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On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards as Part of a Perception-Oriented Politeness Approach

1. Introduction

Then, too, the wraithlike nature of electronic communication – the flesh become word, the sender reincarnated as letter on a terminal screen – accelerates the escalation of hostilities once tempers flare; disembodied, sometimes pseudonymous combatants tend to feel that they can hurl insults with impunity (at least without fear of bodily harm). (Dery 1994: 1)

In this well-known quotation, the author and media critic Mark Dery mentions a phenomenon that has now been taken up by linguistic research (see inter alia Graham 2008 and several articles in this volume): the affinity of internet communication to aggressive verbal outbursts. This phenomenon is often referred to as “flaming” and basically exists across platforms. For example, as Helfrich notes in her contribution to this volume on flaming in YouTube comments, “flaming” is a “particular means of face work practiced in Social Media”, the main function of which is “displaying hostility” (Helfrich, this volume). In such “leave-a-comment” platforms, the phenomenon of verbal aggression occurs at a significantly more pronounced degree compared to communi-

cation on online message boards, which are the subject of my study. The reasons lie in the communication structure provided by different online platforms, which differ with regard to their grounding in the communicative situation. Taking the cooking forum on the cooking platform www.mundorecetas.com as an example, I will show which codes (partly media-specific) the communication members use to ground their communication in order to perceive and understand each other. This helps them to minimise problems of understanding and to foster an environment in which communication partners usually care about and appreciate each other. The members prevent potential misinterpretations of their contributions and practice face work actively. This kind of face work is multicode and plays an important role in preventing negatively oriented “relational management” (according to Watts/Locher 2005). This multicode face work can be found both in the text of the post itself and in the framing peritext (profile information, signature, etc.). If such codes are not used, or are inadequately applied, as the corpus shows, the risk of misunderstandings that trigger the exchange of FTAs is inevitable.

In this article, I argue that internet communication produces marked behaviour in a distinct form, both negatively and positively marked. With recourse to a perception-oriented politeness approach, I would like to show that users of message boards are often not sure how they should classify utterances. In particular, the intentionality of utterances is often debated (“did he really mean it?”). Such negotiation processes are to a large extent face-threatening for the “discussed third” (two or more discussing parties commenting on a third party on an online message board) and often lead to the degeneration of discussions.

This article is divided into seven parts. After the introduction, I will explain the way in which the corpus was approached and then present the online message boards in their mediality. In the

fourth section, I will show the nature of the communication problems in online communication, based on the communication model of Strohner 2006/Kercher 2011. The subsequent fifth section is devoted to verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal codes available on online message boards and used for face work. Then, in section six, the focus will be on less successful online communication. By taking a thread from the forum Mundorecetas as an example, I will show how misunderstandings in communication lead to FTAs. The paper concludes with a summary of the results.

2. The material investigated

For the present study, I examined threads from the Spanish-speaking cooking forum Mundorecetas. The website started as a cooking forum in 2000 and has now been extended to include other areas of everyday family life (such as pregnancy, manual work, diet, etc.). Active participation in the cooking forum requires an interest in a specific everyday topic – cooking – with the result that recognisable common ground between contributors is available. Mundorecetas endeavours to strengthen the community of practice in the forum. Users can join thematic groups where they can upload photo albums and share them with other users, etc. In addition, there are the common hierarchies between users: users can progress through active participation levels in the forum from novice to chef. For my contribution, I investigated threads from this forum without quantitative evaluation;¹ examples show only tendencies and typical manifestations.

¹ A larger corpus study of face work in internet forums is still a desideratum; currently in this field, a corpus study is being carried out by Uta Fröhlich (a PhD project), which is represented by a face-term contribution to this volume. In this study multicodeality of

A potential problem in the scholarly description of multimedial face work is dealing with the data. Anonymisation is not possible when statements are made about the choice of nicknames or avatar images used, for instance. Anyway, the information is publicly accessible on the internet because registration on the platform for the sake of inspection is not required. An illustration of imagery is covered by the right of quotation; therefore, the data in the present study may be used without anonymisation. However, nicknames and avatars are shown only when they are actually the subject of my presentation. The citations are inserted as screenshots to depict the multimediality in at least a static form.

3. Communication on online message boards

Herring (2007) denominated criteria to describe the characteristics of online media platforms that provide an easy way to represent the characteristics of communication on online message boards:

- 1) Synchronicity: communication on online message boards is asynchronous, but much like most other online platforms, the time span of the response is shorter than that of offline writings; therefore, users tend to submit their posts without reconsidering them.
- 2) Message transmission: unlike in chat situations, the interlocutors do not see that a post is being composed. Only the finished and sent posts are visible on the platform.
- 3) Persistence of transcript: once written, a post remains permanently visible and cannot be edited by the author. Posts are usually visible to all those who surf the internet even without

face work is processed with a systematical investigation with focus on a Spanish-speaking cinema forum.

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

having to log in to a platform. This has implications for face work because utterances judged to be impolite are unchangeable, always visible and accessible for externals.

- 4) Size of the message buffer: The posts can be of any size. A maximum limit lies in what the addressee still wants to read. When messages become very long, metalinguistic-related utterances often occur. The posters are then accused of being rude because they take up too much of the readers' time – so face work also occurs on this level.
- 5) Channels of communication: Message boards are regular hypertexts; data in different formats and codalities (photos, videos, audio files, etc.) can be embedded according to the platform.
- 6) Anonymous messaging: Active participation usually requires registration. The data given do not get verified as a rule, so that users can use their imagination when creating their profiles. How often this happens depends on the extent to which a community of practice is integrated.² Most forum members write under a pseudonym. The users choose nicknames with a phonetic quality through which they (intentionally or not) try to influence their face positively. The anonymity of the communication on online message boards was recently attacked by politicians and held responsible for the aggressiveness of the communication in forums. I do not think that that lies in anonymity, nor is it the main reason for such behaviour. The lack of grounding in the situation plays an important role here (more on this below).
- 7) Private messaging: Here, the platforms vary. Some of them allow private messaging to individual users directly from the profile, while other platforms do not provide private messaging. The postings as such are always public. However, it is

² Cf. Kluge's contribution about trolling in the present volume.

often possible for community members to contact each other dialogically through the platform itself or by using email or other platforms (e.g. Facebook).

