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Metadiscourse and the management of relationships during online conflict among academics

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Abstract: This study analyzes how members of an online academic committee use metadiscourse to manage communicative norms and relationships during conflict. The data analyzed include 67 listserv posts among academics developing a solution to a conference scheduling conflict. Discourse analysis highlights how tensions between the group's leader and the group members escalate throughout the interactions. The conflict began when the participants opposed the group leader through positively evaluating the content of their leader's email, yet re-formulating their leader's proposed communication process. When the group leader ignored members, the members escalated opposition through negatively formulating the leader's actions, taking overt negative affective stances, asking the leader to change his decision, and withdrawing from the committee without resolving conflict. Analysis of the group's metadiscourse illustrates that the group members withdrew not because they disagreed with the leader's solution, but because they oriented to their leader as repeatedly violating academia-specific communication and relational preferences: the group leader attempted to conduct a top-down, closed conversation, while the group members preferred an open discussion among equals. These findings highlight the need to attend to community-specific communication and relational preferences, particularly when online interactions are the primary form of relational maintenance.

Keywords: metadiscourse, academic discourse, conflict, formulations, affective stance, online interaction, relationship

1 Introduction

Scholars writing about academic discourse argue that, generally speaking, academics orient to two relational tensions: 1) they value treating each other as equals but also recognize status differences (i. e. graduate student vs non-

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tenured professor vs tenured professor) (Goodall 1999; Lakoff 1990); and 2) they value ritual criticism and adversarial conversations, which can undermine relationships (Tannen 2002). Whereas most previous work illustrates how academics implicitly orient to managing these relational tensions through discursive strategies, the current study analyzes how academics use metadiscourse (Craig 2005, Craig 2008) that overtly comments on communicative actions, and through doing so, manages relational tensions. This paper differs from previous studies analyzing how academics use metadiscourse to help others understand and align with their academic arguments (Aguilar 2008; Hyland 2005) or to achieve mutual understanding in various interactional contexts (Vásquez 2010). Furthermore, while previous studies analyze oral or written academic discourse, this paper analyzes online interactions, thus illustrating how online contexts shape academic discourse (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015).

The question this paper addresses is, "how do academics use metadiscourse to manage communicative norms and relationships during conflict in online interactions?" I first review discourse analytic literature addressing academic discourse, online conflict interactions in institutional contexts, and metadiscourse and the management of conflict. Section 3 describes the data analyzed and provides the background context necessary to understand this communication event and the relationships among participants. In Section 4, discourse analysis of online interactions among academics traces how tensions between the group's leader and group members escalate throughout the interaction, resulting in dissolution of the group. In Section 5, I conclude by discussing the consequences of participants' practices for the maintenance of relationships among academics in online contexts.

2 Literature review

2.1 Relational Tensions in Academic Discourse

Research analyzing academic discourse highlights how participants manage relational tensions (a) between equality and hierarchy and (b) between ritual criticism and relational maintenance. Discourse analyses of interactions between professors and graduate students illustrate the discursive strategies professors use to indirectly display expertise and students use to highlight their intellect and autonomy, thus illustrating a preference for minimizing status differences (Tracy 1997; Vehviläinen 2009a, Vehviläinen 2009b). Waring (2005, 2007a, 2007b) illustrates how peer tutors and tutees minimize asymmetries in expertise through the

ways they give and accept advice. Academics manage dilemmas surrounding criticism through accounting for criticisms (Antaki et al. 2008), invoking shared academic values to maintain community while engaging in criticism (Boromisza-Habashi and Parks 2014), or marking critical dialogue as an intellectually stimulating endeavor (Fitch 2005). Overall, academics' choice of discursive strategies are intertwined with an orientation to managing relationships.

Most similar to the current study is Boromisza-Habashi and Parks' (2014) analysis of 'natural criticism', where academics criticize one another's communicative conduct on a listserv to negotiate boundaries of community membership. While these authors highlight the symbolic relationship between one form of metadiscourse – natural criticism – and maintenance of communal identity, I analyze how participants use multiple forms of metadiscourse in their turn-by-turn interactions to negotiate norms for communication and, in turn, to negotiate their relationships with one another.

