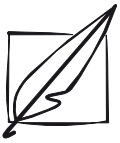

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"Get the snip – and a job!" Disagreement, impoliteness and conflicting identities on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the construction of disagreement and the emergence of conflict talk in the comment boards of the British Mail Online newspaper website. It focuses on the case of a young unemployed couple, parents of six, who are asking Social Security fora four-bedroom flat. By resorting to a threefold framework for the analysis of disagreement – backgrounded, hedged and foregrounded disagreement (Scott 2002, Walkinshaw 2009) – it concentrates on the linguistic and discursive strategies which online speakers employ to disagree in a more or less explicit way. In light of the diversity of negative responses to this specific news report case, which range from mildly disapproving comments to blatantly offensive remarks, it also explores the interactional factors which influence the management of face and the occurrence of (im)politeness. Such factors as anonymity, asynchronicity, spatial disconnection and, crucially, third-party targeting are advanced as possible explanations. Furthermore, the fact that online interaction is multi-party seems to lead to what is coined "multi-topic argument", at the same time as the public character of the exchanges prompts the expression of strongly ideological positions regarding the broad concept of social class, as well as specific issues of unemployment, housing and parenting policies. Crucially, the article explores how relational work in such a complex participation setting influences the online construction of individual and group identity vis-à-vis the reification of the "us vs. them" rhetoric. Last but not least, the article also discusses the way in which a typically plural and open public online platform, with no moderation or censorship, turns the exercise of freedom of speech into the expression of hate, discrimination, and prejudice.

Keywords: disagreement, (im)politeness, Internet, conflict talk, identity, social class.

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1. Introduction

The study of comment forums on the Internet provides rich evidence for a particular, and to a certain extent innovative, type of verbal interaction. Unlike interpersonal conversation, talking in online newspaper comment boards is an asynchronous and long-distance phenomenon, which makes the linguistic exchanges assume a delayed and sometimes impersonal character (Baron 2003; Hardaker 2010; Yus 2011). Additionally, as a multiparty conversation, several voices are at play simultaneously and several alternative (and, indeed, conflicting) topics tend to be raised (Marcoccia 2004; Lewis 2005; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011). This influences the expression of opinions and the negotiation of agreement and disagreement. What is more, the anonymous nature of online discussion forums naturally affects – indeed, decreases – the speakers' concerns for redressing face (Goffman 1955, 1967) and avoiding conflict (Donath 1999; Eisenchlas 2011). Although online comment boards are public, reaching a wide, multinational audience, the fact that the contributors' identities are concealed may cause some speakers to volunteer polemical opinions and to assume strong ideological positions more willingly than in restricted, face-to-face dialogues (see e.g. Graham – Hardaker 2017). Moreover, as the risk of actual retaliation seems to diminish, Internet talk reveals the occurrence of impolite and aggressive elements more easily than talk in personal interaction does so.

The purpose of this article is to analyse a specific case of computer-mediated communication, namely the comment pages of the British *Mail Online* newspaper website. The news article under investigation, published in July 2013, reports on the case of a destitute family of eight. The parents, a young unemployed couple, are asking Social Security for a four-bedroom flat to accommodate their steadily growing brood. The focus of the present analysis is the readers' linguistic responses to the news report context in general (family benefits in the UK) and to the legitimacy of the couple's housing request in particular, given that their unemployment does not seem to encourage them to undertake family planning. This response varies in strength along the disagreement scale, sometimes assuming an explicitly impolite and even aggressive character. It also involves questions of identity in terms of age and social class, at the same time as it is closely embedded in political, ethical and moral issues (on the importance of morality for research on im/politeness, see e.g. Arundale 2013; Haugh 2013; Kádár – Márquez-Reiter 2015; Kádár – De La Cruz 2016).

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The discussion starts by providing a synopsis of theoretical approaches to online communication. Secondly, it reviews the methodological framework of Politeness Theory (Brown – Levinson 1978/1987), against which Impoliteness Studies have to be considered, the online expression of disagreement being one such manifestation. Then, the textual analysis section looks into the computer-mediated dialogues according to three categories: backgrounded (or implicit) disagreement, hedged disagreement (mitigated with face work) and foregrounded (or explicit) disagreement. The treatment examines the speech act of disagreeing in light of the employment – or, conversely, of the avoidance – of face redress strategies. It also aims to analyse the negotiation of identity issues in conflict-ridden Internet discourse (see e.g. Blitvich 2009), in terms of the establishment of coalition, rapport and solidarity (Bruxelles – Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004; Spencer-Oatey – Zegarac 2017), as well as the construction of a sense of community (Baym 1995; Castells 2000; Locher 2004; Hopkinson 2013). Finally, the article investigates the creation and/or reification of segregation strategies in ideology-organised participation frameworks (Upadhyay 2010), where freedom of speech frequently, and ironically, progresses towards hate speech (Calvert 1997; Kinney 2008; Hardaker – McGlashan 2016; Langton 2012).

2. Linguistic approaches to online communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been at the forefront of linguistic, communication and sociological studies since the close of the 1990s, when it became a widespread phenomenon. One of the initial angles of approach was of a contrastive nature, viewing CMC as opposed to face-to-face dialogues. Against the backdrop of Conversation Analysis (CA, Sacks et al. 1974; Atkinson – Heritage 1984; van Dijk 1985), researchers struggled to establish how the specific technological nature of the new medium affected both the linguistic message and the communicative interaction. Devoid of co-presence and simultaneity, Internet exchanges required other categories of analysis, which CA instruments were unable to provide. CA notions such as turn taking, overlap, and interruption, among others, could not apply to the early forms of CMC, namely email. Its asynchronous and spatially distant character, together with its written but informal nature, challenged existing analytical frameworks.

Androutsopolous (2006; see also Locher 2010) regards these research issues as belonging to what he calls the first "wave" of linguistic approaches

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to the new media – that of computer, or technical, "determinism", which focused on describing the idiosyncrasies of the language used in CMC, mainly in email exchanges. Yates (1996), Baron (1998) and Crystal (2001), for example, attempted to incorporate this interactive genre into existing communication models. Consequently, they regarded it either as a form of oral speech, which happens to be written for transmission purposes, or as a message written in the traditional format but transmitted through a new electronic medium (as in job applications, online hotel bookings, family letters). Other authors (Ferrara et al. 1991; Maynor 1994; Collot – Belmore 1996) tried to devise a symbiotic approach to email exchanges by integrating properties of both the oral and the written registers into a so-called "e-style".

Baron (2003) also approached email language in comparison with face-to-face conversations, by exploring both their similarities and differences. The former include informality (use of contracted forms, preferred coordinate clause constructions), conciseness (short messages intended for short answers) and temporariness. The differences between the two communicative forms include the occurrence of more radical informal usages in email than in interpersonal talk (such as colloquial forms of treatment, frequent omission of greetings, use of direct speech acts), a greater variability of the response time (which is due to the asynchronous nature of email which, even if extended, is acceptable, unlike face-to-face exchanges which demand instant response), and the fact that email can be printed, edited and stored, unlike oral exchanges which, unless recorded, are typically ephemeral.

When chat-rooms, discussion forums, newsgroups and other Internet sites of open-access participation became pervasive, the changing discursive nature of cybernetic communication attracted new criticism. Understanding the interpersonal dynamics and the pragmatic competencies of participants in virtual forums, with their frequent anonymity and multimodality, took central stage. This is what Androutsopoulos (2006) calls the second "wave" of scholarly research into CMC, which brings social and contextual factors – namely, the users and the online situation, respectively – into the scene. Marcoccia (2004), for instance, discusses several features of the so-called "online polylogues", such as manipulation mechanisms which anonymity favours, namely the fact that the author (the actual producer of the message) can safely hide behind the speaker (the persona holding the nickname that appears on the screen). Lewis (2005), on the other hand, analyses French and British online boards of political discussion (a case of what she calls "many-to-many interaction") and she remarks that plural communication tends to be fragmented into sub-exchanges, that is, multi-party interactions tend

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to be broken down into a number of overlapping dialogues (each taking place between two speakers). Clarke (2009), employing a Critical Discourse Analysis framework, also focuses on the interpersonal relationships among trainee teachers online, especially the discursive construction of the legitimisation strategies used. Also, Montero-Fleta et al. (2009) study the degrees of formality in two types of chat-rooms (a Catalan one, on football; and a British one, on the Palestinian crisis) whereas Savas (2011) aims to understand the individual and contextual differences in varying stylistic options detected in synchronic forums.

The study of reader responses in discussion forums on the Internet, particularly with regard to the analysis of participation frameworks, face and identity (along the same lines as the present article), characterises what Androutsopoulos (2006) calls the third (and, so far, last) "wave" of CMC analysis. Donath (1999) stands among the first to study the ways in which members of online communities carefully construct their positive face, trying to manage their profiles so as to project desirable images of themselves that do not necessarily correspond to what they are in reality. Other experts have put forth an alternative reading: cybernauts no longer wish for a public image of classiness, learning, or civility. Baron (2003), for example, posits that contemporary American society, in face-to-face exchanges and in CMC alike, has witnessed the fall of "public face". Changes in perception of social class differences, the upsurge of inter-class mobility, the fact that education does not necessarily lead to economic success, and the great importance attributed to youth culture have resulted in "less impetus to learn the fine points of etiquette or dress up for job interviews" and less public respect for developing "the sophisticated thought and language that higher education traditionally nurtures" (Baron 2003: 90).

