

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF
INTERACTIVE NORMS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF
TEXTUAL IDENTITY IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE
COMMUNITIES: THE CASE OF AN EMAIL DISCUSSION
LIST

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes a framework designed to describe a variety of asynchronous written modes of interaction, based on a case study of an email discussion list. The framework focuses on the generic conventions of a representative set of texts produced by the email group whose core members had been actively participating for a period of 8 years. A corpus of texts—comprised of sets of posts written by three list identities, sections of selected 'threads' (comprising approximately 54,000 words), plus other strips of list activity—is used to illustrate the approach to analysis which the thesis outlines. A variety of discourse analytic perspectives are demonstrated as a means for investigating the generic staging within these texts, with an emphasis on the identification of potential stage and sub-stage boundaries such as at the margins of functional 'moves' or 'phases'.

The thesis argues that generic conventions within a discourse community are a product of the overall social purpose of the interaction and the rhetorical purpose of each contribution. The underlying social purpose of group participation and in this list in particular was taken to be the negotiation of identity through the legitimation and reproduction of group conventions. In the service of this negotiation, the rhetorical purpose of the texts was persuasive and therefore argumentative or expository in stance. For this reason, the deployment of resources of evaluation using the Appraisal framework formed one of the primary means of tracking rhetorical organisation.

It is also assumed that negotiation of meaning is reflected in each text's 'orientation to response' and that this in turn is reflected in the ways in which interpersonal relationships are signalled at the micro-level—such as at the boundaries of phases and other sub-units of the texts. The ways in which participants creatively reproduce the meanings or conventions of a group can provide insights into identity and ideology in these written interactive mediums, and thus, the thesis also demonstrates how textual persona / construction of identity may be investigated as a function of these conventions.

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"At the time of writing, the last word which must be added to the description of the authors' epistemological position is an acknowledgement that we expect our own position, like all others, to be, in the end, either incomplete or self-contradictory." (Reusch & Bateson 1951: 227)