Relational work in multimodal networked interactions on Facebook

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The paper argues that the notion of Relational Work (Locher and Watts 2005) needs to be expanded to be able to account for sociability in the networked interactions afforded by social platforms such as Facebook. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore how the nature of networked interactions impacts the emergence of relational practices therein. Importantly, Relational Work is a language based framework whereas networked interactions are highly multimodal. By applying Norris’ (2004) multimodal framework to the analysis of a Facebook wall event, we show how key sociability functions are carried out by semiotic modes other than language. Furthermore, the analysis shows how relational behaviors (such as politeness, impoliteness, etc.) are highly intertwined and should not be compartmentalized, as has traditionally been the case.

Keywords: Relational Work, multimodality, networked interactions, Facebook, im/politeness

1. Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to argue that the notion of Relational Work (RW, henceforth) needs to be problematized. RW is not a digitally native framework. When digitized, it is found not to be well equipped to deal with the complexity and high multimodality of digitally mediated polylogues, more specifically the networked interactions found, among others, on Facebook wall events (henceforth, WE) (Androutsopoulos 2015).

The only framework, to our knowledge, developed to account for unfolding multimodal interaction is the one proposed by Norris (2004). Although Norris’ is not a digitally native framework either, and needs rethinking and reshaping when digitized, we use it in our analysis to show how the RW carried out in digitally networked interactions cannot be properly accounted for unless its multimodal
essence is brought to the fore. Language is one of many modes of communication, but the only one on which extant conceptions of RW are based. However, many fundamental relational practices within networked interaction are carried out by other modes. We argue that only a framework that is multimodal in nature provides the necessary foundation to tackle digitally mediated communication. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the compartmentalization among different types of RW (such as politeness, impoliteness, etc.), implicit in most applications of the framework, does not occur in polylogic, networked interactions which vary greatly in terms of the combined relational practices participants engage in. These fluctuating relational behaviors are not exclusive of the digital medium, but are certainly facilitated by its affordances and the nature of networked interaction.

To illustrate our claims, we micro-analyzed a Facebook WE, a networked interaction which unfolds through fifty-four comments and involves twelve different users.

Our paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we review the extant literature on sociability and networked practices on Facebook and conclude it by formulating the research questions that guide the analysis. In Section 3, we describe the methodology devised to answer these research questions. Section 3 is further subdivided into two subsections that describe the data (3.1) and detail the main claims made by proponents of RW and the fundamentals of Norris’ theoretical framework, as well as the procedure followed in applying these frameworks to the data (3.2). For its part, Section 4 contains the analysis and discussion of findings. The paper concludes with Section 5, where the research questions are answered and additional discussion and some suggestions for future research are provided.

2. Facebook interactions and RW

Thirteen years after it was launched, in 2004, Facebook now boasts 2 billion monthly active users1 and has become the most popular social networking site. Not surprisingly, it has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2016). Facebook defines itself as a platform that “[p]eople use … to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them”.2 In line with this focus on users (whether friends or family) and the actions of discovering, sharing and self-expression, language and new media scholars have generally placed the focus, in their study of Facebook, on social connection (Page 2012), mainly understood

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in terms of identity and community building (Seargeant and Tagg 2014, Tagg and Seargeant 2016). Central to identity and community building are the discursive processes through which users connect with their audience and establish relations with others. As Tagg and Seargeant (2016: 342–343; italics original) put it:

the fundamental social dynamics at the heart of Facebook use are self-presentation (issues that pivot around notions of identity), and the building and maintenance of networked relationships (issues relating to concepts of community). Linking these two concepts is the notion of audience design – the way that speakers’ perceptions of the people they are addressing shape what they say (Bell 1984) – which has particular relevance for an individual’s attempts to form communities in the noisy, semi-public environment of Facebook.

Social networking sites can be described as sites of networked multimodal discourse practices constrained by the mediated context in which they are produced (see Androutsopoulos 2014a). Understanding the multimodal, networked nature of the interaction is pivotal to understanding online communication on these sites, a point that explains the recent scholarly focus on the implications and effects of new networked interactions. The ‘network metaphor’ is used in connection to the new ‘network society’ in which “new information technologies allow the formation of new forms of social organization and social interaction” (Castells 2000:693). Importantly, this notion further includes the new online sociability practices identified by new media scholars (Androutsopoulos 2015).

The new form of social organization and interaction on Facebook includes networked users who communicate with their networked publics / audience (Marwick and boyd 2011), seeking “social opportunities for expression and connection” (Papacharissi 2011:317). The interaction therein develops in networked patterns, similar to those identified for YouTube (Bou-Franch et al. 2012; Androutsopoulos 2014b), and across collapsed contexts (boyd and Marwick 2011; Marwick and boyd 2011). The collapsing of contexts, or bringing together, under the same roof, as it were, groups of individuals who usually remain separate for (offline) interactional purposes, is one of the most influential notions arising from new forms of interaction on social networking sites. Online users accustomed to independent interactions with others in different contexts and circumstances, for different purposes and through a range of communicative styles, now interact with an uncertain and potentially large number of users from various social groups who are simultaneously co-present in the digital world, through a list of Friends. In communicating with networked audiences, users must come to terms with audience uncertainty and are, therefore, faced with the task of redefining the management of sociability (Marwick and boyd 2011).
Exactly how this redefinition of sociability is discursively carried out is the object of much current research. Facebook communication, for instance, has been argued to carry greater risk than face-to-face interactions due to the collapsing of contexts. Therefore, users will employ linguistic devices that protect and enhance the face needs of self and others, and thus show the necessary involvement to avoid face-threat (Page 2012). Within a sociolinguistic view, participants are seen as actively constructing interactional contexts to select and design particular audiences on each occasion (Androutsopoulos 2014b). In this sense, a range of stylistic resources that expand or reduce networked publics have been identified. Audience selecting means include selection of topic, language choice and code-switching in multilingual settings and a range of stylistic resources like affective markers, vagueness, presupposition, explicit name mentioning/tagging, in-group jargon and the posting of concealed messages (Androutsopoulos 2014b; Tagg and Seargeant 2014; Georgalou 2016).

