To tell or not to tell?

Email stories between on- and off-line interactions

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Abstract

The point of departure for this study are recent language-in-use (cf. discourse) approaches to computer-mediated communication that recognize the plurality of its activities and seek to explore their interrelations with their local (i.e. mediated, situational) and broader (sociocultural) contexts of occurrence (see e.g. Baym 1995, 2000, Cherny 1999, Danet 2001a, papers in Herring 1997, forthcoming). The study introduces two relatively uncharted foci of analysis, namely the activity under scrutiny (narrative in private email messages) and the profile of the email senders and receivers (Greeks who live in England). Departing from the well-documented frequency and salience of storytelling in informal face-to-face communication amongst Greeks, the questions that this study sets out to address are as follows: a) How are stories introduced, judged to be tellable, told, and taken up (i.e. responded to, followed up) in this context? b) What kinds of subjectivity does the telling of stories in this context afford? What sorts of channels for the participants' construction of cultural identities does it provide?

It will be shown that the kinds of stories that are introduced or told are presented as part of a trajectory of previous and future on- and off-line interactions, rather than as free-standing, finished and self-contained units. Five distinct types of such "ongoing narratives" will be identified: (bids for) stories to be told, breaking news, references, updates, and projections. Their telling is elliptical and fragmented, but emphasis is placed on the evaluation of the events reported. This is not only interactionally drafted but also highlighted with the use of various means, particularly switches to English. Finally, it will be argued that the stories' point (both as newsworthiness of reported events and as norms of what is tellable) and the use of the two languages (Greek-English) for their evaluation made the participants' contact identities and shared cultural understandings operative and relevant.

The implications of these findings will be addressed on the interface between aspects of the mediated context and the participants' cultural identities and intimate relationships, particularly as these are shaped vis-à-vis the competing requirements of brevity/asynchronicity and interactivity/tellability.

1 Introduction

The point of departure for this study are recent language-in-use (cf. discourse) approaches to computer-mediated communication (CMC) that, on one hand, recognize the plurality of its genres and styles, and, on the other hand, seek to explore their interrelations with their local (i.e. mediated, situational) and broader (sociocultural) contexts of occurrence (see e.g. Baym 1995, 2000, Cherny 1999, Danet 2001a, papers in Herring 1997, forthcoming). In this expanding line of research (for an overview see Georgakopoulou 2003a, Herring 2001), there is still ample scope for an inquiry into which specific discourse activities and in what ways are constructed in different CM environments by different (linguistically, culturally, in terms of roles, relations, etc.) participants.

Intended as a contribution to the above line of inquiry, this paper focuses on private email messages exchanged between intimates over a period of time. The study introduces two foci of analysis to which the relevant literature to date has not paid sufficient attention. The first refers to the discourse activity that is placed under scrutiny in the data at hand, namely narrative. The second has to do with the profile of the senders and receivers of the data. These are (and define themselves as) Greeks who live in England and see themselves as relatively settled in it. They notably type their messages in Greeklish (i.e. Greek with Roman characters) and on very few occasions in Greek.

To take each focus separately, narrative is broadly defined as a "(re)presentation" of a series of (past, present, or future hypothetical) events that are meaningfully connected in a temporal way and with a point of view (cf. Burke 1969, Labov 1972, Ricoeur 1988). It is fair to say that the textual and interactional aspects of narrative present a gap in the relevant literature on CMC; in contrast, turn-taking, opening, closing formulas, overlaps, and other sequential mechanisms have already attracted analytical attention (e.g. Cherny 1999, Herring 1999); likewise, performance-related phenomena such as language play and humour-engaging activities have also been looked into (papers in Danet 1995, Danet et al. 1997). A

lack of focus on narrative is in stark contrast with a long tradition of studying both non-literary (cf. natural) and literary narrative in a number of disciplines, including linguistics.

As far as the profile of the email users of this study is concerned, as suggested, the language of their email correspondence is Greek (with occasional switches to English). With the exception of Danet & Herring (2003), instances of CMC in languages other than English are a rather uncharted territory, with macro-level as opposed to micro-linguistic concerns having monopolized the research agenda. For instance, attitudes, patterns of use, and issues of accessibility to CMC, particularly via the Internet, have been looked into in different communities (e.g. papers in Hawisher & Selfe 2000). Micro-analysis is however lagging behind and it has mostly focused on bilingual choices, namely code-switching to and from English (e.g. see Georgakopoulou 1997a, forthcoming, Paolillo forthcoming, papers in Beißwenger 2001). There is thus much scope here for inquiry into the interrelationships between specific language choices and the participants' social and cultural identities in CMC that is conducted in languages other than English.

How Greek people "tell" narratives on email becomes a worthwhile exploration, not just because of the lack of critical mass, but also on account of the well-documented frequency and salience of storytelling in informal face-to-face communication amongst Greeks (e.g. Georgakopoulou 1997b, 1998, Kostouli 1993, Tannen 1983, 1989). This cultural significance of storytelling for (re)affirming interpersonal relationships, putting forth arguments, and generally making sense of self and others, has been frequently linked with a prevalent tendency in Greek communication for involvement and relatedness, as well as for the sort of immediacy and context-dependency of the message that is typically associated with oral, more specifically, face-to-face communication (cf. Tannen ibid.; Tziovas 1989).

In the light of the above, the questions that this study sets out to address are as follows:

a) How are stories initiated (introduced), judged to be tellable or not, told, and taken up (i.e. responded to, followed up by addressees) in this context? