between the two is continued within a short time span (cf. Figure 7): the original poster answers within 10 minutes (post D), which, in turn, is replied to about an hour later.

Thus, for D and E, temporal immediacy is given. Spatial immediacy is not, however; for post D is not appended to the interaction as a next comment, nor is it the same profile; rather it is posted on the profile of the commenter. As mentioned above, for conversation, Sacks (1995: 734) identifies skip-tying as a device to signal coherence between contributions that are not immediately adjacent to one another. *I mean*, for example, can be used by a speaker to locate the last utterance by him- or herself, and thereby skipping what intervened. In the Facebook data under discussion here, we have identified the use of terms of address as performing similar acts of signalling coherence. Likewise, the placing of an answer in a commenting event on the addressee's profile, as is the case in the present example, represents another such technique that points to users' preference for immediacy.

Based on previous observations, one would expect a commenter to orient to the norm of spatial immediacy by placing D underneath B (note that D was posted before C). One can only speculate as to why the second half of the interaction is moved from one participant's profile to the other's. One reason may be the topic: the post and the comment relates to personal religious convictions, which can represent a contentious issue. Perhaps the poster wanted to remove the interaction from his 'territory' by moving it from the forum that is populated by his Facebook audience (i.e. his Facebook friends who will see the interaction in their newsfeed) to that of the other participant. Or this might have happened simply by mistake.

For the purposes of our analysis however, this spatial location – unusual though it might be – is nevertheless treated and oriented to as the continuation of the same interaction previously begun elsewhere. This unusualness in spatial referents is not cause to diminish the value of spatial interpretation. It is still treated an answer by the participants. Thus, it has features that make it recognisably coherent as an

answer – these are temporal immediacy and continuation of the topic. But in addition, and most importantly, the original poster makes use of an affordance that adds another dimension. The poster specifically chooses the other person’s profile to interact with her, making what one might call *personal immediacy* on Facebook potentially dominant over spatial and temporal immediacy in that domain.

Or rather, this selection of location uses space in a particular way. We have seen traces of this earlier, when the personal dimension was evoked through addressees’ names as terms of address to make up for the lack of spatial immediacy. The subsequent comment (E) in no way treats the location of D as irregular or especially noteworthy, though nevertheless a key to what her next act should be: to post in that space. For the commenter places her next comment in that newly established space rather than posting it in the space where the interaction originated beforehand. In this sense, choice of space becomes a move in the field of possibilities we mentioned at the outset, choices which are reacted to and relied upon as part of how meaning is specified. In this case, location acts like a term of address, a way of identifying next speaker. Though this might be unusual, certainly in our corpus, the point remains that the joint production of coherent, orderly communication continues to be achieved, despite the various constituents that make up this communication.

## **8. Conclusion**

Our research has sought to analyse some elements of digitally mediated social systems. We have reported analysis of the organising characteristics of comments, characteristics that both allow members to determine how to design these acts and

for users or readers of the same to treat them as resources for the production of their own subsequent acts. Key to our analysis has been how the SNS in question affords a set of resources which, when combined with users' own interpretive techniques and practical knowhow, allow for orderly dealings by users of the same. Of particular note are the combined spatial and self-referential arrangements of Facebook comments that produce a domain for action that is populated not by dumb users (behaving how the system directs), but through *their* ongoingly creative and interpretive use of commenting practices. These practices are self-explicative in character, designed by the participants so that they afford various degrees of meaning, reference and clarity of purpose. This self-explicative character is used to help distinguish and specify the moral implicativeness of the acts in question, an implicativeness which is bound to and made manifest in the spatial and temporal display on Facebook. These temporal and spatial particulars are invoked in an on-demand manner to explicate the meaning of acts; without this these acts disappear into a swelter of possible interpretations, making them all but unusable.

These organising mechanisms operate in written language rather than spoken word and so naturally need to accommodate different systematic properties – or affordances if you prefer – to those available in, say, the context of verbal communication. In the latter, turn-taking systems can rely on a mix of different resources not all of which are present on Facebook – glances, for example, as well as spoken summonses and answers. The auditory context can provide a resource too – ambient noise affects how participants manage turn-taking as a case in point.

Different resources are at hand for the users of Facebook. The theoretical significance of our research is not, however, comparative, as it is an exploration of a complex mechanism that is used by people to maintain coherence in their social interactions through a particular form of writing and reading practices (cf. Watson

2009: 1), ones that are treated as constitutive of the social bonds enabled on and through a totally twenty first century domain, the social network, in this case Facebook.

In our analysis, one major analytic tool is sequentiality, which, however, owing to the visual character of Facebook interaction, has had to be adjusted away from the scope it is normally given in the study of face-to-face conversation. In our usage, sequentiality needs to encompass ties not just in the temporal dimension but also in spatial and personal ones. We have used the term *immediacy* to denote this shift, which is at the core of the comment organisation mechanism we have begun to describe here.

Facebook users orient to and deal with an inherent ambiguity of commenting spaces; that is to say they signal whether their own comment is tied to the status update, or to a previous comment. Where this is unproblematic, for example when a user is the first to comment following a status update, no special action is required. Subsequent ones, however, are often demonstrably disambiguated through the use of terms of address.

This reflects the fact that a user's participation in a commenting event is by no means planned or expected, especially in a temporal sense as could be the case in face-to-face communication, where an answer might be expected from someone who had a question addressed to them. On the contrary, Facebook participation is self-selective to a degree. Thus, inherent in all commenting events is an explanatory element: 'why am I contributing, now'. In this respect, participation on Facebook parallels offline interaction in the sense that there is a preference for coherence between contributions and this extends to the question of the relationship ties between people and so too the question of who is allowed to participate. In this



regard, appropriate behaviour expresses membership of a certain group of people who know how to make sense together, and in the way they do this, display their identity as a group – a bunch of friends on Facebook.

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## Notes

1 As the data analysed in this paper consists of written language, the term turn-taking, which traditionally refers to the organization of turns in spoken interaction, must be used with caution; the authors thus use it for lack of better terminology, fully aware that the shifting of contexts is problematic. We do, however, think that it facilitates readability of this text sufficiently to justify its use.

2 We should add that our interest in this proscribes equally legitimate concerns simply as function of how much time and space can be given to these topics: we do not look at the sequential organisation of topic management tools like Sacks' Membership Categorisation Devices (or MCDs), for example [1992].

3 The use of the present perfect here indicates that on Facebook, 'liking' constitutes an action, i.e. clicking an icon in the shape of an upward-pointing thumb, also known as the 'like-button', rather than an emotional state.

4 The Chinese SNS renren.com, which closely resembles Facebook in design and functionality, allows for nested comments, offering a structural tool to avoid this ambiguity. We shall say more about this later.

### Figure captions

Figure 1: A screenshot of the newsfeed page that appears when a Facebook user first logs on, or when clicking on *Home* in the upper right hand corner

Figure 2: A post with comments

Figure 3: Example 1

Figure 4: Example 2

Figure 5: The reply function on a different SNS

Figure 6: Oct 29, 16.14 pm, on  $x$ 's profile

Figure 7: Oct 29, 16.14 pm, on  $y$ 's profile

Figure 8: Oct 30, 10.29 am, on  $y$ 's profile