- 8) Filtering: Since the threads are public, no filters are used there. Some forums (including Mundorecetas) do, however, allow filtering of personal contacts.
- 9) Quoting: In most forums, there is an automatic comment function through which a previous post or parts of it can be taken and discussed in the reply. This function provides a better orientation, especially when one refers to a post based on a contribution made several posts previously. However, such quoting also often leads to resentment, because users are held to their sometimes very spontaneous utterances. Here, the informality of the exchange collides with the permanence of the form: what has been said remains permanently visible and quotable.
- 10) Message format: The basic form of the posts is determined by the platform. Usually, the individual contributions are framed by the users' profile information. These have great influence on face work, and this factor is discussed thoroughly below. In many forums (including Mundorecetas), the users also have design options for their text messages (font style, colours, etc.) and they also embed such paraverbal elements for face work.

Communication on online message boards, just like other online communication, is not very easy to locate on the closeness-distance continuum according to Koch/Oesterreicher (2011). Typical features of distance language are publicity, lack of grounding in the communicative situation and finality. The latter collides with a quality of typical linguistic closeness in communication on online message boards. Little planning effort is made. In addition, this communication, as has already been established, tends to be emotional, dialogical and spontaneous. The preference for non-linguistic codes is very distinct (more on this below). The physical

distance does not entirely relate to this criterion, because the users are in a shared virtual space which can be configured by the communicating members within the guidelines of the platform.

4. Pitfalls of the communication on online message boards: understanding and misunderstanding

Previous studies have already discovered increased aggression in the preceding format of internet forums, namely mailing lists (cf. inter alia, Arendholz 2013; Graham 2008; Maaß 2012). One reason that this is recurrently mentioned is the anonymity of these platforms. However, this anonymity in internet forums is not so distinct with a well-formed community of practice,³ where even sometimes offline contacts are likely (usually with an online-to-offline directionality, cf. Dayter/Rüdiger, this volume). In the cooking forum, many female communicators give information about their lives and well-being quite openly. Many of them are very active in the forum and contacts deepen with time.

Communication is therefore not anonymous in the strict sense of the word. What significantly characterises offline communication in a face-to-face situation, however, is the grounding in the communicative situation. The interlocutor and communicator are now not in a face-to-face situation, but they interact on a common online platform that can be configured (and is actually configured) as a virtual place. In addition, the participants carry out similar cooking acts offline, which they share online. Thus, the online plat-

³ Lave and Wenger describe CoP as a “participation in an activity system about which participants share understanding” (Lave/Wenger 1991: 91, cited by Darics 2010: 135).

form deviates from direct offline communication in its possibilities. The model of Strohner (2006: 191, here in the modification by Kercher 2011) is well suited for illustrating the impact of this situation on the intelligibility of posts on a message board:

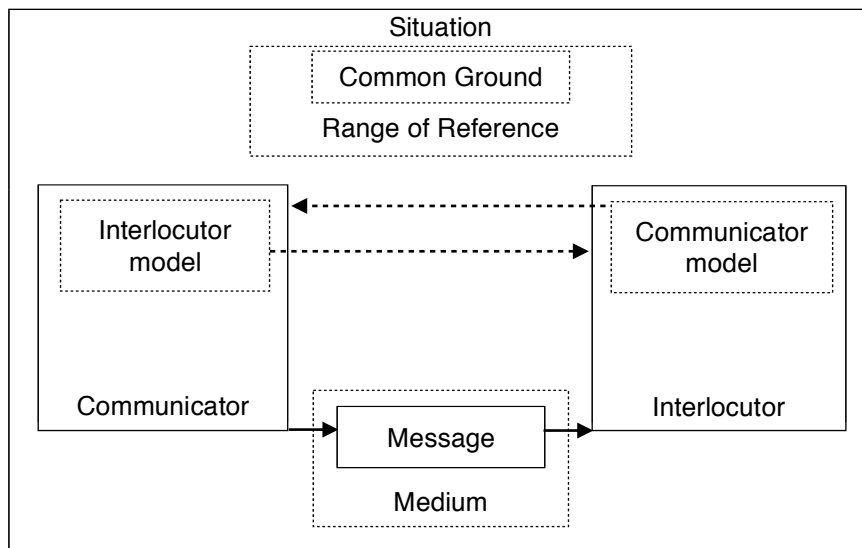


Diagram 1: Text comprehension as a process of mutual understanding between interlocutor and communicator, Kercher (2011: 59) based on Strohner (2006).

Kercher (2011: 59f.) argues that text comprehension is the result of a process of understanding between an interlocutor and a communicator. He distinguishes between manifest factors (solid line in the model) and latent factors (broken lines in the model). Hence, in a communicative act, a communicator conveys a message to an interlocutor in a particular situational context. Text comprehension is influenced by the following factors: the medium through which the message is conveyed, the common ground of the communication members, the reference area of the utterance and the image that the communicator and the interlocutor have of each other.

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

Online communication deviates here considerably from offline face-to-face communication. Due to the medial embedding of the message, the communicator and the interlocutor usually do not visually perceive each other while they communicate. The range of reference must be fully verbalised or displayed with other paraverbal and nonverbal codes; deictics are only available in a limited fashion. But online communication is not homogeneous: the platforms vary distinctively from each other. The aforementioned leave-a-comment platforms create a media environment in which the communicator and the interlocutor know nothing about their possibly existing common ground. Beyond the message and the communication event itself, they do not have any clues to help them build a communicator or interlocutor model. The interlocutor remains “faceless” for the communicator, and the interlocutor perceives the communicator merely through his utterance. The utterances are not grounded in the communicative situation, which results in verbal aggressiveness on the one hand and misunderstandings on the other. This is different in the case of communication on online message boards: the users have the possibility to configure the situational parameters and thus facilitate understanding of their own utterances. The stronger the integration into the community of practice becomes, the more significant these mechanisms are.

The model of Strohner (2006)/Kercher (2011) is, as is often the case in communication models, unidirectional, and focuses on situations with only two communicants. The unidirectionality can easily be compensated for by considering a thread of posts on an online message board as a succession of reversals of the model in which the actual interlocutor becomes a communicator and so on. Communication in forums is also mostly not dialogical; rather, there is a multilateral exchange within the community of practice. This exacerbates the problems of understanding once again, be-

cause the common ground in a loosely constituted group is more threatened than that in a stable dialogic interaction. In addition, we find typical power negotiation processes just as in open groups. Different roles become created, such as the role of the defender, who more or less effectively represents the position of another and in most cases commits FTAs (cf. Maaß 2012). The group of interlocutors is unrecognisable to the communicator in terms of its scope. There is an undetermined number of passive eavesdroppers who do not speak for themselves. This is called lurking (Graham 2008). This phenomenon is known to the communicators and conditions their perception of FTAs just like that of FEAs: they are pronounced in front of an audience of indeterminate size that witnesses the face loss or face gain of one interlocutor (Maaß 2012). Therefore, the 'online message board' medium, by its very nature, provides a communication environment that is not entirely "safe" and may trigger quite aggressive behaviour.