Conflict is constituted by "action-opposition" sequences, where "an opposition subsequently formulates the prior action as an arguable" (Hutchby 1996: 22). Conflict initiation occurs when an action opposes a previous action. The opposition action is often constituted by an invitation for responses from others (i. e. "what do others think?"). Conflict continues through an exchange of action-opposition sequences that can serve to escalate or de-escalate the conflict (Garcia 1991; Cresswell et al. 2014). Terminations of conflict include coming to a resolution or withdrawing from conflict without resolution (Vuchinich 1990). The trajectory of conflict is shaped by the medium of communication. Each online medium provides different affordances and constraints, such as synchronous vs asynchronous communication, channels of communication (i. e. text vs images), or how many participants can message at once (i. e. individual emails vs replying to whole group) (Garcia and Jacobs 1999; Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015; Markman 2009; Panyametheekul and Herring 2003).

Because oppositional moves inherent in conflict can undermine relationships, participants in conflict use additional discursive moves that attend to maintaining relationships despite disagreement (Bonito and Sanders 2002; Goodwin; Goodwin 1990; Hutchby 1996; Schiffrin 1990; Shavit and Bailey 2015; Tracy 2010; Vasilyeva 2016; Vuchinich 1990). Goodwin and Goodwin (1990) argue that any oppositional move during conflict negotiates participants' identities and relationships with one another: "a participant building an appropriate oppositional move must attend not only to the action that is being opposed, but also to proposals in prior talk about how those present are being positioned vis-à-vis each other" (p. 85). In institutional contexts (such as academia) the kinds of identities and relationships participants orient to are tied to their institutional roles (e. g. Hutchby 1996; Tracy 1997, Tracy 2010; Vasilyeva 2016).

2.2 Metadiscourse and formulation in conflict interactions

Research on metadiscourse and related terms highlights that "talk about talk" can take on many forms and functions (Blum-Kulka 1997; Buttny 2010; Craig 1999; Gordon and Luke 2016; Lucy 1993; Schiffrin 1980; Verschueren 1999). During conflict, participants use metadiscourse when commenting on one another's communicative actions "to invoke some potentially problematic feature of communication" and in doing so attempt to hold one another accountable for communicating in socially acceptable ways (Buttny 2010: 639). Buttny (2010) shows how members of a town board and citizens used metadiscourse – such as descriptive terms of others' talk, labeling one's own talk, and quoting others and evaluating those quotes – to define and restrict communicative norms in a public hearing or to resist and negotiate these norms. Town board members and citizens' metadiscourse also negotiates relationships: the town board attempts to maintain authority through setting norms, while citizens attempt to achieve equal footing through questioning communicative norms set by the town board. Thus, metadiscourse is polysemous, in that it can serve both interactional and relational functions (Gordon and Luke 2016).

The labeling of one's own or others' communicative actions is also known as formulating action (Sidnell and Enfield 2015). Formulating action occurs when participants overtly label a speech act or action (i. e. I *promise* I'll be there). In doing so, participants are choosing one of many words to label a communicative act. Participants' choice of formulation (i. e. "*bombing* people with emails") can display their knowledge about preferred communicative norms (i. e. "do not send too many emails") (Buttny 2010). The interpretation and evaluation of participants' formulations is dependent, in part, on how others reply to it. For example, studies analyzing place formulations – where people choose among different terms to identify place (Myers 2006; Schegloff 1972) – show how participants orient to one another's formulations as choices and evaluate each other's choice of formulation. The choices of formulation participants make and the ways they evaluate one another's choices display their knowledge about the kinds of formulations that are appropriate for a particular context (Myers 2006).

3 Data and context

The interactions analyzed include 67 posts on a listserv where 32 academics from multiple science-related disciplines are developing a solution to a conference scheduling conflict between two academic organizations. The members are

in an online committee, where there is an appointed chair – whom I call "Robert" – and the committee members – the other participants in the listserv. The participants' conversational actions reflect and negotiate their identities (i. e. as chair or member) and their relationships (i. e. chair as authority, or all members, including chair, as equals). Since the members of this community do not share physical space, their online interactions are their primary form of communication and central to the way they manage relationships.

The data is part of a larger corpus from a research group investigating a variety of online interactional contexts with the eventual goal of supporting higher quality civic engagement through online media (Murray et al. 2012). The research group received approval from the Institutional Review Board for this project. As a member of this research group, I received consent to use this data for purposes of analyzing "failed" communication. Two members of our research group were participants in the analyzed interactions and provided information about the two academic organizations discussed. I also conducted a member check after completing my analysis. The participants agreed with my overarching argument that Robert – the committee chair – unfairly tried to control the conversations and that most committee members aligned themselves against Robert through their emails. Notable is that my informants were *not* Robert and sided in opposition to Robert both in the email interactions and in their discussions with me. Since Robert (a pseudonym) is a senior person in the research group's field of study, the members of the research group asked that I omit lines from the data so emails would not be recognizable and that I change the years of the conferences mentioned in the interactions. I also use pseudonyms for all people and institutions.

