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“Stop arguing”: interventions as metapragmatic acts in discussion forum interaction

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Abstract:

There exists a wealth of research on practices of disagreement and conflict in online discussions, whereas attempts to moderate such behaviour have rarely been discussed. This study investigates interventions carried out by participants in online discussions as they try to steer the discussion or resolve disputes and conflicts. Interventions are approached as metapragmatic acts, whose functions range from organisational to mediational to affiliative. The analysis reveals that since interventions targeted at other participants can be regarded as face threats, interveners often try to explain and justify their acts. Reactions to interventions by the targeted, as well as other participants in the discussion, vary from silence and implicit acknowledgements to resistance and explicit acknowledgements.

1. Introduction

After three decades of forum discussions and nearly two decades of tweets, there is little doubt today that arguments, disagreement and conflicts are rife on social media platforms. Linguistic and pragmatic research into disagreement and conflict is also by now abundant. Active research on various online discussion forums (reviewed in Arendholz 2017) has shed light on how participants engage in inappropriate behaviour (Arendholz 2013) or voice disagreement (e.g., Graham 2007; Bolander 2013; Langlotz & Locher 2012), and how disagreement can lead to conflict (e.g., Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). So although a considerable body of research exists on disagreement and conflict on digital platforms, less attention has been paid to attempts to moderate such behaviour.

The current paper addresses this gap in research and focuses on interventions in discussion forum interaction. In practice, I examine instances in which one of the participants intervenes in the ongoing interaction with a message that, for example, attempts to steer the discussion in a new direction or terminate a heated discussion or conflict between other participants. The fact that someone intervenes shows that at least they think that community norms have been breached and there is a need for an intervention in order to avoid further or potential conflict. This is evidence of reflexive or metapragmatic awareness. Interventions can therefore be

viewed as metapragmatic acts, which comment on the communicative behaviour of the interactants. The act of intervening is also a negative face-threatening act when it is targeted at other participants; requesting a change in others' behaviour attacks their freedom of action (Brown & Levinson 1987; Hübler & Bublitz 2007).

Material from a large and popular discussion forum (The Student Room) will be analysed to answer the following research questions:

What kinds of interventions do participants on the forum use? What are their functions? Who are they directed at?

How are interventions justified (because they can be face-threatening)?

What happens after an intervention? What are the reactions of the interactants to the intervention?

Are the interventions successful, i.e. does the discussion move in another direction or is the conflict resolved?

I begin the paper by briefly reviewing previous research on disagreement and conflict in digital interaction, and continue with a discussion on interventions as metapragmatic acts. In section 3, I introduce the material and methods used for the analysis. I then discuss, in sections 4 and 5, the results of the analysis of interventions, starting with the types of interventions we can find in the material and then moving on to a case study of one productive intervention format, namely "*stop arguing*". Conclusions are offered in section 6.

2. Background

2.1 Disagreement and conflict in digital interaction

From the very early days of research on digital discourse, studies have shown that disagreement and hostility, even conflict, are common in online interaction (see e.g. Adrianson & Hjelmquist 1991; Avgerinakou 2003; Baron 1984; Bolander 2012; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014; Graham 2007; Hiltz et al. 1986). Research has also drawn attention to the fact that participants in digital interactions use various affiliative and facilitative strategies in order to avoid communicative failure (Garcia & Jacobs 1999; Hancock & Dunham 2001; Harrison 2000; Tanskanen 2007), and that online interaction seems to have its own principles of politeness and impoliteness (Graham 2008; Haugh 2010; Locher 2010).

Approaching the issue from a sociological and behavioural perspective, Lee (2005) notes that conflicts should not be viewed as inherently negative. Instead, they are a natural part of human relationships, and can help maintain group cohesion and boundaries. This point of view is also adopted by Angouri and Locher (2012), who note that disagreement is an everyday phenomenon, which may sometimes be “expected rather than the exception” and that

disagreeing cannot be seen as an *a priori* negative act; communities and groups of people have developed different norms over time which influence how disagreement is perceived and enacted (Angouri & Locher 2012: 1551).

Georgakopoulou (2012: 1623) echoes these sentiments and stresses the significance of normativity and shared understandings of interactants in a given context. All this seems to suggest that disagreement and conflict are for the community or group to determine, and should be studied with this as a basic premise. I explain in section 2.2 below how the analytical approach selected for the present study enables us to do just that.