5. Multicodal hints for interpretation and grounding of utterances

This section is devoted to users' behaviour on online message boards. How do they avoid misunderstandings and compensate for the lack of grounding in the communicative situation? Code systems have emerged in online communication with which the lack of grounding can be, at least partially, compensated for. With the help of these codes, the participants ground their utterances in the communicative situation, and that is why such codes play an important role in face work. These codes can be verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal. They are used in different places on the message board: on the one hand, in the posts themselves – in this case I speak of face work in the basic text – and on the other hand in the

accompanying texts that usually surround each individual post in the forum: profile picture (avatar, static or animated), nickname, status information on membership and activity in the forum, signature (motto, timeline, etc.; static or animated). Here I speak of face work in the peritext, using the term of Genette (1987). The different codes are now presented by means of examples taken from the forums of Mundorecetas.

5.1. Verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal codes

5.1.1. Verbal code

Most of the contributions to politeness and face work in online communication focus on the verbal code, despite the fact that forums and other online communication forms are recognisably and inherently of a multicode nature. Verbal utterances may convey messages of all kinds; but most interesting for face work, including others, are such utterances that show components of verbal politeness² or impoliteness². Links that connect posts play an interesting role (e.g. in the form of hinting that the topic has already been the subject of a thread on the forum). They often point to other contents on the web, too, and thus bring new explanations and background information into the current debates. In this way, they help to construct experts in the discussion – a strategy that is of great importance for face work (cf. the contributions of Schrader-Kniffki and Kunkel to this volume).

Consider this example: the communicator signals that he appreciated the information that nacho has given in the previous post, and applies very classic verbal means of politeness²: praise, thanks, and expressions of intimacy (kissing).

todo perfecto nacho gracias, muakkkkkk

Example 1

5.1.2. Paraverbal codes

These are codes that are directly connected to the verbal signs. Such codes occur very prominently in communication on online message boards. In many forums, it is possible to use html in the posts. The contributors can then determine the font colour / font size / typeface themselves, which is also the case in Mundorecetas. Usually, contributors do not present the whole post in large purple italics online; rather, they restrict the use of these means to specific purposes. In ex. 2, the communicator shapes the name of the addressee in bright coloured capitals with a greatly enlarged font:

XUSSYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY
YYYYY
donde has metido al pinche?  te ha gustado tanto que no quieres que lo vean las
demás, vayan a quitartelo      

Example 2

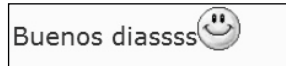
The contributor forgot to congratulate the addressee (whose nickname on the forum is Xusy) on climbing to the next level in the hierarchy: this member has acquired the necessary points to get promoted and become *subjefa de cocina* ('sous-chef')! The communicator is making up for it now with an inside joke that alludes to a lower level in the hierarchy ("pinche", 'cook's mate'), which Xusy had surmounted long ago. The contributor codes her emo-

tional involvement by paraverbal and nonverbal means, and so she marks that there is a difference between the proposition (what she actually says) and the illocution (what she really means) of her utterance. She also signals recognition and closeness by the graphic highlighting of the name.

A much-described feature of online communication (cf. Crystal 2001) is the cross-platform usage of graphic strategies such as acronyms (e.g., LOL “laughing out loud”, CUL8R “see you later”, bn “bueno”, etc.), uppercase and graphic elongations, which are also found on Spanish online message boards. English acronyms are also frequently used alongside the Spanish acronyms on Spanish online message boards. In Mundorecetas, such acronyms are rare; this may be due to the user structure: many users on this platform do not belong to the generation of Digital Natives, but are mostly women, and to a lesser degree men, of all ages.

However, the emphatic capital letters can also be found in the forum of Mundorecetas, as we have seen in ex. 2, which also contains a further widespread graphic strategy: graphic elongations. These elongations need not correspond to a phonic realisation, even if they are often shown to be as such in the research. Darics (2010) describes graphic elongations as “strategies to represent auditory information”; the elongation is “aimed to evoke a sound effect”, which will be interpreted by the addressee because of their “previous experience in spoken interactions in general” (Darics 2010: 135f.). This is possible in individual cases but does not comply with their application in online communication in general. It is often the last grapheme of a word or a syllable that is lengthened, and not the nucleus of the stressed syllable. In ex. 2, this is not so clear, because after all a vowel is lengthened and the word stays pronounceable. In the following example, the elongation is not easy to articulate: Pronouncing a word with an elongated [s] is

hard to imagine, and pronouncing a word with an elongated [k], as in ex. 1, is simply impossible.



Example 3

These elongations are therefore a purely graphic strategy and show a clear decoupling from offline practices. Online communication has made a separate development, the paraverbal and non-verbal codes are not mere transfers of conventional offline facial or gestural codes or certain intonation patterns. They are used in online communication to signal emphasis. They occur more frequently in utterances with phatic, expressive or conative functions. All three functions – different from the referential – are typically directed to face work: establishing contact, ending the post (bidding farewell), requesting and thanking, congratulating, etc. These actions may be appropriate to the situation at the respective place, but by emphasising them, they move from the unmarked area to an emphatically stressed, marked area. Below, I will further discuss this and what it means for face work.

5.1.3. Nonverbal codes

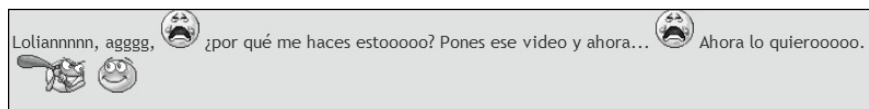
Here, the first to be mentioned are emoticons. They play a special role in online communication across platforms: they are frequently applied by users worldwide and have already attracted the attention of research in a very diverse way.⁴ It is often stated that emoticons reproduce facial expressions and gestures in the text. A

⁴ Examples of which are Dresner/Herring 2010 and 2012, Greiffenstern 2010 and Darics 2010. Dresner and Herring detected that emoticons not only “transport” emotions but also construct meaning.

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

representative of this point of view is the study of Darics, which considers smileys as “strategies to represent visual information” (2010: 135). I do not agree. Rather, emoticons have evolved into a unique code that has become clearly decoupled from offline practices. A mere transfer does not take place. This is evident in, among other examples, the case of such emoticons that do not exclusively represent facial expressions. Consider the smiley with the sunglasses, which exists both in the different versions as a gif (see ex. 2) and as a string of characters B-). It does not depict facial expressions and does not correspond to visual perception. The way it is used and its skopos are heterogeneous: it can be related to people and expressions. In ex. 2, it is used to characterise the verbal components as indirect speech acts.

Emoticons available on online message boards as (usually animated) gifs can also represent small interactions. An interesting example of this is found in 4. Here, the communicator formulated a fictitious reproach against the addressee Lolian, which however enhances Lolian’s face: she is presented as a proud owner of a wonderful pressure cooker that all would like to have:



Example 4

Verbal and nonverbal means in the field of impoliteness₂ are used for face work here. Reproaches are formulated and emoticons that convey negative facial expressions and gestures (crying and beating) are used. The paraverbal features (font colour, graphic elongations) that appear next to the emoticons in the post support its interpretation as indirectly polite (for more see below). Verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal codes are in contrast here and make the

post seem emphatically polite. It is very clear here that the degree of politeness cannot be simply inferred from the verbal and non-verbal means used in an utterance. The emoticons and nonverbal signals disambiguate the message; they give a guideline to the interpretation and thus contribute to the understanding of the text. They prevent the erroneous judgment of a post as inappropriate.

Other than emoticons, various other nonverbal codes can be found on online message boards. Graphics (static or animated) or photos can be embedded on most platforms. Some platforms, including *Mundorecetas*, allow direct embedding of videos and audio files, while others only allow weblinks to these media. In ex. 4, the communicator refers to a video which her addressee Lolian directly embedded in her previous post. Photos are very frequent in the cooking forum, showing photographed food, family members, gifts etc. One shows proudly what one owns and so urges the addressees to practice face work. An example of this is found in 5. Martta posts photos of the sumptuous communion cake that she made for her niece, and invites the interlocutors to virtually have a piece (“*espero que os guste*” – ‘I hope you enjoy it’). She gets 32 consistently positive responses, all of which refer to the posted photos which are added to prove that Martta is capable of the properties rated in the forum (preparing good and visually appealing food and uploading and commenting pictures of it). Posting and discussing the pictures is consequently used for face work.

Various codes are therefore used for face work on online message boards. Graham (2008: 285) refers to paraverbal and nonverbal codes such as abbreviations, uppercase letters or emoticons as “text-based approximations of interactional markers” and underlines that they are not complex enough for the speaker’s intentions, as they do not function as effectively as their offline correspondences. I do not think that this is the actual reason. In contrast to facial expressions, gestures and prosody in an offline situation,

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

online paraverbal and nonverbal codes must be explicitly inserted into the text. One needs to ascribe them intentionality to a certain extent; their proficient usage requires strong communicative skills and practice, whereas facial expressions and prosody are often spontaneous. Emoticons must be selected from a list and inserted into the text, photos and videos must be taken and uploaded with a certain degree of professionalism. One can certainly speak of a strategy and assume that less experienced or less talented users do not exhaust the actual complexity of the field. However, the impacts on face work are very positive when this happens.



Example 5

5.2. Face work in text and peritext

5.2.1. *Face work in the basic text*

Multicodal face work is diversely present in the posts themselves. It informs the interlocutors about the communicator's intention at the very time a particular message is uttered. Examples 4 and 5 show different codes used for face work. In ex. 5, the communicator uses the photos to reinforce her self face as a pastry chef in this forum. The emphatic politeness of the post, where she explains the circumstances and then seems to offer the cake for online consumption, is supported by the emoticons. In ex. 4, the communicator performs a face-enhancing act (FEA) at the interlocutor Lolian. She is presented as a holder of a coveted property and her successful achievement is attested on her self face ('You post this video and now I also want the pot'). As a result, face work goes both in the direction of the common ground (Lolian is praised for her cooking techniques), and in the direction of the medial processing of the message (Lolian uses the available codes in the forum effectively). The post in ex. 4 is itself masterly with regard to face work. The communicator uses a superficial FTA in the form of an apparent reproach with an appropriate use of emoticons, which is featured as an FEA using paraverbal means. The post as a whole is highly (and positively) marked. We witness here a very complex and efficient form of multicodal face work, which I call "indirect polite". Verbal means of impoliteness₂ (here in the form of a reproach) are used for an FEA. Multicodality hinders the occurrence of misunderstandings and the potential perception of the utterance as being inappropriate. The response to this post is correspondingly positive.


5.2.2. Face work in the peritext

Face work occurs on online message boards not only in the posted text itself ('basic text' in my terminology) but also in what I call 'peritext' according to Genette (1987). According to Genette, 'paratexts' are texts which flank a basic text and guide the interpretation by giving additional information, for example on the work or the author. Genette distinguishes between peritext and epitext, in which the peritext is connected to the basic text in a material way and "frames" it in direct proximity (e.g. preface and blurb of a novel). The peritext presents and conditions the basic text as the author intended. It can originate from the author himself or from others involved (e.g., the editor). The epitext, in contrast, circulates in spatial and temporal separation from the basic text. However, it is secondary and closely related to the content, mostly through a metatextual reflection (e.g., a book review). The author here is not in control of the kind of presentation.


Posts appear on online message boards not as pure basic texts; rather, they are always framed by the peritext, the profile information of the user. A framing determined by the forum's provider is actually detected there. Usually on the left-hand side, some space can be found for an avatar, a nickname and some information about the activity of the user in the forum. Many forums provide a hierarchy with humorous titles that often rewards long affiliation with the forum or distinct activities. This information is generated by the operator; the users themselves cannot usually influence it. An exception is the number of positive responses on their posts that users may chose to display or not on their profile information in some forums (including Mundorecetas). It is clear that a large number of positive responses has huge face-enhancing value. If, however, no or only a few positive responses are there, the face of the user is potentially threatened, because this implies that the user's contributions are not considered helpful. Therefore,

only particularly successful users of the forum pages usually chose this option. Ex. 6 shows the profile of mary505.

mary505



Subjefa/e de cocina



Registrado: 04 Feb 2004
Mensajes: 4321
Ubicación: aqui en la cocina embadurnada de harina con las manos en la masa, en Estepona (th 21,31,ka,y pani)

This forum member has uploaded a portrait of herself as an avatar for the peritext. She reveals her first name and place of residence. Thus, she voluntarily steps out of the anonymity of the platform, and interlocutors of her contributions know her name and look her in the eye while reading. She expands the term “ubicación” (‘place’, i.e. of residence) to comply with the common ground of the forum, and stands in the kitchen with flour-covered hands. The platform itself provides more information about her. The forum member has been active in the forum for almost nine years, has contributed thousands of posts and has the second highest rank (subjefa de cocina, ‘sous-chef’, six golden spoons obtained). This information accompanies each individual post that she publishes in the forum, and sharpens the

Example 6

communicator model that her interlocutors gain when reading her posts. This helps to avoid potential misunderstandings. In the forum, mary505 assumes the role of an expert. All of this helps to prevent her contributions from being rashly classified as inappropriate.

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

Each post is followed by a signature with a motto, a link to a private website or blog, a timeline (How much weight have I lost in the last three months? When is my baby due?) or information about membership of the forum (e.g., the communicator is a member, or even head of the forum group “culo veo culo quiero”, etc.) and sometimes with a mixture of such information, as in ex. 7:



Example 7

In the signature that appears below each of her now almost 3,000 posts, the forum member placed her wishes for the New Year, including a link, a verse and two timelines. We thus learn the following about her: her wishes, the fact that she is a mother and the name of her child and its age. She also left the timeline of the already completed pregnancy in the signature. The profile information also includes hints to the common ground (common preferences, educational background, profile in the forum, geographical origin, age); one shows a part of their life (children and pets, marriage status, occupation) and thus steps out of the anonymity of the online situation. Correspondingly, the interlocutor's model of the communicator sharpens itself and the risk of misunder-

standing the tonality of a post is minimised. The information in the peritext is of great importance for the perception of the information in the basic text. Ex. 8 (below) will illustrate this.

6. Central parameters of a perception-oriented politeness analysis

In section 5, I described the multimedial strategies for face work, using examples from the Spanish-speaking cooking forum *Mundorecetas*, which are typical of communication on online message boards. At the same time, I shifted the focus to those strategies that enhance the face of the communicator and the interlocutor. Communication on online message boards is, however, as initially presented, often considered aggressive. It is therefore assumed that these strategies that make the most of the medial opportunities of online communication do not always achieve their fullest potential. This section is devoted to focusing on less successful communication on online message boards. For this purpose, I will apply a perception-oriented approach, inspired by Watts (2005) and Culpeper (2008).

Interlocutors can classify utterances as appropriate or inappropriate. This manifests itself in the responses to the posts in a thread. The thread structure is particularly beneficial to a perception-oriented analysis because the entire interaction is depicted in the corpus, and thus the perception of utterances is understandable. Perception-oriented politeness approaches, such as Watts', have so far hardly been used in corpus studies because it is usually not easy to capture the reactions of the listener in a corpus for the analysis. Online communication has a huge advantage here, and is very

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

interesting for research because the entire interaction of all participating parties is presented in verbalised (and digitalised) form.

In perception-oriented approaches, it is assumed that the grade of politeness or impoliteness of utterances can be read in the reactions of the interlocutors. It is assumed that politeness has no absolute linguistic form of realisation, but rather that it is a perceptual phenomenon constructed in discourse (cf. *inter alia* Haugh 2009). The direction of politeness research described by Eelen (2001) as “post-modern” showed that politeness does not necessarily lie in certain linguistic units; rather, it is evaluated and negotiated in the context by the participants. In his model, Watts brought together different characteristics from the politeness / impoliteness field and set them in relation to each other. This is very clear in his diagram (see next page).

Two central criteria that help to explain communication on online message boards can be read from this diagram:

+ / - appropriate → (“(in)appropriate”)

+ / - marked → (“(un)marked”)

Another criterion can be added when one considers Culpeper’s (2008) reception of Watts:

+ / - intentional (“(non)intentional”)

This criterion is present in Watts (2005) but is not applied fully consistently. “Impoliteness,” according to Watts, appears as an oppositional concept to “politeness”; moreover, he speaks of “rudeness” and “overpoliteness”. Culpeper (2008: 28) suggests a consistent consideration of the parameter “intentionality” and establishes the binary oppositions “impoliteness – rudeness” and “mock politeness – overpoliteness”, wherein the first term realises the parameter “intentionality” in each of the two pairs. With this terminology, it is now possible in the field of utterances perceived as inappropriate to constantly distinguish between utterances to

Christiane Maaß

which intentionality is ascribed and utterances classified as being a non-intentional communication failure.

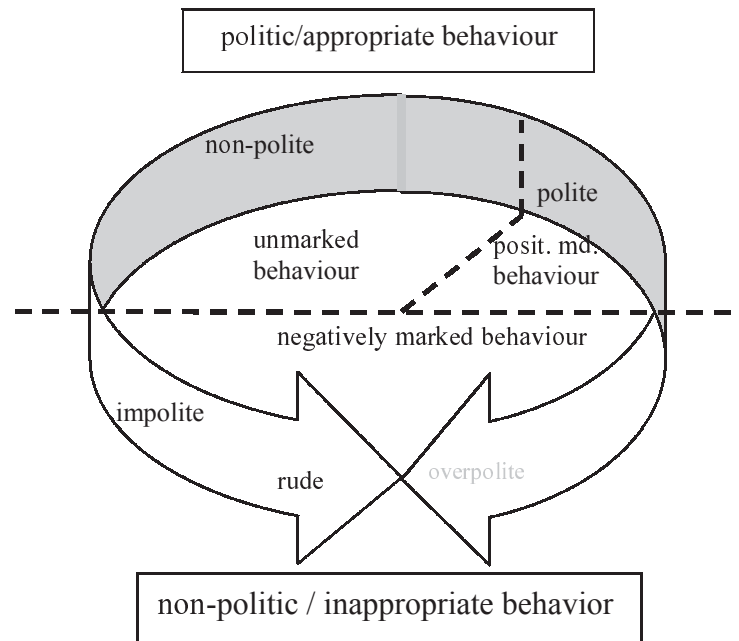


Diagram 2: "Relational work" (Watts 2005: xliii)

The distinction between "impoliteness" and "rudeness" on the one hand and "mock politeness" and "overpoliteness" on the other reveals more possibilities of differentiating: the question of the verbal means implied, whether the propositional act deviates from the illocutionary act, i.e. whether the actual utterance is enriched with typical politeness markers (conjunctive, conditional, indirect questions, modal particles, etc.) and whether this corresponds to the intention of the utterance or whether it is a matter of an indirect speech act. This distinction reflects the fact that utterances that contain verbal politeness markers on the linguistic surface can nevertheless be used to commit FTAs and may be perceived as in-

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

appropriate (“mock politeness”). Conversely, verbal means of impoliteness² may be used for face-enhancing acts, as we saw in ex. 4 (Lolian’s pressure cooker). I speak in such cases of “indirect politeness”.

This distinction is not made in the “classical” politeness approach of Brown/Levinson. Instead, this approach posits a correspondence between intention and verbal surface, an assumption for which the Brown/Levinson model has often been criticised (inter alia in Eelen’s 2001 outstanding study). The deviation of the verbal level from intention is, just like any other indirect speech act, covered by Grice’s Principle of Cooperation and the Maxims of Conversation: the situation suggests certain conversational strategies which are, however, broken. At the same time, cooperation and a message intention may be assumed. In a given situation, praise, for example, might have been expected, so that the apparent FTA violates the Maxim of Relation. Therefore, the interlocutor concludes that the speech act is probably indirect and perceives it as appropriate. This strategy represents a refraction of the “default strategy” (in the end, a speech act with a polite verbal surface was expected). That is why markedness is achieved in this way. If the speech act is detected to be appropriate, it is shifted from the unmarked “non-polite” area of the model to the one marked appropriate, but with an indirect strategy.

Following Watts (2005), I present diagram 3, taking into account the aforementioned additions, to illustrate the different parameters. The white area encompasses the utterances perceived as unmarked; the shaded areas contain those perceived as marked (whether marked negative or positive). The upper part of the diagram above the straight black line shows those deemed appropriate, while the lower shows utterances perceived as inappropriate.

Christiane Maaß

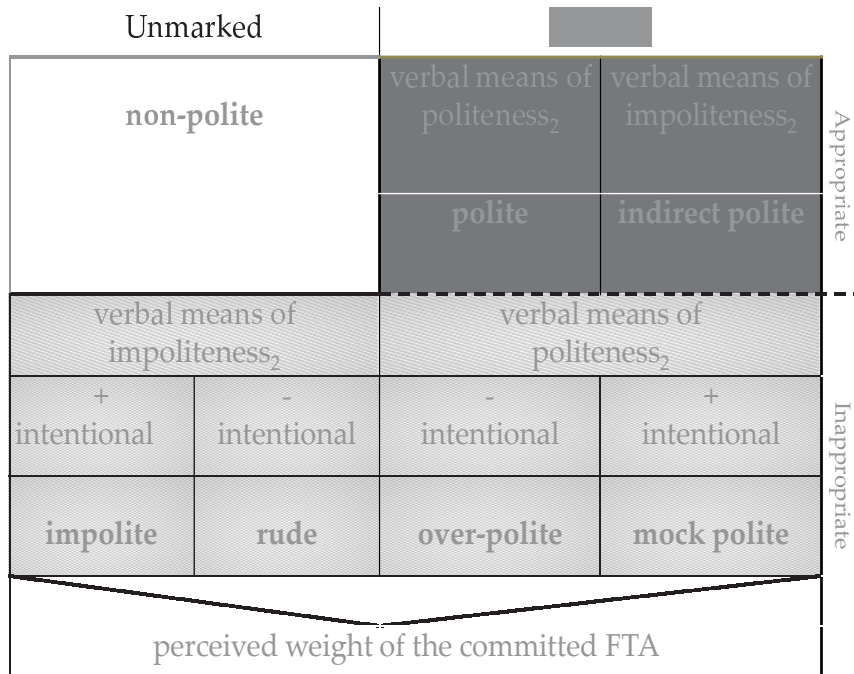


Diagram 3: Parameters for politeness/impoliteness classification

Unmarked utterances are always carried out with the standard means of politeness₂, but marked utterances in the appropriate area can be performed with means of either politeness₂ or impoliteness₂. Below left are utterances considered as inappropriate, marked and made by means of impoliteness₂ (for more on this, see below). Such utterances which are also inappropriate and marked but made by means of politeness₂ are to be placed in the bottom to the right. The criterion of intentionality is also included in the diagram. Intentional utterances are to be located in the lower part towards the outside, unintentional utterances towards the inside. The bottom curve shows that the FTAs committed are considered to be stronger once intentionality is attributed to them.

Many politeness approaches see impoliteness as a complementary concept to politeness, and these are consequently located on the same level. Such an assumption is based on the definition of impoliteness by Bousfield/Locher as “face-aggravating behaviour in a specific context” (2008: 5). Impoliteness functions here as a generic term for a number of face-threatening actions and utterance acts. The model of Watts (2005)/Culpeper (2008) which I modified, on the other hand, contains a proposal to see impoliteness as one of a whole array of inappropriate types of behaviour. Eelen (2001) had already pointed out that politeness and impoliteness are not binary concepts. With the model presented in my diagram, a whole field of possible estimations of utterances opens up, whose reflection is indeed to be seen in the corpus.

In my conception, such terms as “politeness” and “impoliteness” appear at two levels of abstraction: at the level of linguistic means and at the level of the utterance’s assessment by the interlocutors. The latter, as in Eelen (2001), may be classified as a First-Order Phenomenon (lay understanding of politeness), because it is about the way in which linguistic agents classify a speech utterance in a very specific situation in terms of its appropriateness. In order to do that, the interlocutors use intuitive politeness concepts (i.e. politeness₁). The level of classification of linguistic means is, on the other hand, the subject of linguistic studies (scientific understanding of politeness). Modal particles, indirect formulations, certain discourse markers, the conditional, etc. count as typical verbal means of politeness₂. Typical verbal means of impoliteness₂ include conative utterances without mitigation, threats and insults, taboo words and many more. These can be used as an indirect politeness strategy (they are then always marked and suggest communicative closeness). In the very same way, politeness₂ markers can be used for inappropriate communication (in the form of mock politeness or overpoliteness).

Next, I will come to the pairs of opposites (+/- intentional, +/- appropriate, +/- marked) and explain how they help to explain the nature of communication on online message boards.

6.1. Criterion: +/- intentional

In the approach of Locher/Watts (2005), it is not entirely clear how the two terms “impoliteness” and “rudeness” relate to each other, but it seems that “impoliteness” is considered to be a generic term. Culpeper, on the other hand, reserves the term “rudeness” for such cases in which the committing of an FTA was not intended, and he speaks here of “relational mismanagement” (2008: 31). To him, impoliteness is intentional: “a matter of negatively-oriented relational management”. It is based, as Culpeper points out, on a general observation that “hostile and aggressive behaviour” (2008: 32) is rated as being more negative when it is perceived as intentional. This observation is also supported by the findings in the corpus. Therefore, Culpeper’s distinction *impolite* (+ intentional) vs. *rude* (- intentional) makes sense and is accordingly used here, likewise with the pair of opposites *mock polite* (+ intentional) vs. *overpolite* (- intentional). Thus, two terminological binary oppositions can be distinguished in the area of inappropriate communication:

linguistic means	+ intentional	- intentional
Impolite	Impoliteness	Rudeness
Polite	Mock politeness	Overpoliteness

Diagram 4: Inappropriate communication

- Impoliteness is therefore an intentional committing of FTAs with verbal means of impoliteness₂, while rudeness is com-

mitting FTAs with verbal means of impoliteness₂, which is attributed to an inability of well-bred and adequate uttering.

- Mock politeness is thus the intentional committing of FTAs with verbal means of politeness₂, whereas overpoliteness is also performed with the verbal means of politeness₂ but interpreted by the interlocutors as a communicative weakness (Culpeper mentions the example of “too polite” dishonesty, which is negatively rated by the interlocutors).

In negatively marked communication, the intentional committing of FTAs is estimated as a more serious breach than the inability to communicate adequately.

Due to the lack of grounding in the communicative situation in the forum, it is often not clear to the users how to judge a contribution. Is it still OK (politic behaviour) or rude? Or is it even impolite?

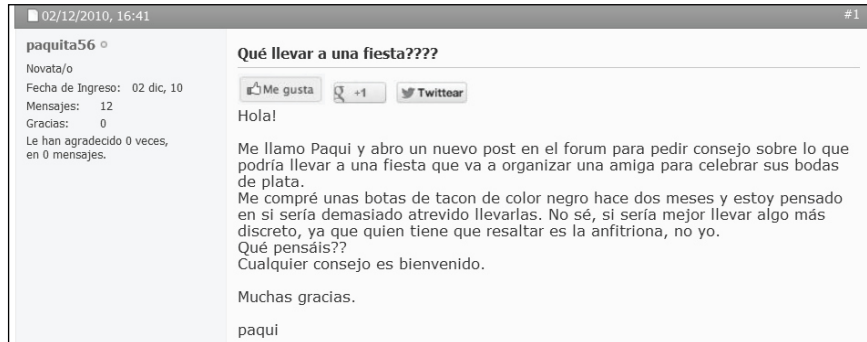
6.2. Criterion: +/- appropriate

According to Watts (2005), behaviour may be perceived as either “appropriate” or “inappropriate”. In his essay of 2003, he refers to appropriate behaviour as “politic behaviour”, which he defines as “behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction” (Watts 2003: 164). He emphasises that the evaluation of an utterance as appropriate or inappropriate is purely personal and can be part of negotiation processes, but is not subject to objective criteria: “The evaluation remains individual and can at best become interpersonal and intersubjective, but can never be objectively verifiable” (Watts 2003: 164). Utterances that do not affect or that even enhance the interlocutor’s face (or that of a third party discussed) are generally perceived as ‘appropriate’. Speech acts that threaten the interlocutor’s face (or a third party discussed) tend to be per-

ceived as 'inappropriate'. The question of whether a post is appropriate or not is repeatedly discussed on online message boards. The lack of grounding in the communicative situation is clearly a major factor: even utterances equipped with verbal means of politeness can be perceived as inappropriate (as "mock polite"), as the additional paraverbal and nonverbal codes available in a face-to-face situation (intonation, facial expressions, gestures) are missing. In a face-to-face situation, those paraverbal and nonverbal markers are added to the verbal politeness markers, so that the intended degree of politeness is not communicated purely verbally. The same verbal utterance accompanied with a smile, classified in a face-to-face situation as unmarked and appropriate, could, in online communication and with the missing extra coding, be evaluated as a deficit and thus classified as inappropriate (i.e. "rude" or "mock polite").

One such example is found in 8. A relatively new member of the forum "Belleza maquillaje y estética" ('Beauty, make-up and elegance') on Mundorecetas posts the question of whether it seems appropriate to the interlocutors to wear new black high-heeled boots to her friend's silver wedding, because the hostess should really be the centre of the occasion. The post contains (except for a slightly emphatic punctuation in the headline and in the penultimate sentence) no paraverbal or nonverbal information, neither in the base text nor in the peritext. The peritext is limited to a minimum; other than the (obligatory) nickname and the system-generated data, there is no further information or a signature. Paquita56 has not even yet deactivated the feature that displays how often her contributions were identified as helpful, so a face-threatening value "0" stands in the profile. The grounding in the communicative situation is minimal, because Paquita56 does not give the interlocutors any interpretation guidelines.

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards



Example 8

Initially, the interlocutors are irritated and commit FTAs against her: Lo_Madhouse, Subjefa de cocina (the second highest rank ‘sous-chef’) and owner of six spoons in the forum, questions the power of a simple pair of boots:

Tan impresionantes son las botas que van a destacar sobre el resto del mundo?

Example 9

(‘Are these boots so impressive that they will outshine the rest of the world?’) Even Hiphopsus, owner of the highest rank Jefa de cocina (‘head chef’) with 7 spoons, makes fun of her openly – suggesting that the shoes are probably set with diamonds:

XDDD Tendrán diamantes o vete tú a saber 😄

Example 10

Two members give kind answers and make suggestions to the question raised by Paquita56. Obviously, they take the question to be legitimate and appropriate. Another member criticises those


Christiane Maaß

who commented earlier for their unfriendly responses. Lo_Madhouse explains herself: she assumes that Paquita56, who began the thread, in turn makes fun of them. After all, one may wear black boots almost for all occasions:

Es que yo creo que es ella quién nos está tomando el pelo. Desde cuando unas botas negras de tacón son impactantes? Yo, como Yoli, impactaría a diario, sin necesidad de bodorrios.

Example 11

This and the following posts show the uncertainty about how the initial post is to be understood. Rociocc (owner of five spoons) expresses even the presumption that Paquita56 could be a troll, because she is apparently new to the forum and began the thread without any further comments from her side:

Pues no sabemos porque no se ha vuelto a pronunciar y era su 2do post así que troll? 

