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## FACE EFFECTS OF VERBAL ANTAGONISM IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

### **Abstract**

Based on a corpus of internet discussions on medical topics, this study examines a salient characteristic of the genre – the prevalence of aggressive verbal antagonism. Drawing on concepts of face, rapport management and relational work, I argue that the effects of verbally aggressive behaviour in this genre are not only destructive and anti-social, but also perform a constructive function, offering benefits both to individual speakers and to the discourse community as a whole. The analysis shows how speakers target different aspects of their opponents' face, deploying a range of face attack strategies (moves). The study then seeks to demonstrate how aggressive facework can help speakers construct and enhance their own face, as well as functioning as a stimulus to constructive relational work among participants.

### **Key words**

*Community of practice; computer-mediated communication; discourse community; face; ingroup; membership categorization; online discussions; relational work; verbal antagonism*

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## **1. Introduction**

As a new and still developing genre of computer-mediated communication (CMC), internet discussion forums have attracted considerable attention from linguists in recent years, with approaches ranging from conversation analysis to interpersonal pragmatics. This article focuses on one of the most salient properties of the genre – the prevalence of verbal antagonism among participants in online discussions (Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Bolander 2013; Hardaker 2010,

2013; Hopkinson 2012, 2013; Kleinke 2010; Lewis 2005; Neurauter-Kessels 2011; Perelmutter 2013; Reid 1999; Shum and Lee 2013; Upadhyay 2010; this list also includes studies of related genres, e.g. blog discussions).

When seeking to account for this phenomenon, studies have generally emphasized two key factors. Firstly, online discussions are not face-to-face (FTF) communication; participants are not in physical proximity to each other, and they do not see each other during the interaction. Secondly, the participants tend to be anonymous. Although they are free to use their real names if they wish, in practice they do so only rarely, tending instead to prefer virtual identities. (Although some discussion sites require users to participate under their real names, in the majority of forums users merely need to set up an account under a freely chosen user name; on some sites it is not even necessary to have an account or log in.) The combination of these two factors – physical remoteness and anonymity – means that the interaction takes place in the absence of the social context cues that are present in FTF communication (Bolander 2013: 71–72). This potentially has a dehumanizing effect; when involved in antagonistic discussions, participants may come to view their opponents not as real human beings but as mere characters in a highly competitive game. The above-mentioned factors have also been linked with “decreased social inhibition” in CMC (Reid 1999: 111); Hardaker likewise observes that anonymity in online discussions “can [...] foster a sense of impunity, loss of self-awareness, and a likelihood of acting upon normally inhibited impulses” (Hardaker 2010: 224). The genre thus offers an ideal environment for intensely antagonistic behaviour to flourish, with some participants evidently feeling licensed to behave towards their opponents with a degree of heightened aggression that they would generally avoid in FTF interaction. Typical patterns of verbal behaviour in online discussions include the rapid escalation of conflicts – which quickly descend into exchanges of personal insults known as “flamewars” (Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Perelmutter 2013) – and the deliberately disruptive behaviour known as “trolling” (Hardaker 2010, 2013; Hopkinson 2013).

This study sets out to build on the growing body of work addressing antagonism in interactive online settings by exploring a dimension which I consider crucial to understanding this type of behaviour: face and facework. Analyzing a corpus of discussions on medical topics, I set out to explore the face effects of verbal antagonism. This involves not only the intended effects on the face of the target (the opponent), but also the effects on the face of the speaker and the effects on the discourse community to which he/she belongs. My approach is underpinned by a view of verbal antagonism as a form of strategic behaviour, through which the speaker seeks to achieve his/her face goals. Such behaviour serves a dual purpose; it not only damages the opponent’s face, but also enhances the speaker’s own face and potentially has beneficial effects upon the discourse community as a whole. In other words, verbal antagonism is more than merely a destructive, socially disruptive form of behaviour; it also plays a profoundly constructive, social role in the discourse. Although this constructive dimension of antagonism has been addressed by some researchers (e.g. Dobs and Garcés-

Conejos Blitvich 2013; Graham 2007; Neurauter-Kessels 2011; Upadhyay 2010), it still remains somewhat underexplored in the literature.

This paper is divided into three main sections. First I present the corpus and briefly characterize the social context of the discourse, with a particular focus on the existence of distinct discourse communities that can be characterized as ingroup and outgroup. The following two sections then move on to address the two main aims of the study. In section 3, I examine the potential effects of verbal antagonism upon the face of the opponent, drawing primarily on Spencer-Oatey's rapport management framework (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2002, 2007) to present a typology of face attacks targeting different aspects of the opponent's face. In section 4, I explore the effects of verbal antagonism upon the speaker and the discourse community; here I set out to demonstrate the constructive effects of such behaviour, which can both enhance the face of individual speakers and contribute to social cohesion within the discourse community.

## **2. The material: online discourse communities and discussions as a form of social practice**

The corpus analyzed for this study consists of 20 online discussions hosted on the website of the British newspaper *The Guardian* between January and May 2013. These discussions are attached to articles taken from the "Science" section of the website ([www.theguardian.com/science](http://www.theguardian.com/science)), and they deal with a range of issues related to new developments in medical science and health; topics include resistance to antibiotics, health benefits of antioxidants, a recent vaccination/public health scandal in the UK, back pain, avian influenza, the coronavirus pandemic, and allergies to junk food. Medical topics were chosen primarily because of the highly personal and potentially emotive nature of topics related to human health; it was felt that this would elicit a particularly antagonistic tenor in the interaction, thus providing an ideal data set for analyzing face attacks.