The online committee was formed to discuss how the BLUEorg and REDorg academic communities can collaborate. REDorg is an academic field that encompasses research done in BLUEorg but does not provide enough support for researchers focused on BLUEorg-related subjects. The members of the online committee are part of the BLUEorg research community and attend the annual REDorg conference. The committee goals include maintaining a unique identity for BLUEorg and a positive relationship with REDorg. The conflict between BLUEorg and REDorg is that the time and location of BLUEorg's conference overlaps with REDorg's conference. Therefore, the leader of the REDorg community appointed Robert G, the leader of the BLUEorg academic community, as head of the online committee to find a solution to this conference overlap. Robert G's roles include acting as a facilitator for the online committee discussion and acting as a representative for the online committee members during in-person conference planning meetings with REDorg.

The online committee discussion revolves around whether to a) co-locate the REDorg and BLUEorg conferences so the members of both groups can attend

both conferences, b) push back the 2008[1] BLUEorg conference to early 2009 to avoid conflict with REDorg's conference, or c) proceed with the 2008 BLUEorg conference and make any date/time/location changes for the subsequent 2009 BLUEorg conference. The conflict does not revolve around different opinions about conference scheduling, but rather *how* the members should communicate about these different options and come to a consensus.

4 Discourse analysis of online conflict interactions

Discourse analysis encompasses approaches seeking to understand how participants collaboratively achieve social actions – i. e. disagreement, questioning, challenging – through language use during interaction (Tracy 2015). The analysis that follows focuses on social actions the participants accomplish through the ways they use metadiscourse when responding to previous actions. The analysis also traces how the participants' use of metadiscourse projects a future trajectory of interaction (i. e. metadiscourse shifts from a closed, top-down interaction to an open, egalitarian interaction). The analysis traces tensions between Robert and other listserv members through focusing on how the participants' responses to Robert's actions escalate from disagreement with and redirecting of his suggested communication process, to criticism and accusations against Robert for not listening to the group discussion, to finally, an official withdrawal of the committee members from the discussion and the committee.

The analysis is organized according to three phases of the conflict: (i) the conflict's beginning constituted by the first action-opposition sequence; (ii) conversational actions during conflict that escalated opposition; and (iii) conversational actions that constitute the closing of this conflict via withdrawal from the interaction. Although not all actions on this listserv can be characterized as oppositional, below I analyze examples that constitute oppositional actions that ultimately lead to withdrawal from interaction.

4.1 Formulating actions and negotiating communicative norms

Analysis of the following emails illustrate how Robert's formulations propose a closed, top-down communication process, and formulations in the responses

1 The year of the conference has been changed for purposes of confidentiality.

resist Robert's proposed communication process. Robert's email is the first email of a new discussion thread, and the following two emails are initial replies to Robert's email.

Example 1

Robert G's Email

1 Hi,
2 In the near future, there could be some conversation
3 between BLUEorg and REDorg to discuss opportunities for
4 interaction and collaboration between BLUEorg/OrgE and
5 REDorg. To get prepared, we'd like to put together a list of
6 ways in which we would like to see REDorg and OrgE
7 interact and/or collaborate.
8 Here is an initial list:
Lines 9-24 omitted for purposes of confidentiality. Robert gives 9 suggestions about conference collaboration (evaluated in a later email shown below).
25 To avoid bombing people with too many emails, please
26 don't use reply-to-all. I will collect all the suggestions and
27 put them together. If there is any suggestion/feedback,
28 please try your best to provide it in three days.
29 Thanks
30 Robert G

Excerpt from Corry's email

31 I actually want all to see this (so it's not bombing).
32 The ideas here are all good, but there may be others.
33-54 *lines 3-24 omitted for purposes of confidentiality – suggestions emphasize the importance of discussion among groups and valuing one another's opinions*
55 Corry

Cathy's email

56 Hi Robert,
57 All the items currently on the list seem to be very weak
58 levels of interaction.
59 I would favor a much stronger association, such as co-
60 located and coordinated events (which could also include
61 ALL the items listed below). Travel funds are tight, so I

62 don't think that people want to have to attend multiple
63 events, when they could attend one.
64 Cathy

Robert requests suggestions for collaboration between BLUEorg and REDorg (lines 2–7). He formulates the online discussion as having a "list" format and provides an "initial list", which is a numbered list of suggestions from the conference planners (who include Robert). Robert creates a hierarchy among the list contributors through using the "program we" (Dori-Hacohen 2014: 190). The "program we" references one participant in the current interaction and people outside of the interaction, thus creating a community that is part of the interaction even though they are not directly participating in the current interaction. Robert's "program we" references himself and the conference program planners. He positions himself as part of the conference planner community, positions this community as in charge of the list, and positions the listserv members as contributors to the list.