Example 12

(‘And we do not know why she did not come back to explain herself and it was only her second post, so that perhaps troll?’) This judgment is very interesting: Rociocc assumes here that Paquita56’s contribution was mock polite, i.e. an inappropriate, intentional act of disturbing by means of politeness². Therefore, we can state that the judgements shift from “appropriate” (Paquita56 gets a friendly answer) to “rude” (the question is repudiated as nonsense that bothers the other forum members) towards “mock polite” (Paquita56 is a troll!).

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

It is most likely that Paquita56 was just a novice user who made her first communicative attempts in the forum and logged out after a few miserable failures. In a thread where she immediately becomes a discussed third, she does not even respond. It is interesting that, in the context of her relatively short stay in the forum, she did not acquire the paraverbal and nonverbal codes that are missing even in her previous and subsequent contributions, and thus she received only few kind answers to her posts. Her communication partners had too little information about the common ground and could not create a plausible communicator model. Indeed, over the next six months of her involvement in the forum, Paquita56's communication was a subject of misunderstandings; she was repeatedly discussed as a third party and had to put up with FTAs until she left the forum a few months later.

6.3. Criterion: +/- marked

This analysis also provides insights into the third criterion: the markedness of communication on online message boards.

Any forms of inappropriate communication and cases in which the communicator uses a degree of politeness more than the situation requires are referred to as being marked. Watts describes such utterances as "polite" in the strict sense of the word. My hypothesis is that communication in forums has a tendency to markedness: unmarked utterances run the risk of being classified as inappropriate or becoming the subject of a discussion about their appropriateness. The other users then discuss how certain statements in the thread could be understood (as the example of Paquita56 clearly shows). Such negotiation processes are highly face-threatening. If forum members are directly asked about their intentions, they are forced into a position of self-justification which is face-threatening. But the FTAs become even more serious if forum

members are not directly asked about their intentions, and others negotiate the degree of appropriateness of the utterances that the forum member concerned has made. They thus become the discussed third, the “subject” of a discussion. Through the medial disposition of the message board, they perceive this discussion, and they are discussed about in their own presence. This situation is highly face-threatening, both online and offline (cf. Maaß 2012).

To avoid such a situation, successful communicators tend to give hints to the correct interpretation of their utterances. These hints tend to be multiconodal and push their posts out of the unmarked into the marked area of the politeness model presented. Such strategies increase the chance of being perceived as appropriate contributors.

Markedness is associated with affect, and involves positive or negative emotions (cf. Culpeper 2008: 23). In Watts’ approach, the normal degree of politeness that can be expected in a given situation is not considered as ‘polite’ in the narrow sense of the word. It is unmarked, appropriate behaviour that he pointedly calls “non-polite”. Such behaviour, which is frequent in everyday offline communication, tends to be avoided in communication on the successful online message boards of *Mundorecetas*. Unmarked, ‘non-politic’ behaviour is, according to Watts, acting exactly in the scope of what is to be expected in a given situation. This includes the normal polite manners that are appropriate and are highly dependent on the situation. The scope is given by the scenario (restaurant, meeting friends, family, contacts with authorities, etc.) and by the role of each conversation partner in that scenario.

Situations in which all participants could reliably indicate what is to be expected must be grown historically and provided with clearly defined roles. None of this is the case in online communication. In the online world, there are less standardised situations of

On the Markedness of Communication on Online Message Boards

the type “buying bread at the bakery” or “eating out”, which, off-line, are prototypical examples of possible non-polite behaviour.

Furthermore, the intercultural aspect is not to be underestimated. The forum is Spanish-speaking; users come from all parts of the Spanish-speaking world. The base of the expectable is therefore quite small. In addition, the role assignments are often not so clear. In the “buying bread” situation, it is pretty much clear offline who the baker is and who the customer is. On online message boards, roles (such as expert / layperson) are subject to negotiation processes. A stable perception of appropriateness cannot be easily stabilised in open platforms. The example of Paquita⁵⁶ shows that, without grounding in the communicative situation, even the issue of appropriate shoe wearing is susceptible to severe misunderstandings.

What is important here, as we have seen, is paraverbal and non-verbal information of the situational context, of the ongoing scenario, of the roles that the interlocutors play and of the tone of the comments, because they provide us with interpretation aids. Culpeper points out that the “[l]ack of norm ‘sharedness’ may cause communicative difficulty”, where he mainly has in mind the area of “cross-cultural misunderstandings” (2008: 29). ‘Lack of sharedness’, however, can also very concretely refer to information about the current situation, the grounding and the image that the interlocutors have of each other. Here, online communication, through the medial nature of the platforms on which it runs, offers particularly less information. This curtails the range of communicative acts which are easily perceived as “unmarked” and situationally appropriate. Successful communication members compensate for this lack by multicodeal face work, which then shifts their contributions into the marked area of the model.

7. Conclusion: Internet communication tends to be marked

Forum communication has developed its own codes, which do not represent a compensation for, nor a projection of, offline communication; rather it has developed its own semiosis. These codes are complex and powerful; they function differently from the facial or gestural codes in offline communication. For example, they must be set explicitly and they do not appear spontaneously for inexperienced users as a mimic expression does. Experienced users can, however, internalise these codes and embed them in their contributions and comments very effectively. This allows them to practise face work that matches the possibilities of an offline situation. With these verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal codes, they create a common ground which leads to making such appropriately equipped forum communication no more prone to aggressive behaviour than that offline. We saw some successful examples of face work on online message boards. These examples show positively marked communication with a well-defined common ground and information for a positively marked communicator model on the part of the interlocutor.

If the user lacks practice and does not embed the codes efficiently, the grounding processes will not work properly. The users then run the risk of their posts being misunderstood and classified as inappropriate. Discussions about the possible intentions of a forum member who is present and reading the comments at his or her expense are highly face-threatening. This is, however, often the case in forum communication, in which communication partners try to figure out the intentions of the less practiced users. Posts without adequate situational grounding trigger aggressive responses. If other forum members then defend the position of the attacked third and commit further FTAs, the discussion in a thread

may degenerate and confirm the existing prejudice against this form of communication.

Hence, communication on online message boards tends to be marked: positively marked in the scope of the 'appropriate behaviour' area of Watt's model and my modification of it (see above), and negatively marked in the scope of 'inappropriate behaviour' area. Markedness can be produced by different strategies. The typical verbal means of politeness and impoliteness can be used with reversed signs to create markedness in an efficient manner. Unmarked communication is risky: insufficient situational grounding may lead the interlocutors to perceive posts as inappropriate. Emphatic communication helps thus to avoid misunderstandings and aggression.

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Christiane Maaß

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