Even though online speakers are not co-present, it should be stressed, as does Locher (2010: 1), that "online communication is as real as offline interaction". She quotes from Wood – Smith (2005: 20), who remark that when people interact online – either with their true names or with pseudonyms – they may "consider the effects of online interaction just as impactful as those one might encounter in a face-to-face scenario". This is in line with what Haugh – Kádár – Mills (2013) reclaim as a legitimate field of Interpersonal Pragmatics. Indeed, Internet communication *is* interpersonal, insofar as it takes place between real, existing individuals, as opposed to e.g. fictional characters, and involves relational management.

More recent approaches to online (im)politeness have actually emphasised the important role that relational work plays in the construction of online identities. Blitvich (2009), for instance, influentially discusses

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the emergence of a new American news genre, that of news as (impolite) confrontation, which depends on a joint construction of identity by the hosts, the guests and the audience. Being impolite is therefore expected and encouraged in such interactional settings. Upadhyay (2010) also addresses the issue of group identity, by claiming that discussants may resort to linguistic impoliteness as an exclusion mechanism, to discredit an out-group's position. This, he holds, is one of the three strategies speakers may use to be impolite, the other two being a communicative strategy, to express disagreements, and an argumentative strategy, to query opposite ideological standpoints. Upadhyay also maintains that impoliteness is connected with the discussant's siding with, or against, a group's ideological stance and objectives, that is, a group's identity. Eisenchlas (2011) proposes another explanation for online impoliteness. He argues that it is the very nature of the Internet medium that makes face concerns become more insignificant than in face-to-face contact. The Internet is democratic, anonymous, and discontinuous, which makes interactants more easily disregard social conventions such as respect, hierarchy and deference, let alone accountability.

Yus (2011) also applies a politeness framework to analyse what he coins "Internet-mediated communication". Yus (2011: 257) interestingly remarks that the employment of politeness strategies online is not necessarily the user's choice, but often the platform moderator's imposition, in such various forums as blogs, discussion boards and chatrooms. Yus (2011: 270) is also aware that the Internet, being used all over the world both asynchronously (in email and texting) and synchronously (in chatrooms), "is particularly appropriate for an analysis of the trans-cultural differences in the use of politeness". The specific nature of online talk influences the use, or misuse, of politeness. Such factors as "the lack of physical co-presence and the reduced nonverbal contextual support" (Yus 2011: 263) affect the choice, or dismissal, of certain politeness strategies. Like other written media, such as letters or the printed newspapers, the Internet does not boast resources otherwise available to speakers in everyday communication. By way of compensation, it does afford other conversational aids that do not exist in other forms of communication: emoticons, for instance, can attenuate the propositional content of an utterance or mask its illocutionary force, much along the lines of what politeness does (Yus 2011: 168).

Herring – Stein – Virtanen (2013) have recently offered a substantial volume on the pragmatics of CMC, including relevant articles on (im) politeness. The use of small talk as a politeness strategy in workplace email exchanges (Hössjer 2013), for instance, is discussed alongside the

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employment of so-called "flaming", or insulting, a consensually impolite interactive attitude on a listserv (Danet 2013; on "flaming" see also Richet 2013). In addition, resorting to repair strategies, such as apologies, in chat room and email conversations (see Baker-Jacobs – Garcia 2013; Harrison – Allton 2013, respectively) is regarded as a way to overhaul the online occurrence of face-threatening acts.

Even more recently, Graham – Hardaker (2017) have also charted a current trend in digital media analysis that concentrates on *im*politeness, rather than politeness. Together with some authors mentioned above, they refer to Angouri – Tseliga (2010), Dynel (2015), Langlotz (2010), Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011), Perelmutter (2013) and Richet (2013). Interestingly, Graham – Hardaker (2017) point out a rather curious characteristic of some forms of online impoliteness: its habitual, or at any rate recurrent, nature. The authors (2017: 803) state: "Spammers, Pimpers, Flamers and Trolls are of particular interest since these labels are frequently associated with deliberate, habitual impoliteness online" (on "trolling", see also Hardaker 2010, 2013, 2015, and Hopkinson 2013).

Now that the textual genre of written online communication has been outlined, an overview of key theoretical points is necessary. Therefore, the next section will survey a few essential premises of Politeness Theory and their impact on Impoliteness Studies (see also Ermida 2006, 2009 & 2014).

3. Aggression, disagreement, and impoliteness

The occurrence of conflict, an aggressive form of divergence, has long been seen as a dispreferred incident in interpersonal communication. Brown – Levinson's (1978/1987) classic book departs significantly from the claim that one of the main goals of politeness is to neutralise aggression: "[…] politeness, like formal diplomatic protocol […], presupposes [a] potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it" (Brown – Levinson 1987:1). The authors add that politeness "makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties", requiring the interlocutors to identify possible symptoms of conflict through "constant vigilance" and to master a "precise semiotics of peaceful vs. aggressive intentions" (1987:1). As such, politeness should be understood as an important method of "social control" (1987: 2).

Another foundational contributor to the study of politeness, Leech (1983), also conceives of politeness as a remedy for conflict and aggression. Moreover, he considers disagreement to be a dangerous pathway for

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aggressive interaction. His Principle of Politeness aims to avert or resolve any hostility between speakers, in such a way as to keep "the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place" (Leech 1983: 82). This Principle of Politeness is divided into six maxims, namely those of Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy. Importantly, the Agreement Maxim is stated thus: a) "Minimise disagreement between self and other", and b) "Maximise agreement between self and other". Diminishing disagreement is listed first because, as Leech (1983: 133) claims, "avoidance of discord is a more weighty consideration than seeking concord". Leech also holds that "there is a tendency to exaggerate agreement with other people, and to mitigate disagreement by expressing regret, partial agreement, etc." (1983: 138). Another means that speakers employ to prevent disagreement is the use of indirect speech acts (Searle 1975), for instance through modalisation and passivisation. Indirectness is inversely proportional to impoliteness: the more indirect the speaker, the less impolite and the less likely to cause conflict.

The management of conflict is closely related to the power differential between speakers, and this has also been clear from the emergence of politeness studies. Power is one of Brown – Levinson's three "sociological factors" that are crucial to "determining the level of politeness which a speaker will use to an addressee" (1987: 15), namely: Power, Distance and Ranking of the Imposition. Power has a strong bearing on the progress of the conversation, because if the interlocutor is "eloquent and influential, or is a prince, a witch, a thug, or a priest", he may well impose "his own plans and his own self-evaluation" (1987: 76). As a result, he will threaten (a) the positive face of the hearers, by showing he does not respect or appreciate their opinion, and (b) their negative face, by intruding upon their territory and requiring them to accept his (cf. Goffman 1955, 1967).

Brown – Levinson approach the issue of agreement vs. disagreement clearly in their theory of politeness. "Seeking agreement" and "avoiding disagreement" are complementary strategies that aim at establishing common ground between the speaker and the hearer, thus "indicating that S and H both belong to some set of persons who share specific wants, including goals and values" (1987: 103, see also 112-113). Speakers wish to agree, or to appear to agree, so eagerly that they may resort to "token agreement". Brown – Levinson (1987: 114) refer to an earlier study by Sacks (1973), in which a "Rule of Agreement" determines "the remarkable degree to which speakers may go in twisting their utterances so as to appear to

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agree or to hide disagreement". An example is when a speaker replies to a preceding utterance by saying "Yes, but…", rather than a blunt "No". We will see occurrences of token agreement, or what I call "disagreeing by agreeing", in the corpus analysed in the next section.

The idea that agreeing is preferable to disagreeing is considered in other early works. Pomerantz (1984: 70) claims that even weak disagreements, being dispreferred answers, resort to delaying strategies such as hesitations, requests for clarification, "no talk", turn prefaces, partial repeats and other repair initiators. And Kakavá (1993: 36) points out that the speaker who disagrees does so reluctantly because s/he is likely vulnerable to censure and counter-attack, given that disagreeing is a potential "generator of conflict", and also of confrontation, argument, and dispute. It is perhaps because of this conflict potential, and collateral psychological damage due to face harm, that disagreement tends to be regarded as a dispreferred response.

In a somewhat later work, Locher (2004) supplies an important approach to disagreement from the standpoint of Politeness Theory and also within the framework of power relations. She takes the notion of "conflict" as the nexus that brings together other important concepts, since, as she puts it, it "can be argued to link the exercise of power, politeness and disagreement on a general level" (2004: 94). In light of Waldron – Applegate's (1994: 4) definition of a verbal disagreement as "a form of conflict" insofar as it is "characterized by incompatible goals, negotiation, and the need to coordinate self and other actions", Locher (2004) holds that disagreeing speakers are in conflict not only in terms of content but also in terms of the protection of both the hearer's face and their own. Locher (2004) stipulates eight categories of expressing disagreement, showing different degrees of politeness: using hedges, giving personal or emotional reasons for disagreeing, using modal auxiliaries, shifting responsibility, stating objections in the form of questions, using the conjunction "but", repeating an utterance, and disagreeing in a non-mitigated way. We will see how some of these categories function in the corpus under analysis. In the meantime, we may simply note that Locher, at this point (2004), sides with those that take disagreeing to be a dispreferred action.