Robert discourages open discussion through requesting, "please don't use reply-to-all" and formulating "replying to all" as "bombing people with too many emails" (lines 25–26). The use of the formulation "bombing" implies that sending emails to the group is a burden. Instead, Robert appoints himself to collect responses and relay them to the conference planning committee (lines 26–27). Gist formulations are often not neutral and can be used for persuasive purposes (Barnes 2007). The person who has access to all suggestions and can decide how to synthesize them, like Robert, has authority over others who simply contribute suggestions (Hutchby 1996). Additionally, Robert discourages replies through using the word "any" ("if there is *any* suggestion"), which could indicate a preference for a negative answer to his request for suggestions (Heritage and Robinson 2011). Heritage and Robinson (2011) find that, in doctor-patient interactions, questions that include "any" (i. e. "do you have any other medical problems?") are oriented to by patients as tilted towards preferring "no" as a response. Thus, it is possible that Robert's use of "any" indicates "no suggestions" as a preferred response.

Corry's email opening challenges Robert's request not to "reply to all". Rintel et al.'s (2001) analysis of openings in online chats illustrate that openings in online mediums are constituted by two actions: 1) the medium announces the presence of a participant; and 2) the participant writes a greeting. The server announces Corry's email to the whole group, which challenges Robert's request to not reply-to-all. Corry re-formulates "bombing people with too many emails" to "not bombing", thus implying that emails are *not* an irrelevant burden but rather something that he (and he assumes others) want to see (line 31). Corry

positively assesses Robert's list of suggestions as "good", and re-opens the floor to the whole group for more suggestions. These actions propose a shift from Robert's preference for a closed interaction where he can collect suggestions to an open discussion where everyone can see all suggestions. Corry, however, encourages open discussion through positively evaluating it during his suggestions: he discusses how REDorg and BLUEorg have passed policies to encourage collaboration but do not follow through on policies (lines 33–54, omitted). He foregrounds discussion as an important solution for collaboration: "discussions can improve the situation, and that without these discussions, many of the other ideas will not come to fruition".

Cathy challenges Robert's authority to set norms for interaction through replying-to-all and formulating Robert's list of suggestions as being "very weak levels of interaction" (lines 57–58), and evaluating her suggestion as "strong" (line 59). For example, one of Robert's suggestions is "coordinating scheduling of conferences", whereas Cathy's suggestion specifies that the conferences should be "co-located" and events should be "coordinated" (lines 59–60). Cathy softens her opposition to Robert through constructing a gist formulation (Heritage and Watson 1979) that positions Robert's suggestions ("ALL the items listed below") as part of her suggestion. Gist formulations are often used to facilitate agreement during meetings (Barnes 2007). Thus, positioning Robert's items as part of her suggestions could be Cathy's strategy to facilitate agreement with Robert through re-positioning all participants and their suggestions as valued.

The disagreement about preferred communicative norms is intertwined with managing relational tensions in academia. Robert – as an appointed leader and the in person representative at the conference planning committees – has a higher status than the group members and invokes this status when he attempts to control the discussion. The group members resist Robert's proposed communication process and instead encourage an open discussion among equals. Implied in the participants' argument for greater transparency is that they might not trust Robert to accurately represent their discussion to the conference planning committees. However, as the participants criticize Robert's proposed norms for communication, they attempt to maintain relationships through including some positive evaluation of his email content.

Robert replies-to-all addressing Cathy's email through stating that BLUEorg and REDorg will be meeting in a couple of weeks, and he wants to wait to discuss conference scheduling until after this meeting. After this reply, Robert stops participating in the committee discussions, while others continue with active participation according to norms set by Corry and Cathy.

4.2 Affective stances, formulating action, and building opposition

Example 2 illustrates how the participants formulate affect – i. e. overtly label emotions – and in doing so take affective stances that mark communicative actions as problematic and align against the people who performed them (Du Bois and Kärkkäinen 2012; Golato 2012; Goodwin and Goodwin 1990; Ochs 1993). This conflict occurs towards the end of the participants' discussion about REDorg-BLUEorg collaboration. After 44 emails, the participants reached a consensus where they decided the best decision was to move the BLUEorg conference from late 2008 to early 2009 and avoid conflict with REDorg's meeting. Subsequent to this, Robert, who has not been participating in the discussion, announces a second call for papers for the *2008* BLUEorg conference. This indicates that Robert was not reading the participants' emails or chose to ignore their consensus to move the conference date. The group members respond to the call for papers below:

Example 2

Oran's Email

1 Robert
2 I find it startling and puzzling (at the least) that you are going
3 ahead with planning for this meeting in this way.
4 The recent lively interactions among members of the team
5 seems to me to have made it very clear that there is a growing
6 consensus that the current plans have the meeting in the
7 wrong place, or at the wrong time, or both, and that
8 continuing with the current plans is causing increasing
9 trepidation in some quarters.
10 I would hope that at this point there you would be conducting
11 an open and careful conversation about alternatives, rather
12 than ignoring what seemed to be a very useful and important
13 conversation.
14 Especially since hotel contracts do not appear to have been
15 signed, this would seem to be the time for constructive
16 conversation and community building. Can we please have
17 that now?
18 Oran L.

Corry's Email
19 I too was puzzled and disappointed.
20 Corry

Oran starts his email with an accusation that holds Robert accountable for ignoring group interests. Oran takes an affective stance, negatively evaluating Robert's actions as "startling and puzzling (at the least)" (line 2) because, while the group has agreed to change the conference location and/or date, Robert's second call for papers announces the conference time/date as unchanged (lines 4–9). Oran positively formulates the committee discussion as "lively interactions" (line 4) and the "current plans" as "wrong" (lines 6–7) and as "causing increasing trepidation" (lines 8–9). These formulations contrast group interaction with Robert's decisions and align the group against Robert, thus constructing a division in the committee.

Oran requests Robert to conduct "an open and careful conversation about alternatives" (line 11). His formulation of preferred communication as an "open and careful conversation" positively evaluates having conversations before making decisions and encourages Robert to participate in these conversations as an equal. He contrasts this action with "ignoring" what he formulates as "a very careful and important conversation" (lines 12–13). Oran continues his accusation through implicitly accusing Robert of abusing his decision making power: by stating "hotel contracts do not appear to have been signed" instead of a more definitive "have not been signed" (lines 14–15), Oran implies that Robert could have possibly signed hotel contracts without the group's knowledge.

Oran writes, "this would seem to be the time for constructive conversation and community building" (lines 15–16), which functions as the upshot of his email and also as a preface tilt (Clayman and Heritage 2002) that encourages Robert to affirmatively respond to the question: "can we please have that now?" (lines 16–17). In addition to the interactional function of soliciting an affirmative response from Robert, the connection Oran draws between "constructive conversation" and "community building" orients to relational tensions in academia. He indicates that participating in "constructive conversations" is not only a communication preference but also is tied to building and maintaining relationships among the community members.

Corry's reply piggybacks (Goodwin and Goodwin 1990) off Oran's affective stance. He does not complete Oran's adjacency pair but rather, "uses the resources provided by the prior talk to create another utterance closely tied to it" (p. 102). Corry aligns himself with Oran and against Robert. This strategy, where the participants strongly disagree with one person and strongly agree

with one another, is one which is used when building opposition in in person meetings as well (Kangasharju 2002). Overall, Oran's accusation and Corry's alignment with Oran both stem from Robert violating not only the proposed interactional norms but also relational norms in academia of speaking as equals and valuing contributions of all members.

4.2.1 Robert's reply to Corry and Oran

Robert's reply to Oran's accusation, sent to the whole listserv, negatively evaluates the group's decisions, positively evaluates and justifies his own decision, and does not address the group's concerns about violating communicative norms.

Example 2.1

Robert's Email

1 BLUEconf1 2008 has progressed to the point where many
2 people are already preparing submissions based on earlier
3 announcements regarding the timing of the event. In addition,
4 re-start the process of confirming a location/hotel would force
5 us to delay the event significantly, probably into 2009, given
6 the time involved in working through this process (especially
7 given the timing of REDOrg's conference). As a result,
8 moving BLUEconf1 at this point would effectively force us to
9 skip BLUEconf1 2008 while disappointing people who have
10 been planning to attend. There is no desire for conflict with
11 REDOrg, the goal is to have a better and more collaborative
12 relationship, and that is why there will probably be some
13 meaningful changes with regard to the timing of BLUEconf1
14 2009. Right now, we're still waiting to hear about the
15 discussions between BLUEOrg and REDOrg and we'll proceed
16 accordingly once we know how things went.
17 Robert G

Robert responds to Oran's accusations through negatively evaluating the group's proposed solutions and accounting for doing so (lines 1–10). He positions his solution as the best way to meet their group's goal of having a positive relationship with REDOrg (lines 10–14). Robert's reply does not address his violation of communicative norms but rather justifies his actions through asserting that his proposed conference solution is better than the group's consensus. The following

are two replies to Robert's email received by the whole listserv. The participants in the replies negatively evaluate Robert's communication actions and decisions:

Example 2.2

Corry's Email
18 I do not think that proceeding further, until we have the
19 outcome of the BLUEorg-REDorg discussions, would be
20 appropriate. Delaying into 2009 is not a disastrous outcome.
21 What do others think?
22 Corry

Sally's Email
23 It was disheartening to see another call go out while we were
24 having this discussion and did not know the outcome of the
25 REDorg-BLUEorg meeting.
26 I agree that we should not proceed until we know about the
27 outcomes and plan accordingly. I agree that delaying until
28 2009 is not that bad – people can continue to edit/iterate on
29 papers and submit them later. If they are looking forward to
30 attending BLUEconf1 2008 they would be equally excited to
31 attend BLUEconf1 2009.
32 It is important to build a strong community that understands
33 BLUEconf1's niche contribution to BLUEdiscipline while
34 maintaining good relations with other REDdiscipline
35 associations and groups.
36 Sally

Corry formulates "proceeding further" in planning for a 2008 conference as not "appropriate" (lines 18–20). He then formulates the action advocated for by the committee, "delaying", as "not disastrous" (line 20). These actions position Corry and the online committee in opposition to Robert's method of decision-making. Corry adds a question, "What do others think?" (line 21), which elicits further discussion and foregrounds a preference for open conversation. Sally takes a negative affective stance towards Robert's "call for papers": "disheartening" (line 23). This utterance aligns Sally with Corry and Oran because "disheartening" is an upgraded agreement with both Oran's (startling and puzzling) and Corry's (puzzled and disappointed) affective stances. Du Bois (2007) argues that affective stances are dialogic, where they "derive from, and further engage with, the words of those who have spoken before" (Du Bois

2007: 140). Corry's, Oran's, and Sally's overt labeling of affect across multiple emails can be seen as linked to one another and upgrading one another as the conflict escalates. Sally again aligns with Corry and Oran, agreeing with Corry's earlier argument about "proceeding further" (lines 26–27) and aligns against Robert through disagreeing with his remarks that people would not attend a delayed conference (lines 27–31).

Sally constructs a gist formulation of the committee's shared goals: "build a strong community ... while maintaining good relations" (lines 32–35) with other REDorg associations, thus attempting to realign the committee members with one another. She foregrounds agreement among the group and sidesteps the group disagreements with Robert. Similar to Oran, Sally constructs a relationship between communication actions and community building. She implicitly uses the goal of community building as a way to persuade Robert to change his unilateral decision.

While the participants had open, lively discussions after example 1, the discussion following Robert again violating group norms and refusing to alter his decision is constituted by oppositional turns that escalate the conflict. Two participants reply supporting Robert's proposed solution. Then, Corry sends another email clarifying that his main concern is not about Robert's opinion, but rather about how people communicate during the decision making process. Corry receives two supportive emails and then an email from Robert again attempting to stop "reply-to-all" emails on the listserv. Corry and Robert engage in four emails debating correct communication procedures on the listserv. Corry argues for open communication among equals, while Robert points out that not everyone is informed, that not everyone wants to participate, and that numerous emails are an inconvenient way to make decisions. Corry receives three emails of support. Then, Robert sends an email to a select group (which includes Corry) informing them that the conference date will not change. Corry then replies to all with what he calls an "open letter" to Robert and attaches Robert's email to the letter so the group can read it.

4.3 Final accusations and withdrawal from conflict

Example 3 illustrates the types of communicative actions that constitute the closing of this conflict, which ultimately ends in withdrawal of the committee members without resolution. Corry's metadiscourse identifies specific types of communication causing dissolution of this committee and advocates for Robert to change his decision and align with the group's preferences.

Example 3

Corry's Open Letter

An Open Letter to Robert G

Dear Robert:

This morning I received your email (see below) indicating that OrgE is proceeding with BLUEconf1 as previously planned. I have sent this to those who are on the Advisory Board as well as participants in our previous exchanges.

I know that you are aware that I have strongly recommended that the conference be rescheduled so as to address any concerns regarding the REDorg conference and the impact of BLUEconf1 on the broader REDorg community. That may indicate that I have a conflict of interest wrt[2] this letter.

However, putting my own opinion to the side, it seems like the situation has approached a kind of crisis. This AM, 3 members of the OrgE Advisory Board resigned in response to the BLUEconf1 2008 decision and a 4th member (yours truly) indicated that his resignation is pending. Others receiving this email have also indicated to me that they are considering resigning their roles. In addition, I think you are aware that many others believe that proceeding with BLUEconf1 on the old schedule is a mistake. Despite that advice and feedback, it has been elected to proceed. That stands against the apparent will of at least those on this email. I say 'apparent', as there has been no vote, although one has been suggested. One way to determine this 'will' is to take a formal vote now.

What disturbs me about this situation is that important issues are not being addressed in a way that (apparently) is consistent with expressed opinion, or are being sidestepped with a statement like "there is no perfect solution at this time". Given this latter statement, the decision to proceed with one of the more imperfect ones seems flawed.

I am appealing to you and our community to give this one further consideration as a group. Please subject this to

2 Wrt = with respect to; jargon used in emails

36 an open vote and learn where we all stand.
37 I would also suggest that, from my vantage point, you
38 seem to have lost the confidence of the Advisory Board.
39 There are only 3 solutions here: (1) for you to alter this
40 decision – if altering it is consistent with the group's will,
41 (2) for those disagreeing with you to resign from the
42 Advisory Board (and we thereby lose some very good
43 advisors) and other roles, or (3) for you to move aside and
44 allow someone else to carry out your role and determine
45 how best to proceed.
46 Perhaps a vote will alter the options, or maybe the OrgE
47 community as represented by us will disagree with what I
48 have said. If the community does see this differently, then
49 these statements are mine only and I apologize for wasting
50 your time. –
51 So, will you have an open vote? Or is this decision final?
52 Corry

Corry formulates the current situation as a "crisis" (line 15) and accuses Robert of causing this crisis by making a decision that he and "many others" formulate as a "mistake" (lines 21–23). Corry names the two acts the committee members engaged in during this "crisis." One is resignation (lines 16, 18, 20). Resignation is the strongest action one can take to display one's disagreement with Robert's decisions because the participants are, after engaging in numerous oppositional turns with Robert, withdrawing from interaction (Vuchinich 1990). A second action is a request for a "formal vote" (line 27). Having a formal vote to determine the will of the people would ensure fairness and mark the group's consensus as official. Corry then upgrades previous affective stances (startled, puzzled, disappointing, and disheartening): "disturbing" (line 28). He accuses Robert of causing this "disturbing" "crisis" through quoting a phrase from Robert's previous email (not shown) and overtly taking a stance towards that quote (Buttny 2010). Corry indicates he is directly quoting Robert through putting the phrase in quotation marks – "there is no perfect solution at this time" (line 31–32) – and takes a stance that Robert is manipulating the group through "sidestepping" their concerns.

Corry presents Robert with some official options for resolving the current "situation", advocating particularly that Robert alter his decision according to the formal vote or resign (lines 39–45). Both requests double as accusations against Robert for not acting as an equal, but rather trying to limit the discussion and ignore or control the group's opinions. These options do not offer Robert the

opportunity to deny the accusation but rather to accept his guilt and either make changes or resign his position.

Five participants reply to Corry's email. Two defend Robert's solution, one email is from Robert asking OrgE members to be patient because the conference planning committees are still having discussions, and two criticize Robert because his communication violates valued forms of relationships among academics. An excerpt from Susan's email, the last email on this listserv, directly addresses this:

Susan's Email

1 Many of us are part of the academy in which we regularly hold
2 faculty meetings, debate passionately about issues, agree to close
3 the discussion after some period of time and vote on the issue at
4 hand. Under this process, we learn to live with decisions that we
5 disagree with because we had a fair shot at impacting the
6 outcome. The problem with the current process is that members
7 not on the executive committee do not feel they are a part of the
8 process when it comes to major decisions that will have a lasting
9 impact on BLUEOrg. And apparently, somewhere from 1/3 to 1/2
10 of the advisory board feels the same.

Susan draws parallels between the communication in this online committee and the communication in faculty meetings (lines 1–6). Her concern is not about the decision that Robert made, but how "the current process" excludes the opinions of "members [who are] not on the executive committee," (lines 6–9). She positions her opinion as a popular one by stating that much of the advisory board agrees with her (lines 9–10). Thus, Susan is positioning Robert's actions not just as an incorrect way to communicate on this listserv but as particularly damaging to relationships among academics. There were no responses after Susan's email.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The analysis above highlights previously unstudied interactional and relational functions of metadiscourse in academic interactions. Similar to analyses of academic interactions in contexts such as colloquia (Tracy 1997), advisor-advisee relationships (Vehviläinen 2009a, Vehviläinen 2009b), and peer tutoring sessions (Waring 2005, Waring 2007a, Waring 2007b), the findings illustrate that there is an expectation on the part of most participants to value one

another's contributions despite status differences in roles (i. e. professor vs graduate student; chair vs member) or expertise. My findings add to previous findings, however, in its focus on how academics use metadiscourse to do so. While previous studies analyzing metadiscourse in academic communication focus on how academics negotiate mutual understanding (Aguilar 2008; Hyland 2005; Vásquez 2010), this study has focused on conflict interactions where academics' main concern is *not* achieving mutual understanding about a subject, but rather creating consensus about communicative norms and managing relationships.