The corpus contains a total of 4,450 comments, making up approximately 400,000 words; the majority of the discussions involved between 50 and 100 participants. For the purposes of this study the corpus was subjected to a manual qualitative analysis to identify the key antagonistic facework strategies used, their means of realization, and their functions in the discourse. Quantitative questions remain outside the scope of the present study.

Regarding the ethical dimension of using this type of data for research, I would echo the opinion expressed by Neurauter-Kessels (2011), who states that "it is safe to say that we are dealing here with an unrestricted public space on these on-line media sites and users are aware that they are operating in a public place and are faced with a potentially large and anonymous audience attending the speech event." (Neurauter-Kessels 2011: 193–4) I would also add that the contributors to the discussion boards are entirely anonymous (should they wish to be), so privacy is not an issue.

One of the most salient aspects of online discussions, with significant implications for the practice of verbal antagonism, is the polylogic nature of the genre (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004). The properties of the medium and the structure of online discussion sites enable participants to engage in multi-party dialogue to an extent that is not physically possible in face-to-face communication; an online discussion can potentially involve hundreds of contributors. This, in turn, stimulates the formation of discourse communities (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010; Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2011; Perelmutter 2013; Upadhyay 2010). Besides offering a space for users to construct and project their own individual identities, online discussion boards thus also enable participants to cultivate and project a social identity, aligning themselves with the values of a given community and engaging in acts of social bonding with other community members. The concept of “discourse community” was developed e.g. by Swales (1990), who characterized it as a group whose members share, among other things, a set of broadly agreed common “public goals” and mechanisms of intercommunication (Swales 1990: 24 ff.). “Discourse community” is viewed here as being essentially synonymous with “community of practice” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) – that is, as an aggregate of people who share and co-enact “[w]ays of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464).

This social dimension is of crucial importance in the practice of verbal antagonism, as the discussions frequently become polarized into two distinct, mutually opposed communities. Discussion boards tend to have a “core” community whose members share similar opinions and value systems; this community functions as the ingroup (see e.g. Hopkinson 2012, 2013). In the discussions examined here, which address medical topics, the core community consists of participants who present themselves as experts in medicine or related sciences. The central attribute of this ingroup is therefore its expertise; for many participants, the possession of medical or scientific expertise, and the sense of belonging to an ingroup of experts, are clearly important components of their identity. (This does not necessarily mean that ingroup members always agree with each other in the discussions. However, even when disagreeing on a particular topic, their strategies of argumentation still typically remain anchored what may be characterized as “ingroup values”, indicating that the discussants in question share broadly the same worldview. These ingroup values – including, for example, a preference for rational, evidence-based arguments over intuitive claims – are discussed further in the following section.) Participants who do not share this core community’s values, and who instead view themselves as dissenting voices, represent an outgroup. The outgroup in the discussions examined here is less cohesive and more diffuse than the ingroup, yet it can be broadly characterized as a loose community of “anti-experts”, united by their shared contempt for the perceived arrogance and elitism of medical experts; these outgroup members are frequently adherents of various forms of “alternative” medicine such as homeopathy.

Due to the rapid escalation of conflicts that is typical of the genre, there is a tendency for the discourse to become highly polarized at an early stage in the discussion (Hopkinson 2013, 2013). Although some participants in the analyzed discussions initially engage in relatively nuanced and constructive debate with their opponents, these more moderate voices soon tend to be drowned out by those of the more radical contributors; the tenor of the discussion becomes increasingly strident, and in most cases the “moderates” eventually abandon the floor entirely. With the middle ground vacated, the discussion becomes essentially a battle between two implacably opposed camps. Given that the members of a discourse community (community of practice) share and co-enact “[w]ays of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464), then it is clear that this combative, uncompromising mode of behaviour in fact represents the community’s interactional norm; participants evidently expect each other to behave in this way, and such behaviour is considered appropriate to the interaction.

### **3. Face effects of verbal antagonism on the target: a typology of face attack moves**

In this section I first briefly outline the theoretical basis of my approach before moving on to offer a typology of face attack moves targeting different aspects of the opponent’s face, based on a qualitative analysis of the material corpus. The concept of moves – i.e. the various steps taken by speakers in an attempt to achieve certain goals in the ongoing discourse – draws on Bhatia’s (2004) genre-analytical notion of “rhetorical moves”. The metaphor originates in the domain of game-playing, with players (e.g. in a game of chess) taking turns to make moves against each other; this metaphor appears particularly apt given the highly competitive and adversarial nature of many online discussions.

My approach to antagonism is anchored in the Goffmanian concept of face, defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [...] during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes [...]” (Goffman 1955/1967: 5). In this approach, face is simultaneously an individual psychological construct (the individual’s idea of him/herself) and a social phenomenon (created through facework in interaction). A key aspect of antagonistic verbal behaviour is the speaker’s use of various face attack strategies in an attempt to damage the opponent’s face; a face attack can be defined as a face-threatening act (FTA) performed with the deliberate intention of damaging the addressee’s face. In terms of the face effects of such an act, the problem for the analyst is that it is often not possible reliably and unambiguously to determine the actual impact of a face attack on its target. In some cases the addressee’s subsequent response (e.g. angry, defensive or counter-attacking) makes the effect of the FTA clear. However, if the addressee does not respond, then gauging the possible effects of an FTA is primarily an interpretative judgement rather

than an analytical one. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is often possible to make a valid, context-informed assessment of the likely effect of a face-attacking act, even in the absence of incontrovertible linguistic evidence. This issue is addressed by O'Driscoll (2007), who argues that the severity of an FTA depends on two factors: "the amount of face-change it predicates and the amount of salience accorded to face at the time" (O'Driscoll 2007: 243). In the discussions examined here, the majority of face attacks predicate a large amount of face-change (as they are typically performed with a high degree of intensity), and face can be viewed as highly salient (given that damaging the opponent's face is the primary goal of such acts).

My approach to face attacks draws mainly on Spencer-Oatey's rapport management theory (e.g. 2000, 2002, 2007), which views face as consisting of three components: quality face, social identity face, and relational face. Quality face concerns the individual's positive self-image (self-esteem) arising from his/her claim to be a possessor of positive personal qualities (competence, intelligence, morality, etc.) on whose basis he/she is favourably evaluated by others (Spencer-Oatey 2002: 540). Social identity face (a category which draws on Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory – e.g. Tajfel and Turner 1979) relates to an individual's membership of a social, ethnic, national, professional or other group; the membership of such a group represents one source of the individual's positive self-image. Relational face concerns the individual's status as a participant in the given interaction, characterized by Spencer-Oatey as "the relationship between the participants (e.g. distance–closeness, equality–inequality, perceptions of role rights and obligations), and the ways in which this relationship is managed or negotiated" (2007: 647). Relational face is closely connected with the concept of equity rights (Spencer-Oatey 2002: 540), which concern an individual's desire or expectancy that he/she will be treated fairly, with due consideration and respect, when interacting with others. A denial of an individual's equity rights thus represents an attack on that person's relational face; being treated with due respect by one's interlocutors will enhance a person's face, while being ignored, mocked or denied the opportunity to speak is likely to cause face damage.

As I have mentioned above, the central "approved social attribute" among the core community of discussion participants (the ingroup) is expertise. The sense of belonging to and representing a community of experts lies at the heart of ingroup members' face-claims. This "expertise-face" is a complex construct, which involves more than merely the possession of expert knowledge. It also encompasses a range of related attributes which can be considered the core values of the ingroup community – including the possession of natural intelligence, a healthy scepticism, and a rational, empirical worldview. Similarly, ingroup members frequently characterize the outgroup (i.e. the non-experts or anti-experts) not only as being ignorant of expert knowledge, but also as being of low intelligence, credulous, naïve, gullible, over-emotional, and prone to non-rational modes of thought such as mysticism.

All three components of face – quality face, social identity face, and relational face – are at stake in the interaction, and they are involved in a constant inter-

play. For example, an ingroup member writing a contribution to the discussion may present him/herself as an intelligent, rational individual and a possessor of knowledge and expertise (quality face); as a member of a prestigious and respected group – scientists or the medical profession (social identity face); and as someone who deserves to be taken seriously and treated with due respect by his/her interlocutors (relational face). All three of these components may be acknowledged by interlocutors (supportive facework), or they may be attacked (antagonistic facework). Quality face may be attacked by criticizing the speaker's ignorance of the topic, thus threatening his/her claimed status as an expert; social identity face may be attacked by denigrating the medical profession or scientists in general; and relational face may be threatened if the individual is demonstratively not taken seriously (for example when ridiculed by means of irony). The individual's face thus remains in constant flux – and constantly vulnerable to attack and damage – throughout the interaction.

In the following paragraphs I outline a typology of the main types of antagonistic moves used by speakers in the discussions, categorized depending on which of the three components of face can be considered the primary target. Due to space constraints, I focus solely on face attacks performed by ingroup members against outgroup members, and not vice versa; I also focus exclusively on face attack, rather than on face defence. (In any case, face defence strategies are usually based on counter-attacking moves, and thus involve similar or identical mechanisms to those used in the attacking moves examined below – though hedging strategies can also be used as a means of pre-emptive defence, reducing the speaker's vulnerability to future face attack.)

### *3.1 Attacks on quality face*

Face attacks directed at an opponent's quality face either target the opponent's previous claims or denigrate the opponent personally. A distinction can be drawn here between what Kleinke (2010) terms "propositional disagreement" and "personal disagreement". Propositional disagreement involves negative evaluation of the propositional content of a previous contribution (Kleinke 2010: 207), whereas personal disagreement (using the term "disagreement" in a very broad sense of the word) "is directed at a negative evaluation of personal traits of the interlocutors" (Kleinke 2010: 211). As Kleinke acknowledges, the boundary between these two categories is not clear-cut; any propositional disagreement can potentially be interpreted as an implicit attack on the personal qualities of the opponent, such as their intelligence or degree of knowledge. Both types tend to be co-present to varying degrees in face-attacking moves, so it makes more sense to speak not of a dichotomy between them, but rather of one type being foregrounded (more dominant) and the other type being backgrounded within a particular utterance.

In the corpus analyzed for this study, utterances expressing propositional disagreement tend either to be left unmitigated, or to have their pragmatic force boosted; this is in keeping with the highly antagonistic, aggressive tenor of the

discourse. Speakers use two main mechanisms of boosting the force of propositional disagreement: juxtaposition with personal disagreement, and lexical intensification.

The direct juxtaposition of propositional and personal disagreement can be seen in the following example. Speaker 1 (S1) is an outgroup member commenting on the topic of vaccination, while Speaker 2 (S2) is an ingroup member defending the efficacy of the vaccine:

- (1) S1 MMR [the combined measles/mumps/rubella vaccine] is unproven against rubella  
 S2 No it's not. Someone else was bleating on about this on another thread last week and I went off and found the studies.

S2's propositional disagreement (*No it's not.*) is immediately followed by an implication that S1 too is *bleating on*; by using the metaphor of a sheep, associated with stupidity and an unthinking flock mentality, this utterance clearly goes beyond propositional disagreement and enters into the territory of a personal attack on the opponent's quality face. Propositional and personal disagreement are thus strung together in a two-stage move, with the latter lending additional aggressive force to the former.

The second main mechanism used for boosting the force of propositional disagreement is lexical intensification, as in the following example:

- (2) Jesus. The sheer ignorance of your comment is staggering.

Here it is the combination of the expressive interjection *Jesus* and the intensifying function of *sheer* and *staggering* that helps to push the disagreement into personal territory; although the criticism is ostensibly grounded in propositional disagreement (it is the opponent's comment that is criticized), the aggressive intensity with which it is expressed clearly signals the speaker's intent to overlay this propositional disagreement with a strong element of personal face attack. (The overlap between propositional and personal elements in criticisms of this type is discussed by Bolander 2013: 55–56.) Such moves generally have the effect of ratcheting up the level of antagonism in the conversational exchange. In my data, criticisms of this type tend to provoke hostile defensive responses based on personal attacks (if the opponent bothers to respond at all). Such moves thus frequently mark a point of transition, at which the tenor of the exchange shifts from propositional to personal disagreement (cf. Bousfield 2007: 2190 ff. on face threats as “triggers” to impoliteness). This is a typical mechanism by which “topic decay” (Lewis 2005) occurs, as discussions typically drift away from the topic and spiral into increasingly intense and personal antagonism (“flamewars”).

Other face attacks make little or no pretence at engaging with the opponent on the level of propositional disagreement, and are instead based primarily on personal disagreement. Such personal face attacks are expressed with varying

degrees of explicitness. At the most explicit end of the spectrum is open personal abuse. In the following example, S1 is an outgroup member who takes an anti-expert stance on the issue of vaccination safety, provoking hostile responses by two ingroup members (S2 and S3) who mount personal attacks on the opponent's quality face:

- (3) S1 Children's health should not be in the hands of drug companies or even doctors [...] Unvaccinated children are much healthier than vaccinated children [...] Please listen to common sense, you're destroying a generation of children.
- S2 Common sense is only as good as the sense guiding it. In your case, zero.
- S3 You, my friend, are a moron. Unfortunately there's no vaccine for that.

However, face attacks involving personal disagreement are subject to certain constraints. Overly aggressive verbal behaviour may, if it goes beyond the threshold of what is considered acceptable by the given discourse community, be deemed to have breached community norms of interaction. These norms are often codified in the form of guidelines, and on many discussion boards they are policed by moderators, who have the power to censor or remove posts that contain taboo language, personal abuse, legally dubious statements, and so on. For this reason, participants are constrained in the degree of explicitness with which they can carry out personal face attacks. In order to sidestep these restrictions, speakers frequently perform such face attacks in more implicit ways, by means of conversational implicature, so that hearers arrive at the intended meaning on the basis of a contextual judgement. Culpeper (2011) labels this strategy "implicational impoliteness". The following example of such a move is taken from a discussion about an article reporting on a medical study which shows that some forms of back pain are caused by bacterial infection, and can therefore be treated by antibiotics. One reader appears to ignore the content of the article, maintaining that chronic back pain is caused by "musculoskeletal misalignment" and can therefore be cured by exercise. This provokes a response by another reader:

- (4) Bacterial infection. Infection. Bacteria. Infection by bacteria. Did I mention bacterial infection? Now, read the article again, especially the stuff about bacterial infection.

Here the speaker's propositional disagreement is overlaid by a strong element of personal disagreement, as the constant repetition of this basic point is likely to be interpreted as an implied attack on the opponent's lack of intelligence. However, the speaker has managed to convey this message without in any way breaching the community guidelines.

### 3.2 *Attacks on social identity face*

Face attacks directed at an opponent's social identity face are anchored in the community dimension of the genre, with its polarization into an ingroup and an outgroup, each associated with a set of (stereo)typical values. Moves of this type function by explicitly categorizing an opponent as a member of the other group, and then attacking that group. In social psychology this is referred to as altercasting, defined as "acting in such a way as to communicate to other how he or she is categorized by actor" (McCall 2003: 330). Altercasting involves the existence of a pre-existing "category" in the sense of Sacks' theory of membership categorization (e.g. Sacks 1972a, b). Such categories are "inference-rich" – they are "the store house and the filing system for the common-sense knowledge that ordinary people [...] have about what people are like, how they behave, etc." (Schegloff 2007: 469). The salience of such categories in facework is explored by Ruhi (2010). The process of altercasting is advantageous to the speaker because it offers a conceptual shortcut; instead of engaging with the complex nuances of each individual opponent's opinions, the speaker can simply reduce all opponents to an undifferentiated mass, attributing the same stereotypical opinions and values to them all. Altercasting thus clearly saves cognitive effort. In addition, the process of de-individualization that is central to altercasting can lend extra force to a face attack by signalling that the speaker does not consider that his/her opponent merits being treated as an individual; this represents an attack on the opponent's relational face.