Other researchers, however, do not think so, and claim that disagreements, just like arguments, do not have to be negatively connoted or emotionally damaging. Schiffrin (1984: 329), for instance, holds that disagreements may be part of the expected speech situation – as in "sociable arguments" – and thus be gratifying and pleasant experiences for the speakers involved. She also remarks that even though arguments

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may initially seem to boil down to conflict talk, they may in fact constitute instances of "cooperative", or healthily "competitive", communication (Schiffrin 1990: 241). Goodwin (1990: 85) views disagreement – or its stronger version, argument – as a reaction that is not necessarily a dispreferred or negative one. Accordingly, "despite the way in which argument is frequently treated as disruptive behaviour, it is in fact accomplished through a process of very intricate coordination between the parties who are opposing each other". In a similar vein, Kotthoff (1993: 193) claims that "once a dissent-turn-sequence has been displayed, opponents are expected to defend their positions", showing fewer reluctance markers, which converts disagreement into a "preferred" reaction. Locher (2010), moving on from previous discussions (see Locher 2004), reasons likewise: the expectations about what is, or is not, polite vary considerably, just like assessments of appropriateness. Regulations like those of Netiquette (Shea 1994) are by no means universally observed. Sometimes, Locher (2010: 3) claims, impoliteness may even be the "norm", especially in online media that focus on political issues, and according to Angouri – Locher (2012), disagreement may actually be expected, rather than just tolerated. Instead of being an exceptional, or dispreferred, speech act, disagreeing is not necessarily negative. Likewise, Hopkinson (2014) studies the prevalence of aggressive verbal antagonism in Internet discussion forums. He argues that the effects of such behavior may be constructive and beneficial, not only to the speaker but also to the discourse community as whole. The use of a variety of face-attack moves helps speakers enhance their own face and that of the group to which they belong.

An important reflection on the desirability of (impolite) disagreement in certain settings and relational contexts is Harris's (2001) study of political discourse, in which being "politically impolite", as she puts it, is actually not only usual but desirable. The same may be said to apply to online debate forums such as the one analyzed in the present article, where State benefits are the object of discussion. It should be noted that since impoliteness essentially constitutes a matter of evaluation (Eelen 2001), online impolite disagreement also occurs within an evaluative, and necessarily relational, framework, where what is deemed (im)proper derives from social practices and established rituals. The point here is that on the Internet it is not only customary to voice (impolite) disagreement but also *expected*, especially when it comes to political discussion. In other words, impoliteness, again, seems to be the norm, at least among certain layers of respondents. Of course, not every online commentator sanctions impoliteness; certain participants, sometimes

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as bystanders, act as politeness moderators, as if there were a moral order by which to abide. Kádár – Márquez-Reiter (2015) interestingly discuss the phenomenon of "bystander intervention" in light of what they call the "moral oughts" (Kádár – Márquez-Reiter 2015: 241; see also Culpeper's 2011 "social oughts"), that is, what is expected behaviour-wise from participants in certain discourse communities. We shall see whether the strong interactional antagonism on the *Daily Mail* comment thread prompts moral judgments, or conversely whether its political nature ritually frames, and interactionally condones, any form of linguistic excess.

Meanwhile, a pair of important taxonomies of disagreement require mention. The first is by Scott (2002), who distinguishes between two basic types of linguistic disagreement which "exist on a continuum of increasing explicitness and escalating hostility": "backgrounded" disagreement and "foregrounded" disagreement (2002: 301). Scott divides "foregrounded disagreement" into two subtypes, namely "collegial disagreement" and "personal disagreement", which may include "ad hominem attacks" depending on the target that the disagreeing speaker has in mind.

The second taxonomy is by Walkinshaw (2009), who, following Scott's lead to some extent, proposes four categories of disagreement. To illustrate these categories, he provides a fictitious example in which a speaker replies to the question of whether he likes a second-hand sofa:

1. Explicit / direct disagreement: "I don't like this couch at all". The literal meaning of this "face threatening act", or FTA, which carries just one possible interpretation, will only be used "if the speaker is not concerned with retaliation from the hearer" (Walkinshaw 2009: 73)
2. Disagreement hedged with positive politeness: "It's a nice couch, but I don't like it". In this case, expressing appreciation of the hearer's likes, wants and preferences reduces the strength of the disagreement.
3. Disagreement hedged with negative politeness: "You've obviously set your heart on it, but I don't like it". This includes the mitigating strategies oriented towards the hearer's desire to act freely as s/he chooses.
4. Implied disagreement: "Um, well, it's certainly an interesting colour…" This roughly corresponds to Brown and Levinson's "off-record" strategies, such as hinting and giving vague, unfinished replies, which liberate the speaker from the onus of only one communicative intention, and thus of the responsibility for the FTA.

Although Scott (2002), Locher (2004), Culpeper (2011) and Walkinshaw (2009) analyse and systematise the interpersonal occurrence of disagreement, it is

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important to note that they do not do so in terms of virtual communication. The present article, therefore, feeds on the foundational input of such studies and expands the field of analysis into online talk.

Other recent studies on disagreement do consider online discourse. Graham (2007), for instance, examines how deviation from expected norms of polite interaction in an email community, when it comes to the expression of disagreement, results in conflict and renegotiation of identity. Blitvich (2010), conversely, analyses the normalisation of impoliteness in online discourse, which she dubs "youtubification", especially when politics is involved – as is the case, significantly, of the present corpus of analysis. Angouri – Tseliga (2010), likewise, discuss how instances of disagreement in online fora have a tendency to escalate up an impoliteness scale, showing signs of deliberate aggressiveness. Langlotz – Locher (2012) identify cases of expression of emotional stance in news website postings through conceptual implication, explicit expression, and description of emotions. And Bolander (2012) surveys the use of (dis)agreement in personal/diary blogs, where the participation framework encourages explicitness, even though there is a greater need to signal responsiveness explicitly when readers address other readers than when readers address bloggers.

The next sections will analyse the forms that the participants in Internet comment boards employ to express agreement and disagreement, and we will try to identify the different linguistic strategies used to express confrontation and rebuttal, as well as, conversely, alignment and approval. It seems that agreement occurs when a) there is a feeling of a shared experience of events and situations (on the concept of networked community, see e.g. Baym 1995 and Castells 2000), and b) for moral reasons, i.e., when readers feel it is wrong not to support people in need. On the other hand, disagreement takes place owing to the factors of Distance, Anonymity and Third-Party, as well as, crucially, Freedom of Speech. In fact, the feeling of unaccountability that comes with expressing opinions outspokenly, here disagreeing with State benefits to the point of resorting to slurring (Croom 2013) and flaming, shows a joint, discursively sanctioned, construction of segregation of certain vulnerable social groups (Calvert 1997; Kinney 2008; Hardaker – McGlashan 2016; Langton 2012). The following sections intend to test these hypotheses.

4. A case study: Preliminary description

The corpus of texts under investigation in the present article constitutes a portion of a long comment thread (on the whole, 2.1K comments) taken

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from the *Mail Online* newspaper website, in the hours following the publication of an article entitled "Jobless couple who claim £27,000 a year benefits want a new council house because they've had SIX children 'by accident' while living in a one-bedroom flat" (July 16, 2013).

A revealing photograph accompanies that article. The picture shows the six young children, ranging from an eight-year-old girl to the two three-month-old baby twins, staring at the camera in a cluttered living-room. The father, wearing a beanie and a sporty urban outfit, has a worried expression, but also a somewhat "hooligan" quality to his looks, with his hands loose, not touching his children, whereas the mother, pale and dishevelled, looks exhausted and alienated while holding the two-year-old between her knees.

Both parents are both unemployed, the newspaper states, "because Maggie [the mother] is depressed and has mental health problems, while Gavin [the father] has to stay in their cramped home to look after her and their family". The news report was made because they are asking Social Security for a bigger home, namely a four-bedroom flat, to lodge their continuously increasing number of offspring.

The focus of the present article is the readers' linguistic reaction to the report, especially in terms of how legitimate the couple's housing request is deemed to be, since the couple's lack of employment does not seem to prevent them from having more and more children. Most of the readers' responses are based on the issue of age, because the couple is relatively young, or that of class, because the family is clearly of the lower socio-economic class. However, the responses are also strongly rooted in political, ethical and moral questions. The interaction quickly takes on a confrontational character, turning the management of disagreement, and conflict, into a key issue. Furthermore, the overall analysis of the texts becomes an interesting case study of argumentative discourse in general and "multi-party argument" in particular (Maynard 1986, Goodwin – Goodwin 1990: 100), lending itself to an examination of the employment – or dismissal – of face redress strategies usually at work in face-to-face interaction.