In sum, managing sociability is at the heart of Facebook interactions, it can be considered to be its very “raison d'être” (Maíz-Arévalo 2013:50). Within sociopragmatics, the field of im/politeness has traditionally dealt with issues related to the establishment and maintenance of social relations. Research on im/politeness has recently intensified by a rethinking of traditional approaches, proposals of a range of discursive approaches (e.g. Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003; Terkourafi 2005; Haugh 2007; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b, 2013), and a strong, new interest in the development of accounts of impoliteness (Culpeper 2005, 2011, among others), which had been previously neglected. Im/politeness research has also explored the newer technology-mediated contexts of interaction (e.g. Graham 2007; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010a, 2012; Locher 2010; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014), including communication on Facebook (e.g. Danet 2013; Maíz-Arévalo 2013, 2015; West and Trester 2013). However, despite the view of language and new media scholars who argue that sociability is realized through networked language practices which involve “semiotic materiality, access to networked resources, and orientation to a networked audience” (Androutsopoulos 2014a:6), for the most part, im/politeness scholars have not dealt with the implications of networked practices for the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal ties or sociability.

This paper aims, precisely, to address the networked and highly multimodal nature of interpersonal relations on Facebook by drawing from the notion of RW (Locher and Watts 2005), or the language practices oriented to establishing and maintaining relations, and which involve a myriad of behaviors, ranging from impoliteness to politeness. Despite the undeniable advantage of developing an approach that encompasses the whole range of sociolinguistic behaviors, this paper argues that the notion of RW needs to be further problematized if it is to
account for the multimodal complexities afforded by communication on social networking sites like Facebook. One particular shortcoming arises from empirical research that focuses on the interactional unfolding of one specific relational behavior without taking into account how other behaviors may be brought into the same interaction. Studies that focus on beginnings, middles, and ends of impoliteness sequences or triggers of, and responses to, jocular mockery, are cases in point which may give the impression that such behaviors unfold in discreet interactional sequences. The networked nature of Facebook interactions makes the non-discreet, intermingled, and multifunctional (see Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014) occurrences of a range of relational behaviors more salient. In sum, a truly discursive approach needs to be able to analyze all kinds of texts, whether they develop in linear or networked patterns. Furthermore, such an approach should crucially move beyond the “verbal” to include other modes of meaning-making (e.g. Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006); this, in fact, is an unavoidable step in relation to Facebook which affords sharing and connecting with others through multimodal resources (Lee 2011; Tagg and Seargeant 2016).

Therefore, the research questions that guide our investigation are:

RQ. How does RW unfold in mediated, highly multimodal networked interactions?
   RQ1. In what ways is RW a networked practice?
   RQ2. How does a multimodal framework illuminate the unfolding of RW in mediated networked interactions?

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

In order to answer these research questions, a specific WE (Androutsopoulos 2015) from a personal Facebook page was selected for qualitative analysis from a larger reference corpus of personal and corporate WEs. The WE under scrutiny unfolds through 54 comments, produced by 12 users from the host’s list of Friends. Half the participants in the WE only posted one comment, while the other half posted two or more comments. The most prolific Facebook users in this interaction were one participant who published 9 comments, another who made 11 contributions and the host himself, who posted 10 comments, including the status

update which triggered the event. A brief ethnographic interview was conducted with the host, who described the sort of interpersonal relationship between all the participants. During the interview, the host mentioned on several occasions that participants in this conversation do not know each other (e.g. “I don't think any of these people know each other funnily enough.”), and that they never interact outside Facebook (“Most of these people we never meet, socially or otherwise.”). But the stretch of talk that most clearly described interpersonal relations in this online get-together, and which is, in fact, the rationale for selecting this interaction for further scrutiny, was the following:

So yeah that’s – so it was basically just a collection of people who were interested in that topic but they don't really know each other at all you know I wouldn't say I I think none of them know each other apart from Facebook and only through me (ethnographic data)

Importantly for our study, relationships were networked and the collapsing of contexts (in the sense described above) could, in principle, have specific effects on the interaction and lead to conflict talk. Relations, in fact, can be said to go beyond the loose-knit characterization of acquaintances (Milroy and Milroy 1985), as most participants did not know each other and they only shared their belonging to the host’s list of Friends. What is more, the host even recognized not really knowing all participants well. With the exception of one participant and a couple of colleagues that he met sporadically at his workplace or at conferences, he never met or saw the others and didn't even remember the name of one participant who had changed his name and now spelled it using a non-Latin alphabet. In the face of such fragmented and loose relationships, however, these participants came together as a result of their interest in the topic.

The WE discusses an episode – Operación Palace – of the current affairs TV show Salvados. The show, conducted by the well-known journalist Jordi Évole, broadcast on Channel Six of Spanish Television, was a mockumentary about Spain’s 1981 coup d'état on the occasion of its anniversary. It was aired on February 23rd, 2014, and claimed the coup d'état had been planned by the Spanish intelligence services, the then prime minister, and the former king. At the end of the show, Jordi Évole appeared on television to unveil that the episode was indeed a false documentary and argued that “you've probably been lied to before but no one told you”;4 after which, he hosted a debate on the show. The show was equally

acclaimed and rejected, and achieved a record-breaking audience share.\(^5\) The WE under analysis begins while the show is being broadcast.