This study highlights how academics use metadiscourse to engage in opposition and maintain relationships while doing so. The participants formulate one another's communicative actions on and off the listserv as being particular kinds of actions (Sidnell and Enfield 2015). At the beginning of the conflict, Robert formulates actions in ways that restrict communicative norms on the listserv and positions himself as an authority over the group. Other participants formulate Robert's actions negatively and their own interactions positively, thus resisting Robert's proposed norms, indexing more equality-driven communicative norms, and building opposition between the group members and Robert. To maintain relationships despite criticisms, the group members use gist formulations (Barnes 2007; Heritage and Watson 1979) that re-position all group members' contributions as similar and valuable and foreground shared goals of the group.

As the conflict escalated, however, the participants did not attend to positioning Robert's actions as similar to the group's actions – nor as accepted by the group. Instead, the participants negatively formulated Robert's actions, positively formulated their own, and overtly asked Robert to engage with the group. The escalation of the conflict was also indexed through the participants' overt formulations of affect that negatively evaluated Robert's actions (Du Bois 2007; Du Bois and Kärkkäinen 2012). The findings illustrate the dialogic nature of these affect formulations (Du Bois 2007; Dori-Hacohen 2017) through showing how the participants upgraded one another's stances throughout the interaction (i. e. startled, puzzled, disappointed, disheartened, disturbed), and in doing so, indexed increasing opposition against Robert. Towards the end of the conflict, the participants marked their strongest opposition to Robert through adopting the genre of a formal letter of complaint or withdrawing from the conflict without resolution (Vuchinich 1990).

These findings contribute to understanding how online platforms shape ways participants engage in the conversational actions that constitute conflict (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015). The participants' conflicts do resemble in person conflict sequences in that they are constituted by 'action-opposition' sequences that initiate conflict, escalate/de-escalate conflict, and end conflict – all while

attending to one another's identities and relationships (Goodwin and Goodwin 1990; Hutchby 1996). The participants also orient to offline norms when engaging in and evaluating online practices (i. e. using norms for in person committee meetings to evaluate interactions in the online committee). However, the online medium provides some affordances for new strategies the participants can use during the conflict. For example, the participants resist Robert's restrictive communicative norms through "replying-to-all" and can take stances against Robert's communication through putting excerpts from his previous emails in quotations. The members also take advantage of the norms in the email genre to accomplish communicative actions (i. e. composing a 'formal letter' for withdrawal). In addition, the overt formulation of affective stances is, in part, due to the restrictions of online mediums on other ways of expressing affect (i. e. tone).

One limitation of this study is the lack of knowledge about participants' off-listserv interactions. Off-listserv discussions occurred among Corry and other members, which is why Corry is aware of previous resignation of the members. Similarly, Sally had off-listserv discussions with the advisory board, which explains her claim that they agree with her. These negotiations were not accessible through this listserv data. Thus, this analysis should be read as one of many types of communication that contributed to the trajectory of conflict on this listserv. Future work analyzing online communication can analyze how online communication and offline (or off-listserv) communication relate to one another and are consequential for analysis.

Overall, this analysis illustrates the intersection between metadiscourse, negotiating communicative norms, and managing relationships among academics. While it is arguable that conflict is a ritual and valued part of academic interaction, the participants' withdrew, in part, because Robert repeatedly resisted and ignored participants' preferences and made offline unilateral decisions against the group's interests. This analysis, therefore, highlights the need to be careful about directing other academics and the importance of honoring the equality ethic that is strong in academe (Tracy 1997). Adhering to these norms might be more pertinent in online contexts where listserv interactions (and not physical space) are the primary form of relational maintenance. These online ways of doing institutional work are only becoming more common, and future projects can examine how academics accomplish institutional tasks and manage relational tensions in different online environments.[3]

3 According to the BLUEorg conference website, there was a conference in 2007 and another in 2009. It appears as if the 2008 BLUEorg conference was pushed to 2009 despite the breakdown in communication on the listserv.

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Bionote

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