In total, the corpus comprises 492 posts, written in the initial six hours following the publication of the news article, each of which containing one or more sentences, which amount to 19,628 words. These posts boast a dialogical nature – or, along Marcoccia's lines (2004), a "polylogical" character – since they involve more than two participants, and many of the utterances respond to more than one speaker at a time.

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5. Expressing disagreement in the *Mail Online* comment corpus

The expression of disagreement in the corpus under analysis derives from the fundamental question of whether or not the couple deserves a new home, but at times it also originates in one of a range of related topics, which the commentators introduce, discuss, drop, and even retrieve as the argument proceeds. This partly accounts for the complexity of the corpus material, insofar as the disagreement turns occur in a succession that is not dyadic, but multiparty, exhibiting different lines of discursive input. More precisely, the various points of disagreement in the exchanges correspond to the following:

a) Disagreeing about poor families deserving child support benefits;
b) Disagreeing about poor people having too many children (a situation which could be resolved by way of contraception, or even sterilisation),
c) Disagreeing about the right-wing's (and more specifically the *Daily Mail*'s) demonization of the poor;
d) Disagreeing about the appraisals of this particular couple's lifestyle (represented by their untidy house, poorly cared for children, and gaunt appearance).

Additionally, the speech act of disagreeing is closely associated, indeed overlaps, with other speech acts, such as criticising, protesting, and reprimanding. In fact, from a Speech-Act Theory perspective, the composition of the discourse is intricate, insofar as the illocutionary force of the utterances covers a broad spectrum, from ostensive condemnation and criticism, to encouragement and support, as well as warning and advice. In argumentative terms, two sides build up from the outset of the discussion: a judgmental side and a sympathetic side, which quickly and easily clash. From a Conversational Analysis standpoint, the ways the turns are constructed bears on the asynchronous nature of the polylogue. Even though interruption and overlap are not possible in this non-presential medium, direct responses to previous comments do come up, whereas other posts exist autonomously, not acknowledging previous discursive input. It is also interesting that the length of comments varies a great deal; rather long turns alternate with single-liners and even one-word replies.

From the perspective of Im/politeness Studies, the essential theoretical framework to be used, the texts boast a high level of intricacy. The anonymity of the discussion forum promotes the free expression of opinion, which may account for the frequent occurrence of politeness infringements. Moreover,

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the third-party factor, i.e. the absence of those targeted (the unemployed couple) in the actual conversation, may explain the "outspoken" character of many replies (Kádár – Márquez-Reiter 2015; Kádár – De La Cruz 2016), which more seldom occurs in daily face-to-face interaction, where speakers tend to be more observant of civility conventions. It is important to note that, according to Leech (1983: 133), "politeness towards an addressee is generally more important than politeness towards a third party".

The next section is divided into three parts. This division follows the three major classes of disagreement strategies present in the corpus.

5.1 Backgrounded disagreement: Hinting and the unsaid

As disagreements potentially harm the hearer's, as well as the speaker's, face, online commentators usually avoid performance of the "face-threatening act" (FTA), or at least attempt to soften its negative impact. As Brown – Levinson posit, going "off record" protects the speaker insofar as "it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act" (Brown – Levinson 1987: 211). Scott (2002: 74) calls off-record disagreeing "backgrounded disagreement" and confirms that it is a way to escape accountability for the FTA because the speaker hides safely beneath implicitness and indirectness. In truth, off-record strategies require inferential efforts on the part of the recipients by offering conversational implicatures, since FTAs typically violate Grice's cooperative maxims (1975). Instances of backgrounded disagreement in the present corpus reflect many of the linguistic mechanisms which Brown – Levinson (1987: 69) advance: "metaphor and irony, rhetorical questions, understatement, tautologies, all kinds of hints as to what a speaker wants or means to communicate".

Metaphor, which compares two elements without the use of a comparative particle, is a "category of Quality violations, for metaphors are literally false" (Brown – Levinson 1987: 222):

(1) Still no excuse to live in a *pigsty*. – Kellieozzy, Soton. [Italics mine, henceforth.]
(2) Cap their benefits and for goodness sake sterilise this baby *factory*! – Remy, Manchester.
(3) They're *rabbits* going at it in front of the kids no doubt. – Concertante, Venus.

The occurrence of similes in the texts points to an infringement of Grice's (1975) Quantity Maxim, as the speaker does not give enough information,

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leaving it to the recipient to infer what is being aimed at. Many discussants refer to the couple as animals of one kind or the other, but do not offer any additional explanation – the pejorative innuendo being all too familiar to a cultural community. Of course, this also breaks the Quality Maxim (strictly speaking, it is false that human beings are rabbits or rats):

(4) Why should people be rewarded for rutting *like rabbits* and being bone idle? – Teacher, Birmingham
(5) Why would one keep on bearing kids *like rats* whilst staying in one bed house? Think about it. – Chaucer, Windsor.
(6) These people who breed *like cattle* but refuse to pay for their own family are just reprehensible. – Newshound, Liverpool.

The following simile, of a somewhat sexist nature, compares the mother to a specific object:

(7) she's popping them out *like a vending machine*!!! – Winnerping, Lancashire.

Similes also concern the couple's appearance. The phrase "looks like" is present in the following situation, which exhibits social class prejudice and a hint of ethnicism, given that the word "clampit" implies a backward redneck white person:

(8) All that money and they *look like clampits*! Give me my tax money back i'll [sic] show you how to look half decent! – Geordie2014, Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Employing rhetorical questions is another case of Quality Maxim violation, since it helps the speaker lessen the strength of the disagreement. As Brown – Levinson (1987: 223) explain, "to ask a question with no intention of obtaining an answer breaks the sincerity rule on questions". The corpus is laden with rhetorical questions of all sorts. Some are emphasized by a row of question marks, which "leave[s] their answers hanging in the air" (Brown – Levinson 1987: 223) and spare the speaker the responsibility for the propositional content of the utterance. The great majority of such questions concern the use of contraception:

(9) Not heard of a condom then or do they fail as well? – Mjs1302, Chelt.
(10) So condoms don't work? I wonder what the manufacturers have to say about this? – St George, Portsmouth.

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(11) How pathetic, how can a condom not work??? – Olivette, Northampton.
(12) What about the 'withdrawal' method of contraception?? Sorry TMI but we've used that method for 10 years. – Kelstar, Belfast.

Other readers hint at vasectomy ("the snip") or phrase it explicitly, even if they soften it with a question mark:

(13) What's wrong with him doing his bit of birth control, has he not heard of condoms or 'the snip'? – Kitty51, Bexleyheath.
(14) If all contraception seems to 'fail', how about keeping your knees together or getting the snip? – Bertha, Buckinghamshire.
(15) By the way… too much for his manhood to have a vasectomy? – Karen, Cardiff.
(16) Why didn't he just get a vasectomy? Why is it always up to the woman? Disgusting, the pair of them. Poor kids having to live like that. – Tishtoshtess, Sheffield.

One last type of rhetorical questioning targets the way the family live:

(17) Why should they get another property when they clearly have no respect for the one that currently live in? – Tomcatx1, Birmingham.
(18) What a dirty floor… ever heard of a hoover?? – MrsS, Bucks.

However, there are also readers whose rhetorical questions do not attack the couple in the article, and instead side with the "poor and needy" in general:

(19) I'm not at all religious, but I was under the impression we were supposed to be a nation with Christian values? What sort of people don't help the poor and needy? Because that's what the MAJORITY of people on benefits are – they just need help. John51, London.

The questions other readers ask seem to be of a different kind; they constitute real requests for information or clarification:

(20) £540-a-month in jobseekers allowance? Don't you have to be actively looking for a job to be entitled to that? – Tinkerbelle, Brighton.
(21) How are they entitled to job seekers allowance if they're not looking for jobs??? I notice her tattoos though… – Annie, Dublin.

Irony, which intends to convey the opposite of what is said (Quality infringement, once again), also expresses implicit disagreement. The corpus contains a large number of ironical utterances:

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(22) Congratulations, great family, good luck! – LadyUmbrella, South-West.
(23) *The pride* of Great Britain, and a vision of it's [sic] future – all created by Lib/Lab/Con. – Owen Hales, Halesowen.
(24) I also have a boyfriend and although its [sic] been very difficult and I really don't know how we've done it, have managed to NOT get pregnant. *I must be a genius*. – Alexandra, London.
(25) *I feel so thrilled and privileged* to be paying tax to support this beautiful couple so they may continue breeding and bringing up their *delightful* little children to carry on in the *same sweet way*. – Cleeboy, Crawley.
(26) *I'm always having babies by accident*. I'm just casually walking down the street and pop, yet another baby. – Au Contraire, Wirral.

It should be noted that quite a few ironical comments bear on social class. The following discussants refer to the man's physical appearance and the quality of their home in a deprecating and jocular fashion, as if making fun of their obviously low class status:

(27) Well, he looks like a catch! – Triggertastic, Birmingham.
(28) I feel sorry for him, the insulation in his house is obviously very poor if you need to wear a wooly [sic] hat in a heat wave. – Devonianlad, Plymouth.
(29) Asbestos floor tiles nice. – Anonymous, London.

Unlike irony, sarcasm does not convey the opposite of what is said (thus violating the Quality Maxim); instead, it means *more* than what is actually stated (thus violating the Quantity Maxim), which is why it also known as "understatement". So as to express disagreement about the couple's claim that their fertility is accidental, commentators write:

(30) Has he tried actually putting the condom on? That might help. – Pixi, Hampshire.
(31) Perhaps they need help understanding on which part of the male anatomy the condom should be affixed. – Cassandra44, London
(32) Maybe he should stop wearing a hat and start wearing something on a different part of his anatomy! – Keith, Kettering,
(33) May I make a suggestion as to a foolproof way of taking the pill and NEVER becoming pregnant. Remove pill from packet and place it between the knees. Keep it there for as long as hubby feels amorous. Works every time! – Steveh2731, Malvern.

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(34) What's wrong with "not tonight, I've got a headache"… and if he still insists, sleep in the bathroom… – SpeaksTheTruth, New Mills.

All of these are sarcastic comments, understated suggestions that the couple's situation is their own fault. So are the next passages, where readers also express disagreement and criticism of the young parents' ways, by insinuating what they are doing wrong, or *not* doing:

(35) I'm amazed reading this but I best not spend too much time commenting as I need to get back to work and earn some money so this family does not starve! – Klhull0, Hull.
(36) I should give up work have loads of kids, cover myself in tattoos and smoke like a chimney, then ask for a move from my tiny cramped flat that houses me and my two disabled children – Mel, London.
(37) Looks like a bar of soap wont go amiss – Rockvilla, Glasgow.

The references to the fact that the pair do not try to work and provide for their family, or do not keep their house clean, and instead waste their money on frivolous expenses, like tattoos and tobacco, also constitute instances of hinting. Hints, as Brown – Levinson (1987: 211) mention, are a typical strategy of indirectness, serving to downplay the illocutionary force of the utterance – in this case, of disagreeing and criticizing. Hints flout the Relation Maxim in that they require the recipient to establish the relevance of the utterance to the issue at hand. The use of interjections (of repulsion and nausea, like "yak" and "yuck") or marker of scepticism (like "ahem", which mimics the clearing of one's throat) also constitute hints that the speakers lay out for the reader to decipher:

(38) I think you need to spend more time cleaning your house rather than making babies – *yak*! – FTMum, York.
(39) Wouldn't let a dog live there *yuck* – Bella, Liverpool.
(40) Celibacy is always an option if nothing surgical or medical works **ahem** you could spend that time cleaning instead? – Tiffany17, Dublin.

Finally, the employment of generalisations is one last off-record strategy Brown – Levinson mention, which may be used to express implicit disagreement. The use of general and impersonal discursive subjects like "people" or "you" (a substitute for "one") helps speakers express their disagreement in a backgrounded way:

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(41) *People* have to be RESPONSIBLE! It's common sense that you don't have kids until you know you can bring them up properly! Don't expect the taxpayers to do it for you!! – Hotchocolate1, London.

(42) I've never understood why *people* without a lot of money tend to live in filth. I myself […] struggle to make ends meet. Yet I would never let myself or my children live like that! I think if you have a clean home it makes you feel better and healthier. – Nicola, Blackpool.

(43) *People* who work are depressed as well. – J93, Leicester.

(44) Dam [sic] the benefits are good in Britain not surprised that *people* are moving in for them. – Dawn5651, Woodstock.

(45) We live in a country that wipes *people*s [sic] backsides. When will it change?? – Hanns C, London.

The same can be said of the following general statements, which are additional cases of impersonalisation (through nominalisation). The speaker uses the impersonal plural form in "scrounging thieves" and, again, the generic "people". Furthermore, he resorts to a popular saying, which is another way to direct his point away from someone in particular. This is what Scott (2002) calls "collegial disagreement", instead of "personal disagreement". Even though the confrontational, even insulting, attitude of the post is clear, the couple discussed in the article is not addressed or mentioned directly:

(46) I am getting fed up of the scrounging thieves of our country. I understand that their [sic] are people who actually get benefits for the right reasons but this is another joke. BEGGARS CANNOT BE CHOOSERS. – Andrew, Dubai.

The following is a very interesting case of one commentator replying directly to another. The first speaker ("José Luis Hernández", probably a fake name) employs an obviously provocative tone, whereas the second one ("Themanattheback") shields himself behind a conditional sentence with impersonal subjects ("everyone, no one") and a vague object ("this attitude"):

(47) "I love big families, I have one too. And I don't work. Looking after the kids is a demanding enough job and we have a RIGHT to have children. The tax payer should support this." – José Luis Hernández, Northampton. And *if everyone had this attitude there would be no one left to pay tax / subsidise them*! – Themanattheback, Newbury.

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5.2 Hedged disagreement: Positive and negative politeness

Comments that express disagreement but attempt to alleviate its impact in a polite way occur abundantly in the corpus and cover both positive face and negative face. The corpus exhibits several examples of each. Let us start with positive politeness, which is aimed at the "positive self-image that [the speaker] claims for himself" (Brown – Levinson 1987: 70) and can be used to remedy the face-harm inherent in disagreement. Walkinshaw (2009: 73ff) also examines the use of positive politeness in disagreements, which he regards as an attempt to lessen disagreement by expressing appreciation of the hearer's likes, wants and preferences.

This is done through the use of hedges, (i.e. linguistic elements that tentativise the illocutionary force of the utterance) which this section will analyse. As Brown – Levinson explain (1987: 145), a hedge is "a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is *partial*, or true only in some respects […]". The quintessential hedging device is the use of adverbs "perhaps" and "maybe", which typically show that the speaker does not wish to lose face by sounding too critical or outspoken, though they can also carry an ironical tone:

(48) *Perhaps* if they worked and spent time and energy cleaning their home they would be too tired to keep making babies. – Maz, Colchester.
(49) *Perhaps* they should read about contraceptives and the uses they have… – Scott, Durham.
(50) *Perhaps* if you embarked on job searching in your spare time instead of in the bedroom these 'accidents' wouldn't happen. – Lucy, Cleveland.
(51) That flat doesnt [sic] look too clean to me, *perhaps* instead of (pardon the pun) breeding, *perhaps* he should have painted the walls … and she done a bit more cleaning. – Me, Somewhere over the Rainbow.
(52) *Maybe* if she was working she would not feel so depressed? Especially as he is a stay at home dad – therefore child care is not an issue. – Jaylouise, Birmingham.
(53) If she didn`t spend so much time on her back *maybe, just maybe,* she wouldn`t be so depressed the more you see of this the more you know E.D.S. is right in carrying out the much needed welfare [sic] reforms. – Yellow hand, Wednesbury.

The use of "I think" and "I don't know" are hedge phrases that speakers use to redress their positive face by pretending not to be certain of their disagreement:

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(54) Time for the snip *I think* – Berkshire, Reading.
(55) *I think* people should learn to take responsibilities of their actions not blaming the council. – Chaucer, Windsor.
(56) "I am too young to get sterilized"… what, she wants more children in the future? *I think* simple economics rather than age should have made the decision for her several children ago! – Charles, Bristol.

The employment of "I don't know", together with modal verbs, serves similar purposes. So do adverbs like "really", "rather", and "quite":

(57) *I don't know* what is more surprising, the fact that they believe others are responsible for supporting them or that the government does!! – Iseult, Glendale.
(58) *I don't know* what the solution is to be honest – but neither parent looks capable of getting a job that would pay sufficently [sic] well to fund so many offspring. Sterilization *would seem* to be the kindest solution for such families *really*. – Sara1, Home Sweet Home.

Claiming common ground by using in-group identity markers and first-person plural pronouns (we, us) is a positive politeness strategy which Brown – Levinson (1987: 107, 127) also note: "by using an inclusive 'we' form, when S really means 'you' or 'me', [the speaker] can call upon the cooperative assumptions and thereby redress FTAs". This works as a solidarity strategy of pretending the speakers are part of a group (see also Chilton 1990: 217), which helps them, as well as their positive face, feel protected:

(59) *We* almost need to go back to the system of Council Estates where all these wasters can be housed in the same community! – JohnakaJJ, Farnborough.
(60) The article is like *we* 'owe' them something! I hate this country and the benefits scroungers in it! Makes you wonder why *we* work at all! – Wood5y55, Reading.
(61) Why should I have to fund their lifestyle, *we*'re all struggling in the recession, it's just not fair. – JackieAlonso, London.
(62) At 26 this person could produce another 6 by the time she is finished – what size of house will she want then? *We* need to say NO now. – Patr0702, Edinburgh.

The use of "us" (in the phrase "the rest of us") works along similar lines:

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(63) I fail to understand why they cannot work like *the rest of us*. – Maz, London.

(64) You breed 'em, you house and feed 'em! Don't expect *the rest of us* to pick up the tab for your irresponsibility. – Mark R, Coventry.

(65) Don't be so ridiculous, WHY should they have been GIVEN a house? They should have done what most of *the rest of us* do and WORK to support themselves and their ever-growing family before it got to this stage. – Anon, Around.

(66) Oops, how did that happen? X6. Why should *the rest of us* have to pay for their kids? – Redkite, UK.

The following commentator uses a more resigned tone and refers to "us fools" as a fait accompli:

(67) The system is so flawed and while it is there will always be people like this wether [sic] they be lazy or just smart who take advantage of it and leave *us fools* to work. – Max, Reading.

The establishment of coalition (Bruxelles – Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004) between speakers has a negative side effect: the expression of prejudice and discrimination. The following, clearly xenophobic, comment also employs the pronoun "we" so as to redress an even stronger expression of disagreement and conflict. Also noteworthy is the use of the hedge "maybe" here:

(68) Maybe *we* should deport all of these lot [sic], along with serious criminals and illegal immigrants to some colonial island *we* own and then give it back to the closest country. The Falklands seems a natural choice. – Samo, Warrington.

This shows that the expression of group identity and bonding is, paradoxically, very close to hate speech (Calvert 1997, Kinney 2008, Hardaker – McGlashan 2016, Langton 2012). By uniting with a group, speakers oppose another group, in what constitutes the "us vs. them" or "ingroup vs. outgroup" dichotomy (e.g. van Dijk 1991: 207). As an ultimate form of verbal aggression, hate speech "expresses hatred, contempt, ridicule, or threats toward a specific group or class of people" (Kinney 2008), which in the present case can be said to be the poor generally, but also the immigrants. A xenophobic, nationalist observation very similar to the previous quote above, sporting the same ideological duality, is made through the use of the determiner "our":

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(69) How come the hate preachers have large houses etc. and immigrants that come to our Country with large families and get houses straight away… And *our* British families get put on the bottom of the ladders ???? – Old timer, Cardiff.

The same sort of ideology transpires in the next comment, where this speaker also blasts immigrants:

(70) Yes the parents are irresponsible but let's look after *our own* by not giving all *our houses* to people who weren't born here! – Scott, Liverpool.

However, a different discursive line emerges in the following post, where "a nation such as ours" is construed as wealthy and supportive of those in need:

(71) Lovely children. Not their fault at all. No child deserve [sic] this kind of crampy living in a wealthy nation *such as ours*. – Ancient Landmark, Homeboy.

Similarly, the next commentator aligns with the genuinely needy and considers the fakes a minority, exhorting "the rest of us" to be compassionate:

(72) Some people aren't able to support themselves like *the rest of us* – a very small percentage of these people might be lazy, but for the majority, the hand-outs from the benefits system are a complete lifeline. – Anne, Berkshires.

Besides pronominal forms, another "in-group identity marker" is address markers. Endearment terms such as "love", or "dear", are used yet again to minimise the strength of the speaker's disagreement, or else to add a note of irony:

(73) Cross your legs, *love*. Welcome to "Once" Great Britain. I give up! – Joetechie, London.
(74) Condoms are cheaper *luv* [sic] – Cant-cook-cucumber, Here.
(75) If contraception won't work for you, there's only one thing for it *dear*. Keep your knees together! – Betty, Workshop.
(76) I was very fertile also, falling for one on the pill and the other on the coil. I sent my husband off for a vasectomy very quickly after that. Its [sic] not rocket science *dear*. – Carol, Reading.

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Similarly, the next commentator addresses his "fellow readers" directly, which is way of gaining their support and averting potential confrontation:

(77) That, *fellow readers*, is what squalor looks like. – SPitcher, Xavia.

A common discursive strategy used to protect positive face is what I will call "disagreeing by agreeing". Speakers use it to pretend they agree with a certain part of the argument – though by no means all of it – and thus sound understanding and sympathetic, thus shielding their positive self-image. On the other hand, they also use it to save the face of the hearer whose opinion they do not actually share. Brown – Levinson (1987: 114-5) refer to "pseudo-agreement", or "token agreement", in situations where a speaker begins by stating agreement but "carries on to state his own opinion which may be completely contrary to that of the first speaker". In the following passages, the speakers begin by using an agreement phrase, like "I can understand", or "I fully sympathise", or "granted", but then move on to disagreeing by using adversative conjunctions, like 'but' and 'however':

(78) *I can understand* having one child by accident. Two maybe. *But* SIX?… Don't lie! – Daniel McDaniels, Birmingham.
(79) *I fully sympathise* with people who genuinely suffer from depression *but* this is a typical story of poor me the world owes me a living. To [sic] depressed to work *but* OK to have sex. – Julie, Lancashire.
(80) *Granted*, the living conditions are unsuitable for the children, *but* having a child is the responsibility of the parents. – Mark, Watford.

The use of certain modal verbs is yet another form of token agreement:

(81) She maybe [sic, "may be"] super fertile, *but* if her idle ****** husband got off his backside and found a job he might be too knackered to have sex! – Bladerunner, Arboga.

Other speakers start by denying that they are wishing the couple any harm, which is an obvious way of protecting their own face and not looking insensitive or heartless, only to end up using the ultimate disagreement marker:

(82) *I am by no means* wishing any ill treatment or any child to go without *but* we have to stump out the problem with the 'CHILD MEAL TICKET PARENTS'. – Cheryl342, Oxford.

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However, not all occurrences of this linguistic particle – *but* – signal disagreement regarding the couple's lifestyle. The following two comments work the other way, supporting the young unemployed parents, against the dominant condemnation that other commentators express:

(83) I have worked since I was 15 and have been fortunate enough to continue to do so part-time even after having 3 kids as I have a good job and have never had to be on benefits, *but* I believe when families need support they should have it at my tax paying expense. – Karen, Leeds.

(84) Bit bored of this benefits propaganda now, *but I still think* that each case should be judged individually, we can all see which ones take the pee and which ones genuinely found themselves in a situation where they temporarily need financial support. – MyName, MyTown.

One final occurrence of "but" deserves mention, first because the commentator capitalises it, as if she were aware of its key role in her utterance, and secondly because it is another instance in which the *Daily Mail* is targeted for criticism. Interestingly, she states her disagreement regarding the couple's benefits very straightforwardly, but then hedges her disagreement toward the newspaper with "I think":

(85) I don't agree they should have so many benefits out of tax payers, like myself. *BUT I think* it's so unfair of the DM to publish articles like this with pictures of the children in for them to get labelled and laughed at school. – Georgia, London.

Let us now turn to the second type of hedged disagreement: that of redressing it with negative politeness. This has to do with linguistic behaviour which has the purpose of showing respect for the hearer's negative face, that is, their freedom of action, their wish not to be intruded upon or hindered in any way. Instances of disagreement hedged with negative politeness are infrequent in the corpus, except in apologies (see Locher 2004: 134). These, in fact, are one important way of lessening the strength of disagreements and thus protecting the speaker's image for any possible conflict coming their way. There are many examples in the corpus of the use of "sorry", often followed by "but", once again:

(86) *Sorry* about this but I have to say if ever there was a picture that sums up all that is dreadfully wrong with the United Kingdom today this is it. – Rick, Teesside.

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(87) *Sorry* but I don't believe them. I feel sorry for the kids. – Stokie, stoke-on-Trent
(88) Sterilsation [sic] works every time! *Sorry* but I have little sympathy for anyone who thinks it is ok to spend £150 a month regularly on Storage! Just too much stuff! It is people like this who give the honest Jobseekers a bad name. – Karen Carealike, Stirling,
(89) I'm *sorry* but poverty is just being used as en excuse for laziness… there is no excuse to live in a dirty home or bring up children in squalor especially if you've got not job. – IAmNoWhere, SomeWhereOverThere.
(90) The floor looks like it hasn't been cleaned for months. I'm *sorry*, but there's no excuse to be living like pigs! Poor children :(You don't have to be rich and live in a mansion or palace to have a clean home! – Ella, Essex.
(91) They look like drug addicts. *Sorry* but fact! – Lisa, London.

The use of indirect imperatives, instead of blunt orders, is a second way of redressing the interlocutor's negative face. The following cases are suggestions mitigated through the use of "how about" and modal verbs:

(92) *How about* cleaning the house for the children that they have instead of making more babies! – Grantpo, Old.
(93) *How about* that boy gets a job? Looks healthy enough! – B19jfm, Macclesfield.
(94) *How about* leaving off the sex for a bit and not increasing taxpayer's burden any more? – Keithy, London.
(95) *How about* some derelict farm on the Outer Hebrides? He *could* help renovate it, as he's home all day. It's not like they are going to have to worry about commuting. And they won't need electricity, looks like they make their own entertainment. – Pixeedude, Oxford.
(96) *Could* try doing some housework! – Chels, London.