In the following example, the opponent's social identity face as an anti-expert outgroup member is attacked by ridiculing the outgroup for its alleged rejection of scientific advances and preference for archaic beliefs (epitomized by the conviction that the earth is flat):

- (5) You should read the article a bit more closely, rather than firing off the usual flat-earthier response to any form of scientific advance.

The pre-constructed, stereotypical nature of the categories used in altercasting moves is underscored by the speaker's characterization of the opponent's views as *the usual* [...] *response*; this serves to de-individualize the opponent's views (and thus the opponent him/herself).

In some cases of altercasting the outgroup is not explicitly labelled, but instead is characterized on the basis of some stereotypical behaviour. In the following example, the opponent is altercast as a member of the anti-vaccination community by means of a reference to the anti-vaccination website [www.whale.to](http://www.whale.to) (this website is a frequent target of ridicule from ingroup members for its propagation of conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific speculation):

- (6) Do you actually have some medical qualification? Or do you simply trawl Whale.to for “evidence” to support your quackpot prejudices you ejaculate over these forums?

Here the speaker attacks multiple components of the opponent’s face. In addition to the attack on social identity face (by altercasting the opponent as a member of a ridiculed outgroup), there is also an attack on quality face, based on (i) the opponent’s alleged lack of expertise (lack of medical qualifications), and (ii) the opponent’s alleged irrationality and lack of mental competence (*quackpot prejudices*). The face attack is further aggravated by the use of an expressive lexical item (*quackpot*) and an unflattering metaphor (*ejaculate*).

### ***3.3 Attacks on relational face***

Face attacks directed at an opponent’s relational face concern the opponent’s status within the ongoing interaction. Of particular relevance here is the concept of equity rights (Spencer-Oatey 2002: 540), which concern an individual’s desire or expectancy that he/she will be treated fairly, with due consideration and respect, when interacting with others. Being treated with fairness and respect by one’s interlocutors will enhance one’s relational face, while being ignored or mocked represents a breach of one’s equity rights, and thus potentially damages one’s relational face. Here I discuss two main types of moves by which speakers attack their opponents’ relational face: the distortion or misrepresentation of the opponent’s views (known as building a “straw man”) and the use of irony and parody to ridicule the opponent.

#### ***“Straw man” moves***

The distortion of an opponent’s views is a frequently deployed strategy in antagonistic facework. Instead of engaging directly with the opponent’s actual words, the speaker first constructs a particular opinion, then attributes that opinion to his/her opponent, and finally attacks that opinion. This generally involves a misrepresentation of the opponent’s views, which are often exaggerated or simplified in order to make them more vulnerable to negative evaluation. The purpose of this strategy is to construct an easy target: it is easier to attack a “straw man” (as this type of misrepresentation is commonly known) than to engage with a complex, nuanced view.

A typical mechanism for enacting this move is the distorted (exaggerated and simplified) paraphrase of views previously expressed by the opponent. The following example shows the construction of a straw man to attack an opponent (S1, an outgroup member) who states that back pain can best be cured by lifestyle changes and physical exercise, rather than medication. This provokes a response by the ingroup member S2:

- (7) S1 Try exercises first, they worked for me. Get up regularly from the computer. Run a mile a day. Slim down. Look at a mainly vegetarian diet. Just don't give these rotten pharmaceutical companies a foothold. They are seriously bad for yr\* health.  
 [\*Here and elsewhere in the text, examples are reproduced in their original forms, without alterations to orthography.]
- S2 Shockingly there are actually multiple causes of back pain, not all of which have the same solution. I do like your idea of a one-size-fits-all cure for ranges of medical problems which present the same symptoms though: perhaps we should bring back leeches as a panacea and do away with anything that will fill the coffers of any large corporation – all everyone needs is a bucket of water to keep them in and we can get rid of health problems completely.

First, S2 paraphrases S1's views (*your idea of a one-size-fits-all cure*). This is in fact a distortion; S1 has not actually claimed that his/her proposed solution will work in all cases. S2 then takes this distorted paraphrase and parodies it, exaggerating it to a ridiculous extent in order to caricature S1's views (*perhaps we should bring back leeches...*). Various means of intensification and quantification (*anything, any, everyone, completely*) are used to boost the force of the utterance, contributing to the exaggerated caricature.

Such misrepresentations represent a violation of the opponent's equity rights – in this case, the desire and expectation to be treated with fairness by one's interlocutors. If one posts a comment in an online debate such as this, one might reasonably expect the views expressed in that comment to be opposed and attacked, as that is a fair and legitimate behaviour in this type of discourse. However, to be attacked for words which one never actually said, which were “placed into one's mouth”, is likely to be perceived as unfair, and thus as an attack on one's relational face.

### ***Irony and parody***

The second key strategy for attacking opponents' relational face is the use of aggressive irony and parody. Here I subsume both irony and parody under the same broad heading due to their close resemblance – both in the mechanisms by which they operate and in their pragmatic effects.