Because conflicts are inevitable, what emerges as central in Lee’s view is therefore conflict management, i.e. how people deal with (potential) conflicts. Among the strategies used to mitigate conflicts, Lee lists *mediation*, in which a third party intervenes to reconcile a conflict between two or more members of the discussion (Lee 2005: 387, 394). Mediation is also the term used in legal contexts for the process of resolving disputes with the help of an impartial third party. Mediation can be used as a useful umbrella term for attempts to mitigate conflicts, but for the specific pragmatic practice carried out by linguistic means (which is in the focus of the present study), the term *intervention* will be used.

In their study on conflict in a YouTube discussion, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich find that assent is rare and compromise practically non-existent as ways of successfully resolving conflict. Withdrawal from the interaction is most often the strategy chosen by participants for terminating a conflict (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). Their analysis also includes instances of third-party intervention, with which they refer to deletions of messages by persons in a moderating role in the discussion. The only study that mentions interventions by co-participants that I am aware of is Arendholz (2013). She looks at a conflict between two discussion-forum participants in which two other participants decide to intervene. The intervention is semi-successful, as one of the disputants stops arguing while the other withdraws (Arendholz 2013: 235).

2.2 Interventions as metapragmatic acts

The fact that interventions take place when a participant in an online discussion sees a need for intervening in a conflict, and acts accordingly, calls for an analytical approach which helps us tackle such practice. Consequently, the present study approaches interventions through the lens of metapragmatics, and interventions are regarded as metapragmatic acts. These acts are a visible sign of the management of discourse (Caffi 1998), whereby interactants reflect on their own and other people's communicative behaviour. They are one way of signalling reflexive or metapragmatic awareness, i.e. the understanding that interactants have of how language is used for interaction (Blommaert & Rampton 2011; Culpeper & Haugh 2014: 237; Haugh 2018; Verschueren 2000).

Metapragmatic acts are not concerned with the topic of the discussion but comment on the communicative act itself, and they may be self- or other-directed; interactants use these acts to comment on their own and their fellow interlocutors' contributions. As such, they offer the participants' own, emic perspective on the interaction (Dynel & Poppi 2019; Pike 1967). The acts can be used, for instance, for clarifying or rephrasing contributions in case of evident or potential misunderstanding (e.g., *that is not what I was saying!*), or making assessments of the appropriateness of contributions visible (e.g., *I see you're missing the point; we're getting off topic*) (Caffi 1998; Hübler & Bublitz 2007; Tanskanen 2007). Hübler and Bublitz (2007: 18) propose the following taxonomy for the functions of metapragmatic acts:

1. Evaluative
2. Communication oriented
 - Interpersonal
 - Conflictual (face-threatening)
 - Affiliative
 - Expressive
 - Means-related
 - Organising
 - Negotiating linguistic meaning
 - Establishing best code
3. Instrumentalised
 - For reinforcing a communicative norm
 - For constructing identity

The analysis in the present paper will show which of these functions are applicable to interventions as metapragmatic acts.¹

¹ Note that these functions are not mutually exclusive; metapragmatic acts can be, and often are, multifunctional.

Digital interaction is a fruitful area for studying metapragmatic acts, because as Georgakopoulou (2003) notes, (text-based) computer-mediated discourse shows a heightened degree of metalinguistic awareness due to the lack of non-verbal cues (see also Hancock & Dunham 2001). Previous research in this area has shown how metapragmatic acts are used in the negotiation of appropriateness and style of contributions to discussion forum interaction (Tanskanen 2007; 2014), rudeness in English and German online discussion forums (Kleinke & Bös 2015), and identity in a student discussion forum (Tanskanen 2018), as well as in the evaluation of RoastMe posts (Dyner & Poppi 2019).

3. Material and methods

The material for the analysis comes from The Student Room (TSR), “the UK’s largest student community” (thestudentroom.co.uk). According to TSR, the site is visited by ten million students a month, and more than 200,000 posts are submitted every month. The site boasts a wealth of discussion forums, ranging from university student life to entertainment to current affairs. TSR upholds a moderation policy according to which posts submitted to the discussion forum may be edited or deleted and entire threads closed (TSR “Terms and conditions”). To avoid intervention by moderators, participants must follow six community guidelines: “be friendly, keep it clean, stay on topic, no cheating, no advertising, keep it legal” (TSR Community guidelines).²

The discussion threads vary in length: there are some very short ones, but many show hundreds, even thousands of messages. Such active discussion means that TSR is an excellent source for material on various features of online discussions, including disagreement and conflict. The participants post with a username, and they have a separate profile page, which shows the date they joined and the number of posts they have contributed. The profile page also includes a section where the participants can share some personal information if they so wish.

Even though TSR includes a very useful search function, it is difficult to automatise the search for interventions. The range of possible formats for carrying out an intervention are practically

² It is unclear how actively the moderators are able to monitor all discussions; it is more likely that they rely on participants to report inappropriate messages and then they may choose to intervene. In a recent thread on the Capitol Hill riot in the US, the moderators added this message at the beginning of the thread:

Mod note: Please help to ensure all posts in this thread follow TSR's community guidelines. If you see any posts which you think might not be within guidelines or might be deliberately encouraging misinformation, please just hit the report button. Our Moderation Team will be monitoring this thread.

endless, and interactants rarely if ever frame their interventions with an explicit phrase signalling their intention (e.g. *I'm intervening* or *I need to intervene* do not occur in the material). Consequently, the interventions analysed below in section 4 have mostly been detected during close reading of the material, some in connection with analyses of other metapragmatic acts. In addition to TSR, material from a Finnish discussion forum Suomi24 (Finland24) is used to illustrate one of the intervention types. Suomi24, one of the largest networking communities in Finland, upholds a moderation policy similar to TSR, with participants posting messages with their username.

For this qualitative study, the method used is a close reading of the interventions. On the basis of the analysis, interventions were divided into distinct types, according to their functions. To answer the research questions, the interventions and their context of use were analysed to determine the target of the intervention, whether and how the intervention is justified by the intervener, and what happens after the intervention.

The analysis of the discussions revealed that there are some phrases which seem to occur quite frequently in interventions. To complement the more general analysis, one of these productive intervention formats was selected for a more automatised search. For the analysis presented in section 5, TSR was scraped for instances of the phrase "*stop arguing*". This was carried out with a web-scraping script written in the Python programming language for this purpose.³ Permission to use the scraper was sought from the moderators of the TSR, with a GDPR (EU General Data Protection Regulation) notice provided because the retrieved data included personal data, i.e. TSR users' usernames. No personal data is revealed in the analysis. As in many linguistic and pragmatic studies, full anonymisation is impossible, as that would mean not citing the material verbatim, and constitute a clear hindrance to presenting the analysis.

With permission from the TSR, the script was run during spring 2020. The scraper used the TSR site's search function to find threads using the relevant keywords and retrieved each unique thread returned in accordance with these parameters. The retrieved instances were checked to make sure that they included the phrase in the intended, intervening sense. Instances not matching this criterion were identified and discarded (e.g. "*Stop arguing with your parents and maybe try to fix your relationship*"). The remaining instances and threads (ca. 120) were then subjected to close analysis along the lines presented above.

³ I want to thank my research assistant Jonas Haverinen for his expert help with the script.

4. Interventions in online discussions

This section presents the results of the analysis of the interventions found in the material. To begin with, in terms of the functional taxonomy by Hübler and Bublitz presented above, it should be noted that all interventions are inherently *evaluative*; with these acts, participants make visible their assessment of the discussion as being in need of an intervention. This function therefore co-occurs with the other functions of interventions.⁴

Organisational interventions

Let us start with interventions which do not occur in conflictual situations but which can nevertheless be classified as interventions; they are carried out by participants in online discussions in an attempt to try to steer the ongoing discussion in a new direction or suggest a return to the on-topic discussion. They thus clearly show an organising function and could be called organisational interventions.

- (1) We're getting off topic.
- (2) We are moving off topic now.
- (3) I'll stop here and hope people are going to discuss the original topic.

Examples (1), (2) and (3) all signal that the intervener has evaluated the discussion as being derailed. What is interesting is how the target of the intervention is specified in the comments. In (1) and (2), the intervener is included with the pronoun *we*; the interactants as a group are responsible for the derailing. In (3), the intervener is included in a different manner: she⁵ accepts at least partial responsibility for the derailing and informs the others that she will no longer post off topic. Interestingly, she continues by hoping that “people” get back to the original topic, instead of including herself here with the use of *we* or *let's*, for instance.

There are also organisational interventions which include further justification for why the intervener considers the act necessary:

- (4) This is getting silly. No one is answering OP's question.

⁴ Here I would like to acknowledge the collaboration with Ulla Tuomarla, who works with Finnish discussion forum data, and with whom I have been able to discuss the functions of interventions. Interventions similar to the ones discussed in this paper can be found in Finnish online data.

⁵ Some TSR members have added a photograph on their profile page, some give their first name or indicate their gender with a symbol. I have used this information for the personal pronouns used to refer to the participants. When little or no personal information is given, I use the singular reference ‘they’.

- (5) This is getting silly and it's up to the OP whether or not he believes my experience of Law firms being extremely competitive to enter, even for people with excellent academics and work experience, or not. ...

Examples (4) and (5) first offer the same evaluation of the ongoing discussion, *this is getting silly* (which might be a productive format for an organisational intervention). They differ from (1), (2) and (3) in that they also include further explanation or justification for the intervention. In (4), the intervener states that the discussion is not focused on the original poster's question. The intervener in (5) points out that the discussion seems to be more about the intervener's reply to the original poster, who should be the only one to decide whether or not the message was accurate.

- (6) Also quite aware that we might be going off-topic, but it relieves the stress of Monday so maybe it counts?
- (7) Careful! You might get in trouble for off topic inflammatory comments. If you want to stop getting into bother for breaking forum rules, maybe stop breaking forum rules.... like posting off topic inflammatory posts like this.

In (6), the intervener admits that her post might be off topic. The thread is about applying to a specific university, and the writer of (6) starts talking about other universities as well. She justifies her post with the fact that it is the weekend before the results are published and she is under stress. Example (7) also offers justification in the form of a warning: forum rules forbid off-topic inflammatory posts. On the surface then, the intervention appears to be trying to reinforce the communicative norms of the forum. While (4), (5) and (6) appear to include the intervener as also responsible for the discussion getting silly or off topic, Example (7) lays the blame solely on the co-participant.

If we look at the reactions prompted by these interventions, it is perhaps not surprising that there are differences in how they are received by the other participants in the discussion. There are few explicit acknowledgements that the discussion might be derailing. The exception here is Example (6), which receives this reply (8):

- (8) I think we are able to freestyle a bit this weekend to keep things soft and gentle.

The writer of (8) acknowledges the stressful time and assures the writer of (6) that her post was appropriate in this situation, confirming that the writer of (6) is not acting against communicative norms.

Most often the interventions receive no explicit reply. Instead, the participants start steering the discussion back towards the original topic in their later contributions; this happens after interventions (1), (2), (4) and (5). Interestingly, the two interventions which seem to mainly target other participants (Examples 3 and 6) are less successful in their attempt to steer the direction of the discussion. Moreover, they both occur in a situation which is clearly getting conflictual, although it has not yet been overtly assessed as such by any of the participants. Example (3) can be read as the intervener's attempt to end the off-topic discussion after she has had her say on the matter. This may be why her intervention goes completely unheeded, and the interactants continue their off-topic discussion.

As for Example (7), the following exchange takes place after the attempted intervention:

- (9) Precious, aren't you? [crying emoji]
 For what it's worth most of your on topic comments are inflammatory, so how you don't receive warnings for them is more the point. You constantly bait other users, constantly throw around terms such as 'bigot' and generally lambast anyone who doesn't agree with you, as you've exemplified in this thread. Once a poster doesn't agree with you, they're suddenly on your blacklist, no matter their opinion.
- (10) This is utter fantasy, there wasn't any conflict in this thread from #30 backwards... maybe a sarcastic/ lpassive aggression in #27 which I ignored, untill you two started.

The participant who receives the warning in Example (7) replies to the intervention (Example 9) and states that the intervener's own comments, even those that are on topic, are inflammatory and against forum rules. The intervener disagrees (10), still claiming that the writer of (9) and another writer supporting the same argument are responsible for the bad behaviour. No one else intervenes in the incipient conflict, and the discussion continues in the same spirit for some time, the three interactants arguing with one another while others post on topic. There are thus two parallel discussions going on in the thread, following two different topics.

The interventions discussed in this section occur in situations which either involve no conflict or show disputes between the arguing participants only, i.e. no one else intervenes in the dispute. We will next turn our attention to instances where a third party intervenes after evaluating the on-going discussion as conflictual or escalating towards a conflict.

Mediational interventions

Mediational interventions occur when a participant evaluates the on-going discussion as requiring mitigation. Typically in these cases, the situation has evolved into a conflict. The intervention is carried out by one of the interactants, who has been participating in the discussion but remains a third party as regards the actual conflict. Although the intervener cannot be regarded as fully neutral or impartial, their attempt to mediate in a conflictual situation is obvious.

To illustrate mediational interventions, we will first consider a sequence of messages from a single discussion thread.⁶ The sequence shows two interventions and the reactions they received from other participants--those involved in the dispute as well as others.

- (11) [quotation from a post]
 I for one find you rather tiresome, not only in this thread but in most of the other posts of your's I have come across.
 I think you have made your point, no need to want others to agree to your view. Hammering on about it will not make it more conclusive. You think your way and others think differently. End of discussion. :)

The intervention in Example (11) targets two participants in the discussion who have been arguing for a while with increasingly conflictual contributions. The writer first quotes from a message sent by one of the disputants, whom he seems to consider more responsible for the conflict. As pointed out earlier, interventions are face-threatening acts, and this one even starts with a harsh evaluation of the disputant. The intervention continues in a slightly more mitigating tone, with the intervener justifying the intervention and adding a smiley emoji at the end. The intervention is unsuccessful, and the dispute continues (Examples 12, 13 and 14):

- (12) I am not going to just walk off and leave the discussion on the note of someone insulting me.
- (13) I dare say, don't be so touchy. You are not exactly mincing your words either.

⁶ This thread was also used in Tanskanen (2018) for a study on conflict and identity construction; during that analysis my attention was drawn to the interventions in the discussion.

- (14) I most certainly am not mincing my words, but when someone has no comeback on the actual issue so resorts simply to insults, I find it necessary to highlight the fact. It is not a question of sensitivity.

The intervention is received with Example (12): the targeted disputant informs the intervener that she will not end a discussion after being the target of a face threat. The intervener replies with (13), pointing out that she had been equally responsible for face-threatening insults. The final message from the disputant is given as Example (14); in it she again claims that the other party in the conflict is to blame. The intervener's call for a compromise fails, and after declaring that she will not leave the discussion (in Example 12), the disputant actually does just that: she withdraws from the discussion (i.e. she never posts again on the thread, although of course she may have remained as a lurker). The other participants cannot know this at the time, and one of them offers her support (15):

- (15) [The disputant] is not the only person here who was pissed off by [the other disputant]'s comments.

The original intervener replies with a further appeal for compromise:

- (16) And there were quite a few others who were pissed off by [the disputant]'s comments. Why not call it a tie?

At this point, the other disputant, who has remained silent for a while, posts again and makes clear that she, too, is unwilling to compromise. She does not directly address the intervener, perhaps because she interprets the intervention as not targeting her, but does tell the writer of (14) that she does not appreciate their opinion. The thread continues for a few more messages, with the conflict remaining unresolved.

Although aiming to end a conflict between two interactants, the interventions in the thread above mainly targeted one of the interactants. Let us next look at examples where both or all parties to a dispute are the target of the intervention (17 and 18):

- (17) For god's sake [name] and [name] just stop arguing. Go into pms. This isnt the place

- (18) We're not arguing we're discussing the topic of the thread, it's what forums are for.

Examples (17) and (18) show us that even if both participants in a dispute are targeted equally, the intervention will not necessarily be successful. One of the disputants replies to the intervener, stating that what is going on is not a dispute or a conflict but just discussion appropriate to the forum. The disputants then continue their debate.

As with some of the organisational interventions in the previous section, mediational interventions do not always receive an explicit acknowledgement. The intervention in Example (19) occurs in a thread started by a poster whose young brother has suddenly died and who is now herself terrified of dying. Other posters try to comfort her, but some start a discussion on whether death really is the end of everything. At this point, the writer of (19) feels that an intervention is called for:

(19) Please, show some respect to the OP and stop arguing about death, that's not the point here.

The justification offered by the writer of (18) relates to communicative norms and the fact that some of the comments are off topic. Other posters do not explicitly reply to the intervention, but the discussion returns to the original poster's worry, showing that the intervention achieved its aim.

The last examples (20 and 21) in this section illustrate quite a rare occurrence where the targeted disputant actually acknowledges the intervention as fair:

(20) please stop arguing, this is not related to the main reason of this post...

(21) You're right, sorry!

Two interactants have been debating in a conflictual manner for some time when the writer of (20) intervenes, again justifying the act with the interactants' off-topic comments. One of the disputants replies with (21), while the other remains silent and withdraws. The acknowledgement is the last message of the thread. There is no way of knowing whether the other disputant ever saw the intervention and whether the silence is a reaction to the intervention or possibly a signal of tacit agreement with the other disputant (on the functions of silence, see Kurzon 2015; Sifianou 1995). The disputant may simply have withdrawn after posting their last message.

Staged interventions

To conclude this section let us consider a special case of intervention. In addition to comments that can be regarded as genuine interventions as they try to steer the discussion in a new direction, return to on-topic discussion, resolve a conflict or at least ameliorate a heated discussion, there are interventions which could be labelled ‘staged’ interventions. Let us look at an example of one such instance, which, unlike previous examples, comes from a Finnish discussion forum (Suomi24).⁷

The intervention⁸ takes place on an immigration-related thread populated by participants who all share a negative view on immigration. The writer of the intervention tells the others to talk in a more tolerant manner, but it is clear that this is not the actual intention; the participant adds a note of irony to the discussion by only mimicking an intervention. The beginning of the message is a caricature of an opposing view, with phrases drawn from discussions that are more positive towards immigration, while towards the end of the message the tone shifts towards a clearly negative one. It can be argued that this staged intervention has an *affiliative function*, creating a bond between the participants with the laugh they can all share as they recognise the caricature. The existence of such cases shows that the practice of intervention is recognisable to discussion forum participants (see Jones & Norris 2005).

The example comes from the Finnish forum, because staged interventions have so far not been found in the analyses of the TSR material. This is not to say that they could never be found in the thousands of discussions in TSR. That they do not seem to be numerous may be due to the fact that unlike the Finnish anti-immigration discussion, the participants in TSR discussions tend to be more heterogeneous, with divergent voices and perspectives. For such caricature-like interventions to work the participants need to have similar beliefs and a knowledge of what the opposing view looks like. A final point about staged interventions: because they are not in fact

⁷ I am grateful to Ulla Tuomarla for sharing this example with me.

⁸ Here is the original intervention and an English translation:

hyssyn , hyssyn. ei saa yleistää. yksittäistapaus. ei saa antaa pelolle valtaa. pitää kääntää molemmat posket. puukko kilahtaa, henki pellolle vilahtaa. mikähän sota syttys, jos me tehtäs mussuille samat teot, mitä he ovat meille tehneet. oltas narun jatkona lyhtypylväessä.

hush now, hush. one should not generalise. a one-off case. one should not let fear take over. one must turn both cheeks. a knife rings, a soul to the fields springs. what kind of a war would break out if we did the same to the mussies that they have done to us. we would be hanged from the lamp posts.

actual interventions, they also lack an evaluative function. In this respect, they differ from the interventions discussed above.

We have now discussed the various interventions in the material – organisational, mediational and staged. We have seen how interveners justify their acts and how the targeted interactants and other participants react to them, either resisting or implicitly or explicitly acknowledging them. To conclude the analysis, the following section focuses on an intervention format we already saw in action in Examples (17), (19) and (20), namely “*stop arguing*”.

5. The case of “*stop arguing*”

“*Stop arguing*” is used as an intervention with different functions; it can be organisational or mediational. The target of the intervention can include the intervener, or the act may be directed solely at other participants. Interveners often justify the act, and reactions vary from explicit acknowledgement to silence. Let’s next look at examples of the various ways in which this productive intervention format occurs in TSR.

(22) I’ve said my bit I’ll stop arguing now

(23) Seeing as you are probably a Trump supporter, Im going to stop arguing with you.

Examples (22) and (23) can be viewed as organisational; they indicate a termination of the arguing. The interventions are directed at the interveners, who inform others that for their part the debate is over. The acts signal a change in the direction of the discussion in that the intervener will no longer post on whatever the topic of the debate was. Both examples include justification for the act: in (22), the intervener states that nothing more remains to be said, while in (23) the justification comes from the fact that the other disputant appears to be from an opposing camp, and the intervener regards further debate as futile. That the acts are self-directed does not mean that the intervention is successful, however. Both interveners in fact get drawn back to the debate when they receive comments suggesting that they have realised they cannot win the argument.