The personal (as opposed to corporate) nature of the Facebook wall event involves ethical decisions regarding data gathering, storing, and analysis (Markham and Buchanan 2012). In fact, ethical issues surrounding data elicitation are behind the “scarcity of language-focused social network research to date” (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015:140). An important point is that the personal Facebook page that hosted the interaction had privacy settings selected for public display. However, since the public sharing of posts does not mean that participants have no expectations or perceptions of privacy (Zimmer 2010; boyd and Marwick 2011), several steps were taken to protect their identity and privacy. Drawing on prior studies of Facebook discourse (e.g. Page 2010, 2012; Lee 2011; Androutsopoulos 2014a, 2014b; Maíz-Arévalo 2015) and in compliance with the 2012 report on ethics in internet research discussed by the Association of Internet Researchers, participant names were anonymized and fake names were used instead. Further, informed consent was sought from the host of the WE.

3.2 Theoretical frameworks and procedure

As mentioned in previous sections, we used a RW approach to the analysis of our multimodal networked data. RW refers to “the “work” individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others” (Locher and Watts 2005:10), which comprises “the entire continuum of verbal behaviour from direct, impolite, rude or aggressive interaction through to polite interaction, encompassing both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour” (11). In our analysis of participants’ relational behaviours, we further resorted to the labels identified in extant second order taxonomies of im/politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987; Culpeper 2005, 2011; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011) as they offer a shared terminology for analytical purposes.

Our analysis also included the use of a framework designed for multimodal interactions. In a recent paper that evaluates the merits of the notion of context collapse, Blommaert and Szabla (2017) use the principle of action, which they adopt from the interactionist tradition to analyze a concrete example of Facebook data. Although this is a step forward, we believe that mediated action is a better principle for a multimodal analysis of the kind we are proposing here.

Mediated action as well as the main ideas and terminology used in the multimodal section of the analysis are adapted from Norris (2004) methodological framework for analyzing multimodal interaction. According to Norris, multi-

modal interactional analysts aim at understanding and describing what is going on in a given interaction. More specifically, they focus on what individuals express and react to in specific situations, as interactions are always co-constructed. Norris’ framework is complex, nuanced, and comprehensive. Here, due to space constraints, we will just provide a brief account of the concepts and terminology which will be applied to the analysis of the data.

For our analysis, we will be fundamentally drawing on the notions of lower level actions and higher-level actions, frozen actions.

- Higher level action (HLA henceforth) is described by Norris as bracketed by social openings and closings and as being, at least, partly ritualized. HLAs can have other HLAs embedded within them.
- Lower level action (LLA), for their part, is the smallest interactional meaning unit constituted by different modes of communication (such as proxemics, posture, head movement, gesture, gaze, spoken language, layout, print, music) put to action within a HLA. Therefore, all HLAs are made up of multiple chains of LLAs.

HLAs are complex, due to the interplay of many different communicative modes that make their construction possible. This complexity can be achieved through intensity, when a mode takes on saliency, i.e. the HLA cannot be carried out without that specific mode (language in the case of a press conference, for example). Also, complexity can be achieved through density when more than one mode takes on high intensity (such as movement and music in a ballet recital). However, the HLA can go on when one mode is discontinued (as when the dancing stops, but the orchestra keeps on playing).

At a given time, an individual may be engaged in several, concurrent HLAs. HLAs in interaction can be foregrounded, midgrounded or backgrounded depending on the level of attention, versus just awareness they receive. A HLA that receives full attention gets foregrounded by participants, while other concurrent HLAs get midgrounded and backgrounded. A woman may be talking with her girlfriend, giving their talk her full attention, while she is quite aware of their children playing in the room, but less aware of the TV repairman in the background. However, when her son calls her name, she turns her attention to the children and engages in conversation with them, consequently midgrounding the talk with her friend, and still keeping the TV repairman in the background; suddenly, the repairman is done with his job and calls out to the woman to let her know; she turns her attention to him, foregrounding her interaction with the repairman, thus midgrounding the talk with her girlfriend and backgrounding the children playing nearby.
According to Norris, the signaling of a change in attention – i.e. switching the end of a participant’s engagement with a foregrounded HLA and the beginning of his/her engaging with another that gets then foregrounded, mid or backgrounding other HLAs – is carried out by pronounced LLAs called *means*. A department’s faculty is sitting around talking informally to each other when the Chair raps on the table to switch their attention to the new foregrounded HLA, the beginning of the department meeting. Norris classifies means into beats (an LLA repeated a few times) or deictic (a LLA pointing towards the new focus of attention); in her account, means are always gestural. Norris argues that means are used to structure real-time interactions (Norris 2004:116).

Our qualitative, netnographic (Kozinets 2010) analysis proceeded with the close scrutiny of RW and multimodality at the micro-level, on a comment by comment basis aimed at capturing the complexities of unfolding actions in the WE.

4. Analysis and discussion

The higher-level action is one of the basic tools used in the analysis. As Norris’ model- initially developed for face to face interaction- is digitized in our analysis, some methodological problems emerge. This is not unusual when non-digitally native methodologies need to account for digital data (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). One of these difficulties is that in Norris’ initial definition, HLAs have clear beginnings and endings whereas digital HLAs can be reactivated at any time. Mediated polylogues have clear beginnings and middles, but no clear ends.

This particular wall event is articulated into other seven HLAs with different degrees of embeddedness. HLAs are made up of a combination of LLAs and are structured in terms of different levels of attention/awareness. The HLA that receives the most attention is foregrounded, other concurrent HLAs get then midgrounded or backgrounded depending on how much a key participant in an interaction is aware of them.

The first HLA we find embedded in this wall event is triggered by the host’s publication of a new initial comment or status update. HLA1’s main goal is to seek confirmation for the host’s interpretation of one TV program as a hoax. The seven ensuing turns do confirm host’s views on the matter.

(1) Higher Level Action 1

1 Host:  *Lo de Salvados es de coña, no?*  
This episode of Salvados is a joke, right?

2 Molly:  *Eso mismo estaba pensando yo! Fue todo un montaje????????*  
That’s precisely what I was thinking. It was all a setup????????
3 Silvie: Yo estoy flipando!!
I’m amazed!!

4 Silvie: Entiendo que el golpe de estado ya estaba pactado, porque si el discurso del Rey se grabó 6 días antes …
I understand they all were in on the coup, if the King’s speech was recorded six days before the fact…

5 Carolina: Por algo lleva toda la semana diciendo que hay que verlo hasta el final
That’s why, all this week, he’s been saying that this episode needs to be watched until the end…

6 Host: Mars attacks!

7 Molly: La guerra de los mundos????
The war of the worlds????

8 Silvie: Hay que verlo hasta el final porque para mí que esto no es real. Ahora es cuando sale Jordi Évole diciendo que todo ha sido un sueño, no te digo …¬¬
It has to be watched till the end because this is not real. Now we will see Jordi Evole come out and say this has been just a dream, I’m telling you…¬¬

From a multimodal perspective, HLA1’s density is achieved through intensity: language emerges as the most relevant LLA without which HLA1 could not be accomplished. However, we find that other LLAs play an important role in it, making it quite complex, such as layout, which has crucial functions in organizing the turn taking system in wall events, profile images that are posted automatically along with comments, and reaction buttons (such as ‘like’, etc.) which carry out evaluative functions. An important feature of HLA1, and the WE, in general, regarding the use of language is the presence of code switching which plays important functions regarding context selection and collapse.

The RW in the initial LLA deals with the sharing of uncertainty and discomfort about a potentially controversial episode of a TV show that is being broadcast during the initial contributions to this wall event. In the status update, the host expresses his suspicions about the lack of veracity of the political documentary being broadcast on Channel Six and invites feedback on his comment through the tag question no? (l.1). The host is an English native speaker who lives in Spain. His choice of Spanish in the status update selects the potential audience of the post, and his choice of topic, discussing a show on Spanish television, further restricts the audience to those watching it. As mentioned above, choice of language and topic display a user’s orientation to their networked audience, as they constitute attempts to partition the audience related to the collapsing of contexts. Within a relational viewpoint, such audience-selecting actions are group-building
strategies, that is, the shared language and the shared interest in the topic will act as in-group identity markers, instances of traditionally called positive politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987).

The contributions to HLA1 unfold in a networked interaction pattern of multiple-responses to a turn (Bou-Franch et al. 2012), or node-oriented pattern (Tagg and Seargeant 2016), that reflect the interpersonal relationships as described by the host in the ethnographic interview, which also revolve around a node, the host himself. Comments 2 and 3 share the same doubts about the show, which are intensified through use of question and exclamation marks, and show alignment with the host. Users, therefore, resort to discursive strategies that claim common ground with the host, a marker of positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). The next two contributions elaborate on the initial doubts, either by expressing disbelief about the content of the show (l. 4) or by suggesting that the truth will be revealed at the end, as the journalist had been insisting that viewers watch the show till the end all week (l. 5). While sharing their suspicions, the idea that they are being deceived begins to dawn on them, a fact that strengthens their interpersonal bonds, and, at this point, the host switches code and posts a humorous remark (l. 6). Humor, another positive politeness strategy used to show shared opinion and empathy, is achieved by invoking incongruity (Haugh 2014). This is mirrored in comment 7, a post in Spanish which also resorts to similar incongruous imagery: as deception becomes clear, users feel “under attack”. Sharing feelings of uncertainty, and even using humor to compensate for the discomfort that ensues, are rapport-building interactional moves which strengthen relational ties among participants. The last LLA in this extract (l. 8) has a topic-closing quality, and emerges as a transition to the next HLA, as Silvie seems to have made up her mind about the show which, in her view, will soon be revealed as unreal.

HLA2, which becomes foregrounded in terms of receiving the most attention and midgrounding HLA1, spans turns 9 through 19, and uses two LLAs, an image and a link, as means to indicate a shift of attention towards a new HLA. In face to face interactions, means (LLAs indicating end of a HLL/beginning of a new one) are always gestural. In digital contexts, however, they may be realized by other semiotic modes. As we will see in the analysis, images seem to be used as means relatively often in this WE.
Higher Level Action 2

9 Carolina: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mockumentary

Mockumentary – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (...)

10 Sergio: El personaje de Antonio Ferrandiz en Volver a Empezar creo que se llamaba Antonio Miguel Albajara, como uno de los que está hablando (supuestamente). Además Garci es muy mal actor, se le nota que no miente también como los políticos.

Antonio Ferrandiz in Volver a Empezar was called Antonio Miguel Albajara, just like one of the guys who is talking (allegedly). Besides, Garci is a very bad actor, you can tell he does not lie as well as politicians do.

13 Mercedes: Es un falso documental

It is a fake documentary

14 Silvie: Yo estoy segura de que sí, pero, ¿con qué objetivo? Si no es 28 de diciembre …

Sure, but what is the point? It is not April fools day ….

15 Host: Que todos estemos viendo el programa, quizás?

So that all of us watch the show, perhaps?

16 Silvie: Pues sí es así, lo que van a conseguir, conmigo por lo menos, es no volver a ver la sexta jamás. Ya no me creeré nada de lo que cuenten.

Well, if that is the case, this will result, at least in my case, in my not watching Channel 6 again. I will not believe anything they say anymore.

17 Host: Aún así estamos dándole a las teclas virtuales o no

Still, here we are typing away … (…)

HLA2’s focuses around the discussion of the concept of mockumentary, which is introduced through said image/link, and what the goals of a mockumentary may be. This is important from a RW perspective, as key actions within the WE are not realized linguistically, but by other semiotic modes.

Like HLL1, HLA2 achieves density through intensity, with language being the most relevant mode used. Also, in HLA2, we find the same key functions carried out by the WE set layout, profile pictures, and reaction buttons.