In terms of mechanisms, both irony and parody involve the interaction of two central components: echoing and dissociation. These two components are central to Sperber and Wilson's account of irony (Sperber and Wilson 1998; Wilson and Sperber 2012; Wilson 2006, 2013). The speaker of an ironic utterance echoes “a thought [...] she attributes to an individual, a group, or to people in general [...]” (Wilson 2013: 41). Dissociation involves the speaker's attitude to this thought: “The point of an ironical utterance is to express the speaker's own dis-

sociative (e.g. mocking, scornful or contemptuous) attitude to a thought similar in content to the one expressed in her utterance, which she attributes to some source other than herself at the current time” (Wilson 2013: 46). The difference between irony and parody lies in what is being echoed: whereas an ironic utterance echoes a thought or idea, a parodic utterance echoes not only the target’s thoughts or ideas, but also his/her patterns of verbal behaviour.

In terms of pragmatic effects, both irony and parody (if performed with obvious aggressive intent) signal primarily that the opponent is being ridiculed, and therefore not taken seriously. (It should be noted that irony may also have a bonding function, as in social disagreement or banter; it is only through a close consideration of the context that it becomes evident whether or not irony is being used to perform a face attack.) Such ridicule represents an attack on the opponent’s relational face (equity rights) by violating his/her expectation of being treated as a legitimate participant in the discourse, a worthy opponent whose views deserve serious consideration even if they provoke strong disagreement. Intensely expressed non-ironic disagreement with an opponent’s views is likely to be more acceptable to that opponent than being made the butt of an ironic or parodic joke. Such intense disagreement at least signals an acknowledgement of the opponent’s status as a legitimate participant in the interaction; the opponent’s quality face may be attacked vehemently, but his/her relational face remains untouched. Irony and parody, by contrast, attack both quality face and relational face.

When performing an ironic face attack move, speakers typically juxtapose ironic and non-ironic elements; the latter provide the interpretative cues that guide the hearer to the correct (ironic) interpretation of the former. The following example shows a response by an ingroup member to an opponent who has given anecdotal evidence in support of a particular “alternative” remedy (stating that the remedy worked well for one of his/her friends). The ironic utterance (*That’s me convinced*) is preceded by a non-ironic negative evaluation of the opponent’s evidence (*uncontrolled, unblinded ... one patient*):

- (8) Oh well, an uncontrolled, unblinded clinical trial of one patient. That’s me convinced.

Ironic face attacks typically take the form of “mock” behaviours. The use of “mock politeness” as an impoliteness strategy is discussed by Culpeper, who characterizes it as “the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations” (Culpeper 1996: 356). The same principle applies to other “mock” behaviours – mock respect, mock admiration, and so on. Provided that the speaker’s insincerity is obvious from the context, hearers will arrive at the correct interpretation (i.e. a complete lack of respect or admiration for the opponent) by a process of implicature. In the following example, the speaker S2 performs a face attack through the mock expression of enthusiastic admiration for the opponent:

- (9) S1 Okay, so a balanced diet, what is that. [...] Fresh veg, fresh fruit, grains, less meat etc. Once you start to think about your diet, you inevitably head towards healthier foods. [...] Do you use lard, bacon, steak chips etc., possibly not. You make up your own mind.
- S2 Thanks!!!!!!! OMG, I never knew any of that!! You are a beautiful guiding light amongst the ocean of misinformation. I've wasted 35 years of my life living off Pot Noodles and pickled onion flavour Monster Munch\* because I'd not met anyone as bright as yourself to tell me what is good for me. Please tell me more about how to become like you?  
[\*two British brands of junk food]

S2 ridicules the banal obviousness of S1's dietary advice by pretending to be awestruck with admiration and respect for the opponent's immense wisdom. The mock admiration here involves hyperbole, which acts as an interpretative cue guiding hearers to the correct (ironic) interpretation (on the use of hyperbole as a cue to irony see e.g. Kreuz and Roberts 1995).

When performing a parodic face attack, the speaker echoes and ridicules not only a thought attributed to the target, but also the target's patterns of verbal behaviour. Parody "simulates a speech act, mimicking the tone of voice, form of words, etc. that someone genuinely performing that speech act might use" (Wilson 2013: 51). An example of such a move is given below. S1's criticism of the pharmaceutical industry echoes a conspiracy theory that is frequently voiced by outgroup members who pride themselves on their free-thinking, anti-establishment credentials. This provokes a response from the ingroup member S2:

- (10) S1 These people [i.e. the pharmaceutical industry] answer to their shareholders and nothing else [...] Often it is proven that an older medication, or a herb [...] is far more effective and safer, but since these can not be patented they rarely even follow up the research and we are all denied these treatments. When a treatment is REALLY effective they ban it completely, like cannabis. If you think that is paranoid, then ask yourself why doctors are allowed to prescribe heroin (diamorphine) and not cannabis. Who thinks that heroin is safer than cannabis?
- S2 Diamorphine is safer than cannabis [...] Your anti-pharma, pro-cannabis rant will go down a storm at the bypass protest, but it won't wash with me. Ooooh they keep the natural herbs away from us because they can't be patented, ooooh, pass the tin hat.