The intervener is also included when the intervention targets many or all of the participants in the discussion:

(24) Look, we have completely different points of view and I understand where you're coming from and I respect your opinion, so can we please stop arguing?

(25) Anyway, we're derailing the thread, so we'd better stop arguing now.

(26) Can we stop arguing? Not helping anyone with their revision which is what this thread is for

The interventions in (24) and (25) are directed at both the intervener and one other interactant, who have been debating, and the intervener now wants the dispute to end. Both examples include justification for the intervention, as is the case with (26), which is directed at those participants in the thread who have been involved in an off-topic dispute, including the intervener. All these interventions are successful, although the acknowledgement is implicit for all of them: the disputants stop arguing or return to the on-topic discussion. Explicit acknowledgements of interventions also occur, although they are infrequent:

(27) Guys let's stop arguing, it's all cool [grouphugs emoji]

(28) true there is no point

In addition to the request to stop arguing, the intervention in (27) includes a multimodal offer of conciliation, a grouphugs emoji. The act is reinforced by another interactant in (28), and the discussion runs to its end after a couple of neutral messages.

From the above it might seem that using the inclusive forms *we* or *let's* is a guarantee of the success of a stop-arguing intervention. This is not, however, the case. Consider the following sequence:

(29) *A:* Guys can we just stop arguing lol. The OP had an opinion. Good for her.

(30) *B:* We don't care that she doesn't want to call herself a feminist. We are upset because she called feminists psychos and claimed they hated men and wanted to limit women's choices. Which isn't true.

(31) *A:* then I guess thats her own stupidity lmao. But you know I ain't stopping u. Carry on lol. It is TSR after all.

(32) *C:* and we can't debate the opinion? what's the point of creating the thread then
☺

(33) *A:* OP wanted attention? ☺

sorry you guys can continue to your hearts content lol. I'll sit with my popcorn

The thread from which these examples come is started by a poster confessing that she does not want to call herself a feminist. The opening message sparks a lively discussion, which soon escalates into a dispute. In (29), participant A offers an intervention, justifying it by pointing out that the OP should not be attacked because of her opinion. The intervention receives two replies. In the first, (30), participant B states that the OP's opinion is irrelevant, but that her claims are inaccurate. From the second one, (32), it becomes clear that the opinion is open to dispute, at least according to participant C. How the intervener responds to both B and C is interesting. After first trying to stop the dispute, the intervener seems to change their mind and is now willing to let the disputants continue. All the messages with the exception of (30) include one or more smileys and lols. This could be an indication that the intervention and the replies are in fact good-humoured (on emoticons as markers of intention, see Derks et al. 2007; Dresner & Herring 2010; Thompson & Filik 2016), and the intervener may actually find the dispute entertaining; hence the reference to popcorn.

Moving on to acts which do not include the intervener as target, we will first discuss examples of interventions which are directed to one participant:

(34) can you just stop arguing with everyone and admit the fact that you're racist

(35) Please stop arguing with me about things you know nothing about.

In Examples (34) and (35) the other person is clearly solely the problem, which has an effect of increasing the face threat. It probably comes as no surprise that neither (34) nor (35) are successful. Instead of offering justification for the intervention, they combine two face-threatening acts: an other-addressed intervention and an insult. Both remain unacknowledged by the targeted participant and the dispute continues. There are also instances where the targeted participant responds (37) to the intervention (36), making clear that they do not agree with the justification offered and will let the intervention go unheeded:

(36) Stop arguing for the purpose of arguing. You lost this argument.

(37) Yeah sure mate ☺ I can only go suggest you actually read a book on political theory to educate yourself on why you are wrong on every level. Never mind get a basic understanding of the global political environs.

Finally, the following examples are directed at two or several other participants involved in a dispute:

(38) pls stop arguing

(39) yea will do. this kid doesn't understand how biology or fitness works, ...

(40) You are the one who doesn't get it, ...

The intervention in (38) occurs during a discussion in which two participants have been arguing with one another for some time, and the writer of (38) finds it necessary to intervene; the intervention starts with quotes from both disputants' posts so the target of the act is clear. One of the disputants seems to acknowledge the intervention in (39), but adds a further conflictual comment to the message. The other disputant retorts in (40), and the discussion ends after three messages by other interactants. The intervention thus appears to have been successful, but the dispute ends in a standoff, as the disputants maintain their positions until the end.