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6. (... indicates that some extracts have been removed.
As mentioned, the first LLA (l. 9) modifies the interpersonal and topical orientation of the interaction drawing on multimodal resources. After this, the interactional structure changes and the conversation unfolds in a networked ‘chained pattern’, that is, with each new contribution responding to the previous post (Bou-Franch et al. 2012). In the following turns, participants orient to the notion of mockumentary, and reach complete agreement that what they are watching is not true. This can be gleaned from further evidence provided in comment 10 or the explicit statement in comment 13, in which users actively claim common ground by seeking agreement, another positive politeness strategy. Comment 10 is very interesting from the point of view of networked or intermingled relational behaviors, as the criticism of Spanish actor José Luis García – who is negatively portrayed as “a very bad actor” – constitutes a positive impolite strategy targeting the actor and is, simultaneously, a token of agreement with the group, and, therefore, a politeness, bonding strategy with other in-group members who form a coalition in the sense of Kerbrat-Orecchionni (2004).

It is worth noting how the configuration of the participation framework fluctuates, with users posting several comments (e.g. Silvie or Sergio) and new users entering the chat for just one comment and then withdrawing altogether, as Mercedes does (l. 13). From comment 14 onwards, the topic evolves to focus on the possible objectives of mockumentaries. While the host insists that this episode’s aim is to increase publicity and viewers, Silvie expresses anger by arguing that since it is not April Fools Day (l. 15), she will never watch Channel Six again or believe anything they say (l. 16). Disbelief and puzzlement give way to anger and disappointment in a HLA where sharing feelings, and therefore enhancing common ground, seems to be the central group-building activity. In fact, the feelings of anger and disappointment will be central in the next HLA.

HLA3 begins when participants in the WE move from discussing mockumentaries and their goals, agreeing the show they are discussing is indeed one, to criticizing the show in question.

(3) Higher level action 3

20 Host: *Qué programa más patético* 
This show is pathetic

21 Host: *Qué bien se lo pasan los putos políticos* 
Politicians have a hell of a good time

22 XXX: *lo era … hijos de perrilla … (…)* 
True … sons of bitches …

23 Silvie: *Conclusión: el día de los inocentes ha pasado del 28 de diciembre al 23 de febrero …* 
Conclusion: April Fools is now on February 23
24 Host: Y ahora la parte seria. No pude ver el final de Hellboy por culpa de este programa!
And now to the serious stuff, I wasn't able to watch the end of Hellboy because of this show!

25 Silvie: ¡Y yo me he perdido casi la mitad de Aida!
And I have missed half of Aida!

26 Molly: Me parece que la mierda de políticos que tenemos se acaban de retratar riéndose de algo de lo que no hay que reírse … (…)
Mierda de clase política que tenemos que ahora se dedica a hacer documentales de mentira, se nota que saben mentir bien! Al puto exilio con todos ellos (…)
I think that the shitty politicians we have have just proven again who they really are, laughing at something that is no laughing matter … (…) We have shitty politicians who are now into mockumentaries, you can tell they are experts at lying! They should all be fucking sent into exile (…)

29 Cristabel: Totalmente de acuerdo Silvie … todo menos gracioso …
100% in agreement, Silvie … Not funny at all…

30 Molly: Que les den! Y a Évole el primero!
Fuck them! Evole first and foremost!

31 Empar: També s'ha fet un documental sobre l'aplegada a la Lluna que es riu d les conspiracions
There is also a Mockumentary on landing on the moon that makes fun of conspiracy theories

The WE host shifts the attention from content/goals of mockumentaries to evaluating the show as “pathetic”. This initial LLA is followed by another ten turns that asses the program negatively. Again, we find density being realized through the intense use of language and the same other LLAs- layout, profile pictures, and reactions buttons – play an important role in making HLA3 also complex.

The RW of HLA3 proceeds through expressions of agreement and alignment of participants against the show. This HLA is a clear case of the mingling of networked relational practices as the intense bonding of participants resulting from their agreement and alignment is conveyed through their disaffiliation with the show in what can be seen as escalating conflict which begins by calling the show names like “pathetic” (l. 20), progresses with insults to politicians – even resorting to the use of taboo words (l. 21, 22 and 26) – and also contains expressions of contempt against the journalist and host of the mockumentary (l. 30). Thus, disaffiliation through criticism and impoliteness markers (Culpeper 2011) against the out-group made up of politicians and journalists is used as a means of reinforcing the in-groupness of participants in the WE. Unsurprisingly for this networked
environment, within this case of rapport-building conflict ‘talk’, two LLAs convey expressions of humor. In l. 24, after mentioning the need to be serious, a textual means to change attention in Norris’ framework, the host regrets having missed his favorite program, a TV show of a fictional superhero. This post receives uptake in 25, which is produced during the same minute, in 24, as Silvie also regrets missing her own favorite show. Again, topical incongruity is used as a resource to create humor and enhance in-groupness, another instance of positive politeness used before resuming the criticism of the mockumentary and of politicians, and bringing this HLA to a close.

Indeed, another instance of code switching to Valencian (l. 31) opens the next HLA. A second language shift to English, and then back to Spanish functions as a means to shift the attention to HLA4, in which participants switch from criticizing the show to assessing it positively, in a marked relational shift of alignment from HLA3.

(4) Higher level actions 4, 5 and 6

32 Cristabel: So, let me play the devil’s advocate ... ha conseguido lo que quería: mostrarnos los crédutos que algunos podemos llegar a ser ... Pero ¿le ha valido la pena sobrestimar a alguno de sus seguidores? ¿El fin (reducir el “borreguismo” y falta de crítica hacia los medios) justifica los medios? So let me play the devil’s advocate ... they got what they wanted: to show us how gullible we can be ... But was it worth overestimating some of his fans? Does the end (making people more reflective and critical of the media) justify the means?

33 Host: Reirse de los que te dan de comer es peligroso. Laughing at the hand that feeds you is dangerous.

34 Host: Bona nit Good night

35 Rosana: Yo no entiendo la decepción de la gente (...) A mí me parece muy interesante lo que ha hecho. Y valiente, porque tiene más audiencia que perder que ganar. Es una barbaridad pero demuestra hasta que punto desconocemos nuestra historia y porqué cojones tenemos una monarquía señalada por un dictador. (...) Desclasificación de documentos ya !!! I do not understand why people are disappointed (...) I think what he’s done is very interesting. And courageous, because this may impact his ratings negatively. It is incredible and shows how little we know about our own history and why the fuck we have a monarchy appointed by a dictator. (...) We need all relevant documents declassified now!!!
36 Ana: No entiendo las opiniones en contra. Creo que han sido muy valientes al utilizar a todo un país como conejillos de indias, y encima cumplir con el objetivo. Grande, muy grande. Deberías hacer auto reflexión en vez de echar pestes. Somo manipulables, títeres ... Y hacen de nosotros lo que quieren. Ese es el mensaje. Ya era hora de que alguien se atreviera a hacer algo distinto, a desafiar a la audiencia.

I do not understand people's opposition. I think that they have been very courageous in using the whole country as a guinea pig, and being successful at it on top of everything. Great, really great. You should be more reflective, rather than so over critical. We're easily manipulated, like puppets... They do as they please with us. That's the message. It was about time somebody dared to do something different, to challenge the audience.

37 Host: Lo de echar pestes sobraba, Ana. Vamos a ver. Es como si después de 10 minutos de Sexto Sentido te das cuenta de que Bruce Willis está muerto. A mí me gusta Salvados pero ver a políticos masturbar su ego en público no. Ay que bonachones son, que simpáticos! Y luego un debate insulso. A lo mejor hacen contigo lo que quieren a nivel cognitivo – no lo sé- pero a mí no. Soy popperiano y creo lo que creo hasta que la evidencia a mi alcance me demuestra lo que creía era falso. En cuanto al día a día, los que están en el poder sí que hacen con nosotros los que les da la gana- para eso tienen policía y ejército y un montón de gente sumisa. Ahora bien, contra el estado no puedo hacer nada. Ah, sí. Apuntarme a Podemos. Eso sí que iba de coña.

The over critical comment was a bit too much, Ana. Let's see, it is like after 10 minutes into the Sixth Sense you realize that Bruce Willis is dead. I like Salvados, but not to see politicians jerking their egos off in public. They are so nice, so cute! Followed by a senseless debate. Maybe they can do whatever they please with you cognitively, I don't know, but not with me. I am a popperian so I do not believe in anything until I have enough evidence to do so. Regarding the day by day, those who are in power do indeed what they please with us, because they have the police, the army, and tons of people are submissive. Now, I cannot do anything against the State. Wait, I can! I can join Podemos! Just kidding!

38 María: Pues a mí me ha parecido algo muy inteligente (…) Nos ha enseñado a tener un ojo más crítico con todos, incluso él, y eso es de valientes y para mi gusto, muy coherente con lo que él hace,
que no es ganarse “adherentes”, sino mostrar cómo funciona el mundo.
Well, I thought it was very intelligently done (...) It has taught us to be more critical of everybody, including himself, and that is very courageous, in my view, and very coherent with the way he does things. It is not about increasing his number of “fans”, but about showing how the world really works.

39 Rosana: lo que pasa es que a nadie le gusta saber que le han engañado. (...)
What happens is that nobody likes to realize they have been taken in (...)

40 Host: A mí me gusta Salvados y el Intermedio pero ¿y si funcionan como válvulas de escape diseñadas para que el cabreo general se disipe (...) I like Salvados and El Intermedio, but what would happen if their goal was to act as pressure relief to help dissipate people’s anger? (...)

43 Rosana: ¿A quién le gusta admitir que tuvo miedo? (...) Y ya que todo el mundo se rasga las vestiduras con lo difícil que fue esa noche y la de poemas que les escribieron a sus hijos sobre la democracia que no iban a poder ver, aquí dejo yo uno mío que escribí cuando me subió mucho la acidez un día .. <link removed>
Perdón por la parrafada
Who’d like to admit they were scared? (...) And since everybody is all out about how difficult that night was, and how many poems they wrote for their children about the democracy that would never be, here you have a link about a poem I wrote on a bad day .. <link removed> Sorry for the long post <image and link removed>

44 Host: Me da miedo leerlo
I am scared to read it

Cristabel’s comment (l. 32) begins with a means that mark the shift of direction through the use of the discourse marker “so” and the English phrase “let me play the devil’s advocate” which prepares participants for a change in the direction of the talk, by literally asking permission to discuss a different view, thus avoiding potentially strong disagreement. Cristabel then proceeds in Spanish with positive comments about the show which are met with disagreement on the host’s part (l. 33), who immediately brings the conversation to a close. While disagreeing may traditionally be considered impolite, the host then resorts to politeness in wish-
ing good night in the local language, which he knows he shares with Cristabel (l. 34) and is, therefore, an in-group identity marker. But the talk goes on when Rosana (l. 35) reintroduces the topic and justifies her positive views of the mockumentary, thus showing simultaneous alignment with Cristabel and disagreement with the host. After providing some justification for her views, her post ends with a political claim. The topic is taken up in l. 36, when another user, Ana, agrees with Rosana. However, the LLA of turn 36 also begins a short HLA, number 5, embedded in HLA4, when the attention shifts from the group to a specific participant by means of an ad hominem (potentially impolite) comment, i.e. telling the host how to behave and associating him with the action of being too negative. The host, in fact, seems to take offence as he begins his response with a reprimand to the explicitly mentioned addressee (l. 37), thus resorting to impoliteness in order to restore conversational harmony. As we have seen above, means (gestural in Norris’ initial account) are realized by diverse semiotic modes digitally. Here, the shift from the group to the individual is carried out by addressing said individual openly by her Facebook identity. Incidentally, during the ethnographic interview the host admitted not even remembering his relationship with this user and showed his surprise at this brief HLA, as can be seen in the transcription that follows:

(...) that wasn’t that wasn’t normally if you don’t agree with someone on Facebook you just you know say ok unless it’s like a mate [uhum] which we are not as I say, yeah but it was unusual how she got all erm excited about it but that’s that’s if you want my opinion [of course I want your opinion] that’s a very very very rare occurrence you know. (ethnographic data)

As a matter of fact, comment 37 is very interesting as far as relational behavior is concerned. This somewhat lengthy post starts with a reprimand and then the host seems to illustrate his divergent opinion with an example from a film, which conveys a humorous yet serious tone. It proceeds with sarcasm against politicians, followed by some negative – potentially offensive – comments against Ana (“Maybe they can do whatever they please with you cognitively, I don’t know, but not with me.”), and goes on to explain and justify his position, criticizing politicians and those in power. He ends with what he frames as a joke (“Just kidding!”), thus showing a myriad of relational behaviors, with different targets, within the same comment. Needless to say, these fluctuating relational behaviors are not exclusive of the digital medium. Comment 38 shifts the attention back to the main goal of HLA4, as María proceeds with her own assessment of the merits of the show, thus disagreeing with opinions that criticized it early on in the interaction, in previous HLAs, and at the same time affiliating with those that praise the show.
In all, HLA4 is structurally very interesting as we find two further HLAs embedded within it. Although there is a shift of attention in HLA5, turn 38 shifts the attention back again to the focus of HLA4, which is to assess the merits of the show. Another HLA, HLA6, is introduced at the end of turn 43 by using an image and a link as means that signals a shift of attention, once again, from group discussion to an individual’s views on the matter by the posting of a link to her poetry on related issues. There is just a brief rejoinder to this brief HLA in turn 44. The fluctuating networked interactional patterning of HLA4 is also revealing. While comment 32 receives two responses (33 and 34), comments 35 and 36 are responses to (at least) all previous comments in the WE that criticized the show. The pattern then changes when the host, in 37, explicitly addresses comment 36. After 37, the remaining posts seem to unfold in a chained pattern, with each turn responding to the immediately previous one, and the interaction taking on the appearance of a (networked) dialogue, i.e. a dialogue between two active users ‘observed’ by a potentially large passive audience. Further, those members of the audience who already participated in the event will get Facebook notifications (unless otherwise marked) and are more likely to be aware of subsequent ongoing talk.

In turn 45, as a way to shift the attention and further the discussion, another link with an image is introduced the following day, signaling the beginning of HLA7. This is the last of the HLAs that make up the WE.

(5) High level action 7

45 Rosana: http/aramultimedia.com/…/bravo per Jordi Evole

Great job, Jordi Evole

Wait a minute! “Bad News” by the Glasgow came out in 1974

(…) Manipulation by journalists, newspapers, television channels, governments has been going on for years. I personally didn’t need Jordi Evole to open my eyes to it.

47 Host: When people say the official story what do they mean?

(Exchange in English between Host and Rosana)

53 Rosana: El caso es que al final siempre se deja el debate para después (…) The fact of the matter is that the real debate is always postponed (…)
El Rey mostró “comprensión” por los golpistas del 23-F, según ‘Der Spiegel’ <link to elpais.com>

The King showed understanding to the perpetrators of the February 23 coup, according to ‘Der Spiel’ <link to elpais.com>

Once again, we see important relational and multimodal segmentation functions being carried by semiotic modes different from language. In turn 45, Rosana retakes her previous position in favor of the show and its host, Jordi Evole. This position, which is an implicit disagreement with the WE host, is carried out linguistically and, crucially for our contention in this paper, visually through the posting of an image. When the host responds, he recognizes the image as one originally posted in 1974. He partially agrees with Rosana’s views conveyed by her selection of image/comment but implicitly associates Rosana with a negative aspect (being naïve or unaware of what is going on in the world), a positive impoliteness strategy, when he argues he did not need the program to open his eyes to institutional manipulation. The host voices his arguments and disagreement in three consecutive turns (46–48) regarding how useful having certain documents may be for the public to have a clear view of what happened during the attempted military coup in 1981. In turns 49 and 50, Rosana again disagrees with the host, contradicting his views and his claims about conspiracy theories. The host replies to Rosana with another disagreement and the new argument, his two final turns, that Spain has more pressing needs to attend to than paying attention to alternative accounts of the coup. Seek disagreement, a positive impoliteness strategy, is frequently used in HLA7, as we have seen. Rosana, in turn 51, associates the host with a negative aspect, i.e. avoiding the real debate, which constitutes another positive impoliteness strategy, and elaborates on the necessity to have access to official documentation regarding this historical event. After not receiving any response from the host, Rosana continues with her line of argumentation but this time visually, by linking the image of a documentary which acts effectively as means to end de facto HLA7. Codeswitching also functions as means to shift attention, first to Valencian and then to English in turns 45 and 46 respectively. English is maintained until turn 53 where we see another switch to Spanish. In HLA7, although there is passive possible participation by other posters as it is characteristic of polylogues, we mainly find the interactional pattern of a networked dialogue between two participants. When the host, one of those two, does not post a rejoinder, the HLA ends. However, due to the affordances of Facebook, this discussion
could be continued at any time by host or any other networked participant. Hence the difficulty in establishing clear and definite ends in digital HLAs.