5.3 Foregrounded disagreement: Going on record

The last means the *Mail Online* readers employ to express disagreement is to do it openly, with no face redress whatsoever. Scott (2002) calls this category "foregrounded disagreement", a term which Walkinshaw (2009) later takes up, whereas Locher (2004) refers to it as "unmitigated disagreement". All three researchers echo Brown – Levinson's "bald-on-record" strategies

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for performing an FTA, which involve "doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible" (1987: 69). The reasons Brown – Levinson (1987: 69) offer to explain such strategies are urgency, efficiency, negligible threat to face and vastly superior power of the speaker. These reasons differ from the ones Locher (2004: 143) presents, namely:

a) when it is more important to defend one's point of view than to pay face considerations to the addressee (see also Kotthoff 1993);
b) in contexts where the relationship of the interactants minimises the potential risk of damage to the social equilibrium;
c) when the speakers wish to be rude, disruptive or hurtful (see also Beebe 1995 and Culpeper 1996)

In the present corpus, some disagreements are so direct that the speaker simply states: "I don't agree". This is the case of the following comments:

(97) *I don't agree* they should have so many benefits out of tax payers, like myself. – Deborah, Tunbridge Wells.
(98) *I don't agree* the house looks dirty, rather difficult to have clothes for 8 people in a one bedroom place. – Foxie, Washington.
(99) *I don't agree* their benefits should be cut. Would it be better to make them homeless, children taken into care? – Colin77, Kent.

Other bald-on-record expressions of disagreement include lexical choice meant to attack the hearer's face. Use of certain adjectives, in particular, is a frequent way to make disagreement explicit – and disparaging:

(100) Clearly so *dumb* they can't work out how to use contraception. – Melbournegirl, Melbourne.
(101) 1 accident fair enough 2 accidents again fair enough 3 accidents now your [sic] pushing it 4 accidents you must be *stupid* 5 accidents you must be *brainless* 6 accidents you don't deserve anything let alone a new house. – Ap, Cardiff.
(102) There is no way she has gotten pregnant five times while using contraception! Call it was it is – *feckless*, *lazy* scrounging! – Dave, Birmingham.
(103) It is called keeping it in your pants or he could get a vasectomy, however that word could be a bit long for their *simple* minds to understand. – James, Edinburgh.

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"Flaming" (Danet 2013, Richet 2013; see also "slurring", Croom 2013) is the practice of insulting someone on the Internet, publicly and often in a group, and it reveals not only the "outspoken" nature of bald-on-record FTAs, but also the normalization of a group behaviour where disrespect and segregation attract support, hence the importance of a study of impoliteness in the context of hate speech (Calvert 1997, Kinney 2008, Hardaker – McGlashan 2016, Langton 2012). In addition to such adjectives, certain nouns (and nouns-adjective collocations) can be utilized to disagree, or, significantly, even insult, strongly:

(104) This *irresponsible git* [Br. slang for "silly, annoying person"] probably would claim a vasectomy breached his human right to procreate. – Norman Churcher, Hastings.
(105) People like this disgust me. *Idiots*. They can prevent themselves from future "accidents". – Laurenbaebex, Leeds.
(106) Go out and look for a flat in the private sector you *lazy s*ds*, you get enough in benefits to pay your own rent! – Concerned, Plymouth.
(107) Goodness just look at them and probably bringing up another generation of *scroungers*! – MandyS, Solihull.
(108) *Vile*, absolutely *vile*! I am a 27 year old woman working fulltime in London earning less than what these *cretins* get and they do absolutely nothing except produce and expect us to pay for it!! – Lollypops, Wimbledon.
(109) *Workshy, selfish idiots* who expect the rest of us to keep them in money. – Sunking101, Leeds.

The use of direct directives (cf. Searle 1969) to give advice (which, in itself, is a threat to the hearer's negative face) increases the strength of the FTA, especially when accompanied by exclamation marks:

(110) Clean your house! – Nicole, Somewhere Exotic.
(111) Use the all-modern method of birth control. Stop copulating. Get a job on nights and another one part time during the day. Sell the bed. – John Todd, Okehampton.
(112) Get a grip of yourselves and make the best of what you have, however difficult it is! Your children don't deserve this! – Luke, Cambridge.
(113) Now, stop grizzling about your lot, rent a 4 bed house privately and go get jobs the pair of you. It'll keep you busy so less time to get pregnant again, and working tax credit will pay for increased rent! – Skyrah, Bournemouth

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(114) Get off your excusable rectums and stop giving excuses to why you cannot get a job, use contraception like every other normal human being with a brain, be grateful for what you have been given rather than complain about what you should have. Take a large look at other people in countries of your same situation and see how you would take how they live in society!! – Rpotts, London

An interesting occurrence of direct imperatives is the following post, where an inflamed devotee sides with the accused, introducing another line of disagreement:

(115) Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. Don't be a judge, for Christ will turn you into the judged!!! – Jesus Is Lord, City of God.

Presuming, or assuming, one knows this couple's thoughts, feelings, or personality is a very common way for readers to go bald-on-record about disagreeing with their lifestyle. In so doing, they disrespect the couple's negative face at the same time as they outwardly violate one of Leech's (1983) politeness maxims, the Approbation Maxim ("Minimise dispraise of other"). Brown – Levinson correctly specify that protecting the hearer's negative face implies not to "presume /assume", which includes "avoiding presumptions about H, his wants, what is relevant, or interesting or worthy of his attention – that is, keeping ritual distance from H" (1987: 144). In the next passages, the speakers explicitly make guesses and express intrusive values of judgment about a third party:

(116) "Gavin tried using a condom as well". *I guess* it was more uncomfortable than sleeping on the floor. – GBrooks, Ottawa.
(117) *She's totally lying* about failed contraception. The implant is almost 100% effective, as is the injection if taken on time – add into that condoms also. – Dave, Birmingham.
(118) *They did this purely to get a big house*… and when they have got the big house *they will suddenly make sure* they don't have any more kids – Mel, London.
(119) I'm super fertile, contraception doesn't work on me lol. *She's such a joker* and I haven't come across that line before in my entire life. – Chaucer, Windsor.
(120) *Nice try*, both condoms and the diaphragm work by blocking sperm, you can be as fertile as you like lady, if it cant [sic] access an egg you

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cannot get pregnant. But then again *you'd have nothing to moan about* right! – Floflo, UK.

A curious form which explicit disagreement assumes in the corpus is what Goodwin and Goodwin (1990: 97) call "content shift within argument". In the following passage, the speakers introduce new topics into the argumentative line – be they abortion, or the Royal Family, or Wars, or International and Home Politics, or even the British way of life:

(121) Why have all those children if your circumstances don't allow it? Would one or two not be enough. It seems so irresponsible … *yes i* [sic] *am talking about abortion here* people and i [sic] know its very controversial but i'm [sic] pro-abortion so there you go! – NoHopeInHell, West London.

(122) Give them a bigger house and more money. …sooner spend my taxes on this family than on pointless wars and the royal spongers. – Cornish Rebel, Republic of Kernow.

(123) They are beautiful kids and shouldn't be involved with this publicity, but that's the point. Successive liberal lefties have caused these problems, pretending we can all live in their socialist utopia where the money just appears. – Waguitarman, Nottingham.

(124) Makes me question why my Grandfather gave his life in WWII. I'm sure he was fighting to protect the British way of life. Is this what the "British way of life" has become? I can imagine him turning in his grave. – Steve, Coventry.

It is noteworthy that raising new topics in the middle of an argument is a double symptom of disaffiliation: from one party involved in the dispute on the one hand, and from its opponent party on the other. According to Maynard (1986), "non-collaborative opposition" works as follows:

> […] [D]isputes, although initially produced by two parties, do not consist simply of two sides. Rather, given one party's displayed position, stance, or claim, another party can produce opposition by simply aligning against that position or by aligning with a counterposition. This means that parties can dispute a particular position for different reasons and by different means. It is therefore possible for several parties to serially oppose another's claim without achieving collaboration. (Maynard 1986: 280)

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This sort of interaction is fertile ground for ideological and political dispute. If someone criticises the "lefties", someone else may quickly rise up to criticise the "tories", or any party in power for that matter:

(125) This benefit bashing that is being promoted by the tories (to take the focus away from their banker friends that have caused the recession we are in now) is going too far. Who would honestly prefer to live in a society like Brazil where the poor have to build unregulated favelas in order to survive? – Richard67, Sheffield.

(126) Our taxes are hugely mismanaged by the government – regardless of the party in power. Some people think that UKIP are the answer, which would be hilarious if the consequences weren't real. But they are. – Paul, Belfast.

One point which brings quite a few readers together regards disagreeing with the *Daily Mail*. This type of relational work is, yet again, a sign of the establishment of coalition and rapport as well as a sign of a strengthened sense of community and belonging. Most such comments show support for the poor in general and for this couple in particular, but they also reveal an attack on the newspaper for its conservative and manipulated (or manipulative) political standpoint. The explicit – actually, outspoken (on "outspokenness" as a strategy for voicing moral judgements, see Kádár – Márquez-Reiter 2015; Kádár – De La Cruz 2016) – nature of the following posts is shown by hostile adjectives, direct statements and blunt accusations:

(127) Hundreds people died from benefit reduction, especially disabled. *Why don't you publish this statistics? Because government told you!!!* – Iana, Carlisle.

(128) *A news story that is designed* to make *YOU* think that all people on benifits [sic] are like this couple. *Do not fall for this evil, anti-poor propaganda*. – Jon, Manchester.