We close the analysis with Examples (41) and (42). Before the request to stop arguing, both interventions include a lengthy justification for the act:

(41) ... It's a gut feeling that isn't likely to be changed. None are right, none are wrong. Those who view that life is at the start will obviously see abortion as murder, and vice versus. Why can't people just understand this and get over it? This debate is so repetitive, just stop arguing with each other because it all just comes down to differing core opinions that won't be changed.

(42) I actually feel the need to report this thread. Apparently studies show that black people are twice as likely to spend time on social media which is really bad tbh.. We need to be getting out there and becoming doctors, engineers, earn the 100Ks not following celebs online and arguing on internet forums. This is just so sad. No wonder people don't want to be black. Please stop arguing. This is shameful.

In (41), the writer tries to acknowledge the claims of the disputing camps as equally valid, hoping that this might end the conflict. In (42), in addition to comments justifying the act, we see an explicit mention of what underlies interventions: the writer starts by stating that they

would like to report the thread to the moderators so that they could take appropriate action. In the writer's opinion, forum norms of conduct have clearly been breached.

Regardless of the interveners' efforts to explain and justify their interventions, the acts remain unacknowledged. In both cases, the debate continues as if the intervention had not been voiced. It may be that the topic of the abortion discussion is so divisive that the interactants are simply unwilling to even consider the value of the opposing claims, and to acknowledge the intervention would mean that they would be doing just that. The same may be true of the discussion on black people and their success in life. Whatever the reason, the interventions are met with silence, while the topic continues to be actively disputed.

6. Discussion and conclusions

On the basis of the analysis presented above, interventions in discussion forum interaction can be presented in table format as follows:

Interventions as metapragmatic acts		
Type	Genuine	Staged
Function(s)	Evaluative	Affiliative
	Reinforcing a communicative norm: <i>stay on topic</i> <i>no conflict</i>	
	Organisational Mediatlional	

The analysis of genuine interventions presented in this paper generally corroborates the findings of previous studies on conflicts in online interaction: compromise and assent seem to be rare. The present study only investigated instances involving an intervention, which naturally means that the findings cannot be extended to cover all conflictual situations. Interventions which attempt to steer the discussion in a new direction or terminate a dispute are often unsuccessful. Or, if the intervention is successful and the dispute ends, so may the entire discussion. Interestingly, even self-directed interventions are often unsuccessful: participants promise to stop arguing, for instance, only to resume arguing a little later. Perhaps the suggestion to stop arguing can be seen as an offer, and if other interactants continue the dispute despite the offer, the intervener withdraws the offer and also continues.

Reactions to interventions by the targeted posters and other participants in the discussions vary from silence and implicit acknowledgements to explicit acknowledgements and resistance. Implicit acknowledgements mostly occur with organisational interventions, as interactants return to on-topic discussion or steer the discussion in a new, less conflictual direction. Explicit positive reactions are rare in the material. More common are expressions of resistance, which range from mild to conflictual.

Perhaps the most intriguing reaction is absence of reaction, signalled by silence, and silence accompanied by withdrawal the most elusive. I would argue that silence signals disagreement in instances where the dispute continues as if the intervention had not happened. The disagreement may not be strong enough for explicit, voiced resistance, but continuing the debate shows disregard for the intervention. Silence with withdrawal is difficult, if not impossible, to analyse, at least without access to more detailed log files of the discussions. Since we cannot tell the exact point when a withdrawal happens, we cannot say whether silence is an active reaction to the intervention – agreement, disagreement or conflictual – or simply the accompanying result of the withdrawal.

Participants in online discussions seem to be willing to carry out interventions, although it is indisputable that interventions targeted at others are face-threatening and often have adverse implications for interveners themselves. Including oneself as the target may be one solution around this problem, and the analysis revealed that such interventions are quite often successful. It is more difficult to mitigate an intervention which targets only others, although we saw interveners trying to justify their act in various ways. Interventions which target only two or a limited number of participants also seem to attract more resistance, and it could therefore be argued that the effect of this face-threatening act is smaller when it targets a larger group of participants.

This paper has only managed to provide a cursory glimpse of interventions in online discussions. Future investigations could look at the phenomenon on other platforms and forums. Although the many forms that interventions can take means that automatic searches are not easy to implement, other productive intervention formats can no doubt be detected for automatised analyses to complement the more qualitative close reading of digital interactions.

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