S2's response begins with a simple propositional disagreement (*Diamorphine is safer than cannabis*). It then moves into more personal territory, dismissively characterizing the opponent's words as a *rant* (a quality face attack implying that the opponent is over-emotional and lacks objectivity). S2 then proceeds to attack the opponent's social identity face by altercasting him/her (*the bypass protest*). In

the British context, the reference to *the bypass protest* is an allusion to an environmental activist movement that emerged in the UK during the 1990s to protest against road-building schemes; the members of the movement (who would set up camps along proposed routes, chain themselves to trees etc.) were frequently stereotyped and ridiculed as naïve hippies. By invoking this cultural reference, S2 constructs a generalized outgroup characterized by its opposition to modernity and scientific or economic progress. This altercasting face attack is then aggravated by the parody which follows (*Ooooh they keep the natural herbs away from us because they can't be patented, ooooh, pass the tin hat*). The interjection *Ooooh* is intended to simulate an infantile expression of dismay. The *tin hat* is a reference to a hat made of tin foil (aluminium foil) worn in the belief that it shields the wearer's brain from electromagnetic radiation and mind control; among the ingroup community (i.e. expert or pro-science contributors to internet discussions), the tin foil hat is a commonly used reference alluding to the paranoid delusions attributed to conspiracy theorists (and by extension, to all outgroup members). The face attack shown above thus involves a complex nexus of cultural allusions; it taps into a set of pre-existing, stereotypical assumptions about the outgroup, which will be readily recognized by like-minded readers (ingroup members).

#### **4. Effects of verbal antagonism upon the speaker and the discourse community**

The previous section focused on the destructive, anti-social dimension of verbal antagonism, exploring its intended effect on the face of the target. This section now moves on to discuss the main constructive effects of antagonistic verbal behaviour; my central argument is that such behaviour can be profoundly beneficial to those who practise it – not only enhancing the face of individual speakers, but also contributing to comity and social cohesion within the discourse community as a whole.

##### ***4.1 Effects on the individual level***

On the level of individual participants, the practice of verbal aggression can potentially offer a number of benefits to those who engage in it. By attacking an opponent's face, one can not only cause damage to that opponent; one can also construct and enhance one's own face. Leech, discussing the use of irony as an impoliteness strategy, writes that the speaker in such cases "scores points off" his/her opponent (Leech 1983: 142). This metaphor drawn from the domain of games (also reflected in the concept of "moves") is particularly apt given the highly competitive and adversarial nature of many online discussions, in which participants vie to gain the upper hand over their opponents. Face attacks against opponents can help construct and enhance the attacker's face in three main ways.

1. Attacks on an opponent's face enable the speaker to construct his/her own face indirectly, through a process of implicature. By attacking the opponent's negative qualities, the speaker implies that he/she in fact possesses the opposite, positive qualities. This concerns both quality face (attacking the opponent's ignorance implies one's own expertise) and social identity face (by attacking outgroup values, one implicitly aligns oneself with the ingroup and its values). Such moves are thus analogous to what Haugh (2010) terms "identity acts", i.e. acts through which participants project their identity-claims into discourse.
2. The performance of face attacks enables the speaker to appear superior to his/her opponent and thus to gain power within the conversation. Of relevance here is Culpeper's notion of "coercive impoliteness" (Culpeper 2011: 227), in which speakers use insults and putdowns in an attempt to enhance their own face by constructing a relationship based on superiority/inferiority. Particularly at stake here is relational face; by engaging in such antagonistic behaviour, the speaker attempts to construct an imbalance in status between him/herself and the opponent.
3. Verbal aggression against opponents represents a form of display behaviour. An important factor here is the structure of participant roles in online discussions; the genre includes not only direct participants (the speakers who actually contribute comments), but also what can be termed "side participants" (Haugh 2013, Kádár and Haugh 2013) or "eavesdroppers" (Marruccia 2004), who are observing the interaction without actually contributing to the debate. In other words, online discussions are a spectator genre, and the direct participants are in the role of performers; as Neurauter-Kessels (2011: 193–4) observes, "we are dealing here with an unrestricted public space [...] users are aware that they are operating in a public place and are faced with a potentially large and anonymous audience attending the speech event". Face attack moves thus have multiple recipients; besides being aimed at their obvious targets, they are also intended to be read by the "side participants" – the spectators. It follows that the intended effect of a face attack on its direct addressee (the opponent) is not the same as its intended effect on the spectators.

This observation echoes Haugh's argument (writing about impoliteness) that "[t]he fundamental question in the analysis of im/politeness evaluations in interaction should [...] not just be whether some talk or conduct is im/polite, im/proper, in/appropriate and so on, but rather *for whom* is this polite, impolite and so on?" (Haugh 2013: 61). A face attack is thus not only designed to humiliate the opponent and damage his/her face; it is also designed to impress the spectators by representing a display of strength and conversational power. On many online discussion boards, aggressive behaviour against outgroup members appears to be held in high esteem as a positive cultural value within the discourse community (see e.g. Hopkinson 2012). Speakers projecting an uncompromising, combative

persona may thus gain prestige status within the community; they show off, or “play to the gallery”, to seek esteem from their peers.

Indeed, such behaviour is sometimes rewarded by explicit expressions of approval and support from fellow ingroup members – either agreeing with the speaker’s views, or praising his/her combative approach. Most discussion sites also enable readers to click on a button and express approval for a comment by “recommending” it; a running tally of the number of “recommends” is shown next to the comment, serving as a gauge of its popularity. Aggressive comments by ingroup members frequently amass large numbers of recommends – for example, the mocking comment listed as Ex. (4) received 165 recommends, compared with just 14 for the comment to which it responded. It is clear that verbal aggression is a socially ratified behaviour, which enhances the speaker’s face and boosts his/her status within the community.