HLAs 4–7 were similar in their construction to previous HLAs in this WE. They all achieved multimodal density through intensity, as the language mode carried out the LLAs without which these HLAs would not be possible; however, we see that this intensity is further complicated by the complexity added by layout, response buttons, and images which we see carrying out fundamental actions to the realization of HLAs 4–7.

5. Conclusion

This paper was premised on the assumption that the notion of RW needs to be further theorized and problematized if it is to be fully explanatory of the complex phenomena arising in digital interactions that draw on a wealth of semiotic modes of communication. RW, it was argued, is not originally a digitally native approach to sociability, and when digitized, i.e. applied to digital interactions, it is not well-equipped to account for the complexities of highly multimodal, networked interactions. In order to prove our point and explore the ways in which RW emerges in digital polylogues as networked, multimodal practices, we micro-analyzed a Facebook WE. Our analysis attempted to find answer to two research questions, which we reproduce below for clarity.

In relation to RQ1. “In what ways is RW a networked practice?” our analysis showed how RW is performed by groups of users bound together by networked relationships. Previous research has described this type of relationship as node-oriented (Tagg and Seargeant 2016), and our ethnographic data confirmed that this description fitted the type of relationship held among participants in the WE under scrutiny.

In orienting to networked audiences to manage sociability across collapsed contexts, Facebook users draw from a number of strategies that select potential interlocutors. Our analysis revealed that choice of language and topic served the purpose of audience-selection (Androutsopoulos 2015) through RW, as subsequent turns that employed the same language and dealt with the chosen topic worked as in-group-building strategies, i.e. they act as identity markers or positive politeness strategies, thus illuminating how users temporarily come to the same networked, interactional space.

Like in other polylogic interactions, RW was shown to unfold in interactionally networked patterns (Bou-Franch et al. 2012), which included some stretches of talk in which a comment received multiple responses, others in which a comment responded to multiple previous comments, other chained patterns of
networked interactions in which each comment responded to the immediately preceding comment, and a pattern we called networked dialogues, as the talk proceeded between two users (one of them being the host) with the networked public, especially those that had already actively participated in the WE, as passive recipients.

Far from linear unfoldings, relational practices emerged as networked in yet further ways. RW was multifunctional and included behaviors simultaneously oriented to politeness (in-group affiliation) through impoliteness (out-group disaffiliation) (Garces-Conejos Blitvich 2009; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014), that is, a way of doing rapport-building impolite/conflict talk; further, relational practices fluctuated within the same comment and could be oriented to polite, impolite, humorous, or sarcastic behaviors aimed at different targets. Finally, and as can be expected especially of polylogic interactions, the data showed divergent relational reactions (agreement and disagreements) to a single action (e.g., criticizing the show), a point already identified in other types of mediated polylogues (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). Needless to say, many of the ways in which RW was found to be networked are not exclusive of Facebook polylogues and may well occur in any especially multi-party interaction. However, as we argued earlier, most research on RW has tracked the interactional progression of one type of behavior, without paying much attention at the interplay of diverse kinds of RW. Our focus on the networked possibilities of RW and the nature of the interactional structure of the WE object of analysis, brought these qualities of RW to the fore.

Additionally, and to better understand RW in the data, we identified relational behaviors by resorting to the terminology available in second-order taxonomies of im/politeness. A positive im/politeness orientation was more salient throughout the whole interaction, thus underlining the importance of rapport and involvement in this Facebook exchange, over deference and independence. The most common positive politeness strategies were the seeking of agreement, the use of in-group identity markers and humor, and claiming common ground, feelings, opinions and points of view. The most common positive impoliteness strategies were seeking disagreement, calling the other names, associating others with negative aspects, and the use of taboo words. Negative impoliteness strategies were far less frequent, although in a few cases users resorted to blocking the other or the strategy known as condescend, scorn, ridicule.

A final way in which RW was networked was by being produced in the net, a fact which affords multimodality. In this respect, we posed a second research question:
RQ2. How does a multimodal framework illuminate the unfolding of RW in mediated networked interactions?

All human communication is multimodal; however, its multimodality is brought to the fore in digitally mediated communication, such as the networked interactions we find on Facebook. RW in these interactions is carried out by diverse modes of communication, in addition to language. Therefore, a multimodal framework is needed to account for it. Norris’ framework has been useful in providing units of analysis, HLAs, in which language is combined with other modes to construct sociability. It has also provided us with tools to understand attention and segmentation within massive polylogues.

Most HLA achieved density through intensity, with language emerging as an essential LLA. In the networked interaction under analysis, however, we have seen key sociability acts such as establishing lines of argumentation, making statements, showing disagreements, and functions, such as changes of topic, being carried out visually, through images, rather than verbally. Profile pictures are other LLAs found to play an important relational function. Also, Facebook’s default layout is a fundamental LLA that organizes the turn-taking system and allows participants to make meaning and achieve coherence. Reaction buttons, for their part, carry out evaluative functions. These modes, all nonlinguistic, are an intrinsic part of RW in networked interactions and need to be taken into account when analyzing it.

The application of a non-digitally native multimodal framework to networked interactions has proven challenging as well. When digitized, problems were found with the application of units of analysis, such as HLAs, which have clear ends in face to face interaction. The affordances of Facebook allow for networked interactions to have beginning and middles, but no clear ends. Also, key functional units in Norris’ framework, means, which are always gestural, are carried out by different semiotic modes in digitally mediated interaction.

All in all, however, Norris’ framework for the analysis of multimodal interaction has allowed us to move beyond text based analyses and start thinking in a much more inclusive way about digitally mediated RW.

In sum, this paper has contributed to advancing our knowledge of RW vis-à-vis two major aspects of the interaction, common to many online polylogues which, however, remained unexplored in this field so far. The first refers to our examination of the ways in which RW emerges in interaction as a networked practice, and the second to the expansion of RW beyond the realm of the verbal to include relational practices realized through semiotic modes other than language.
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