(129) It's a shame that the poor are subjected to this level of national humiliation in order for *news outlets to exploit their situation and use it for political gain*. This family clearly need help. […] To me *this article is exploitation of poor people situations*. And the comments… Sad. – Mrsc, London.

Some posts curiously address the newspaper as if it were a person, making their antagonistic and challenging character more acute (on addressivity see e.g. Werry 1996):

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(130) *Here you go again Daily Mail*. I wonder how many heart attacks *you are responsible for*. You must be paying these people for the story or else it is a fabrication. They know they will be vilified and can surely not expect sympathy. – Hoskiz, Cardiff.

(131) *DM why do you keep running these stories*? Is there a competition for how much hate *you can whip up??* – Andrew47, Brighton.

(132) So bored of hearing about this, DM. *You're a paper* for the selfish, small minded and self important – if there was a benefits system that offered decency and a heart, *you'd be first on the list*. – John Dough, London.

The moral weight of these judgements also makes clear the evaluative nature of impolite behaviour, as well as the existence of a moral order that sustains and sanctions it. The above comments constitute what Kádár – Márquez-Reiter (2015: 240) regard as the "participants' metacommunicative voicing" of their "perceptions and understandings of moral principles". Other commentators speak of the *Daily Mail* in the third person, and instead address its readership directly:

(133) *I urge readers of the Daily Mail* to not jump to the misleading conclusions articles like these force upon *you*. Just remember the benefit system is there for us all, and *one day you too may find yourself in need of support*. – Kevin Foster 123456, Dorset.

(134) This article and pictures are all carefully composed by the DM to make *your blood boil and believe* that all working class families are out for a free buck. The majority of people on benefits are pensioners and working families. – Pluto103, Aylesbury.

One final aspect concerning bald-on-record expressions of disagreement has to do with giving personal or emotional reasons for disagreeing (see Locher 2004: 113). The confessional, self-disclosing nature of the following comments – which can be seen in the use of the first person pronoun – makes the authors' face more vulnerable. That is perhaps why the commentators adopt a defensive stance:

(135) *I work* to provide for my family and can't have anymore because *I simply can't afford* it. Why should *I pay* for your family – Jenn29, Newcastle.

(136) Cant [sic] work as she suffers depression… *I have suffered with depression* for years and if it was not for the medication and routine of coming to work and having a laugh while *I make money for my family*, I too could

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be as bad as them… Don't insult legitimate depression suffers [sic] WHO ACTUALLY WORK!!!!! – Catherine, Kent.

(137) Get yourselves organised! *I got pregnant* very easily too – all my husband has to do is look at me! However *I had the coil fitted* after my third and bingo, no more pregnancies! I've had my family now and we are not on benefits, we pay for ourselves! – jeeves197141, London.

Instead of giving strictly autobiographical information, the following discussants make reference to relatives close to them:

(138) *My grandmother had 10 children* by accident and her husband worked all hours that god sent to pay for them, *she had no help*. One of these should try working – Bell, Norwich.

(139) Those poor children look in desperate poverty. I'm one of 5 children and *my mother brought us up in the late 70s alone*. She worked evenings when my nana could put us to bed, we had very little but we were clean and had everything we needed. Can't help but feel sorry for these kids. – Ken, Liverpool.

(140) *I live* in a council flat and *everyone in my building* who gets some form of benefit also has a family member who works full time. – Jrstf, Manchester.

(141) *My boss* whos [sic] just retired and worked for 50 years has just been refused housing as he dosnt [sic] qualify, and yet paid into the system for years, and this guy hasn't had a job for 8 years and does qualify?? – Triggertastic, Birmingham.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how readers of the *Mail Online* manage the expression of disagreement and the emergence of conflict talk. A number of dichotomous patterns have surfaced in this particular case of "multi-party argument" (Maynard 1986; Goodwin – Goodwin 1993: 100), such as alignment vs. disaffiliation, sympathy vs. indifference, acceptance vs. denial, confirmation vs. rebuttal, and collaboration vs. uncooperativeness. Still, the organisation of different types of stance and perspective has in a number of cases proven to be sensitive to face concerns. In fact, bluntly oppositional and adversarial input is also present in the argumentative conflict. Whatever the ideological position of the speakers, the expression of social identity and a sense of identification, or lack thereof, pervade the corpus.

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The analysis, guided by Im/politeness Studies, has shown that the expression of disagreement in the corpus of comment posts subdivides into three main types: "backgrounded" disagreement, i.e. covered, implicit, or mild disagreement; "hedged" disagreement (Walkinshaw 2009), i.e. redressed with positive and negative politeness; and "foregrounded" disagreement, i.e. overt, explicit, or unmitigated disagreement (Scott 2002). Regardless of category, speakers seem to be aware that disagreeing does have "an impact on relational issues" and on face issues, by aggravating, maintaining, or enhancing face (Angouri – Locher, 2012: 1569). The incidence of blatant impoliteness, through bald-on-record disagreement with no face redress whatsoever, sometimes goes as far as actual insults. In fact, the expression of opinions contrary to the couple's Council request is at times so violent that it resembles hate speech (Calvert 1997; Kinney 2008; Hardaker – McGlashan 2016; Langton 2012): against the poor, against "losers", against "underdogs". Possible reasons for this may be the sense of unaccountability that anonymity and distance bring about, both in spatial and temporal terms (exchanges are not face-to-face or synchronous). The neglect of face concerns (Donath 1999; Eisenchlas 2011; Yus 2011) may indeed be due to the fact that retaliation, apart from verbal retaliation, is unlikely in the context of the Internet, and, as a result, participants often feel empowered (Brown – Levinson 1987: 97) to assault their opponents' – and especially a third party's – face.

In fact, on the Internet disagreeing with an absent party, let alone criticising, deriding, or humiliating such a party, is much less risky than inflicting such treatment on someone who is physically present. Along lines put down by Leech (1983: 133), I have proposed to call this important discursive element the "third-party factor" (Ermida 2014). The fact that Gavin and Maggie (the unemployed parents of six) are not taking part in the polylogue makes their face more negligible at the same time that it reinforces the readers' confidence to show their disapproval of, and lack of support for, the young couple's predicament – and also to do so in an overtly rude way. Additionally, the fact that some readers feel no empathy towards the poor, or the unemployed, or those in need, may have to do with their lack of personal experience, in a direct or indirect way, of such difficult situations. Hence the strength of the "us vs. them" and "ingroup vs. outgroup" dichotomies (van Dijk 1991) that such comments voice. Yet again, these dichotomies reflect the online construction of readers' identity, especially as far as social class is concerned. It also reveals the conflict between a strong moral trend in telling right from wrong, and the workings of a community setting that approves of impolite, aggressive and politically incorrect flaming (Danet

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2013; Richet 2013). The outspoken nature of many bald-on-record excerpts also discloses the strong evaluative nature of (im)politeness, which in some contexts is even regarded as the norm (Arundale 2013; Haugh 2013; Kádár – Márquez-Reiter 2015; Kádár – De La Cruz 2016).

On the other hand, agreement occurs, I propose, for (a) personal/ emotional reasons and (b) for political/ideological ones. In the former case, agreement results from a feeling of a shared experience of events and situations, or a sense of community (Baym 1995; Castells 2000; Locher 2004, Hopkinson 2013) or collective identity; in the latter case, agreement ensues when readers adopt a left-wing view of the role of the State in supporting the poor and needy. It is common that the expression of this solidarity-inspired ideology (be it socialist or religious, especially "Christian") often comes hand in hand with an attack on such conservative and reactionary tabloids as the *Daily Mail*. Whatever the case, the motivations for agreeing/ disagreeing that this analysis has detected reveal two types of interpersonal stance: a supportive/sympathetic stance (which Bruxelles – Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004 call "coalition") and a disaffiliated /judgmental one. At the same time, these types of stance assume two kinds of target: a personal, ad-hominem target, i.e. the couple discussed in the article; or a collegial one, i.e. all those that the couple represent (see Scott 2002).

Finally, this study has identified instances of illocutionary force overlap and multi-topic development. The speech act of disagreeing may blend with other illocutions in the readers' comments, for instance in contexts of complaining, criticising, protesting, or reproaching. In fact, disagreeing seldom occurs in an argumentatively pure form. Also, the comment thread often breaks into several new topics, sometimes moving drastically away from the initial discursive point. From vasectomy and jobseeker allowances, the discussion examined proceeds quickly to abortion, immigration, drug addiction, international politics, UKIP, and the British way of life. Sometimes, such new topics create a new comment thread, sometimes not. They may go unanswered, or they may be resurrected later in the polylogue. One topic that does pervade much of the corpus is social class. The parents of six are said to live in a "pigsty" and look like "clampits", which should make them feel ashamed as British people, but "at least" they "were born in this country" and have "beautiful blond children". The construction of social class prejudice, with hints of ethnicism, indeed emerges between the lines of the comment texts, being a recurrent ideological pattern that readers either align with and approve, or disaffiliate from and condemn, in line with the usual dichotomous nature of conflict talk.

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