#### *4.2 Effects on the community level*

On the level of the discourse community, verbal aggression directed against opponents has two main constructive effects. Both are rooted in the group dimension of the discourse – the fact that the interaction is framed not merely as a series of disagreements among individuals, but rather as a wider conflict between two opposed groups, each representing opposite mentalities and value systems.

(1) The practice of verbal antagonism against outgroup members helps to construct a clear ingroup identity by reinforcing the starkly binary, polarized structure of the cognitive schema within which the discourse is embedded. The core values of the ingroup community (i.e. those values connected with expertise, rationality and empiricism) are constantly re-affirmed via the recurring attacks on opponents’ quality face (targeting their ignorance, mysticism and so on) and social identity face (altercasting them as members of a stereotypically defined outgroup). This antagonism thus helps to construct both groups as distinct entities, each with its own clear, coherent identity. In other words, it helps to construct something that could be termed “group face”.

This dimension of face has remained somewhat neglected in pragmatic studies, which have tended to view face as an essentially individual phenomenon. However, some researchers have recently begun to address the social dimension of the concept, including the role it plays in intergroup settings (Bousfield 2013; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010; Haugh 2013; Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2011; Perelmutter 2013). Bousfield argues for “the recognition of a sense of wider-than-the-individual understandings of face; of what we might understand as “metonymic face” or, more specifically of group face [...] (“group” face remains an underexplored concept in communicative theorizing)” (Bousfield 2013: 38). Ingroup members in the analyzed discussions associate their positive self-image with group membership on two levels: first, on the level of a community existing outside the world of the discourse (i.e. the scientific community or

the medical profession), and second, on the level of the discourse community to which they belong (i.e. the ingroup in the discussions). This, in turn, means that individual participants in the discussions frequently display a personal concern not only for their own individual face, but also for the face of their group (or of fellow group members); they will sometimes defend their group if it is attacked. This aspect of facework – which could be likened to playing for a team – was acknowledged by Goffman when he referred to cases in which “a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself” (1955/1967: 5). Indeed, this “team” dimension of the interaction may account for the esteem and support shown to ingroup members who behave aggressively towards outgroup members (discussed in section 4.1); such speakers are evidently viewed as good “team players”.

(2) The second main beneficial effect of verbal antagonism on the community level is related to its function as a stimulus for constructive relational work, defined as “all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice” (Locher and Watts 2008: 96). The practice of verbal antagonism against outgroup members stimulates ingroup members to engage in mutual interaction which builds and strengthens social bonds, thus reinforcing ingroup cohesion. This occurs in two main ways.

Firstly, as has been observed above, partisan displays of verbal aggression are often rewarded and ratified by explicit expressions of approval and support from fellow ingroup members. Conflict thus has the potential to generate comity; it acts as a trigger for relational work which enhances fellow members’ face and supports social harmony. In this connection it should also be mentioned that the lack of social context cues in this genre (due to the lack of face-to-face contact and the predominance of anonymity) does not only have the effect of dehumanizing opponents and thus intensifying the level of antagonism in the discourse. As Reid (1999) observes, it may also paradoxically have the opposite effect, being associated with “increases in friendliness and intimacy” (Reid 1999: 111).

Secondly, conflict situations stimulate the formation of ad hoc alliances among ingroup members; Bruxelles and Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004) term such alliances “coalitions”. If an ingroup member is involved in a dyadic antagonistic exchange with an outgroup member, other ingroup members will frequently step in to offer assistance – simultaneously attacking the outgroup member’s face and supporting the ingroup member’s face. For example, following a lengthy and increasingly antagonistic exchange between an ingroup member (whose user name is anonymized here as “IG-1”) and an outgroup member (anonymized as “OG-1”), a third poster (anonymized as “IG-2”) enters the discussion and addresses both antagonists, supporting IG-1 and attacking OG-1:



disruptive in nature; it also has a powerfully constructive function, offering benefits both to individual speakers and the discourse community as a whole. Verbal antagonism can thus be viewed in terms of its strategic intentions and functions, realized in the discourse through different types of face attack moves.

Drawing on Spencer-Oatey's rapport management framework, I offer a basic tripartite typology of face attacks depending on which aspect of the opponent's face is targeted. Attacks on quality face generally involve both propositional and personal elements, though the directness of personal attacks is limited by the constraints imposed by the community's norms of interaction. Attacks on social identity face are typically based on altercasting strategies, while attacks on relational face generally involve misrepresenting the opponent's views ("straw man" moves) or the use of irony and parody for purposes of ridicule.

In the final part of the study I turn to examine the constructive functions of verbal antagonism. On the individual level, I show how aggressive behaviour enables speakers to implicitly assert their own face, to gain power over an opponent within a conversational exchange, and to enhance their own face by performing in front of an appreciative audience. On the community level, I argue that verbal antagonism leads to the construction of a clear, coherent ingroup identity or "group face", and I show how antagonistic exchanges may function as a stimulus for supportive relational work among fellow ingroup members, ultimately strengthening social harmony within the discourse community.

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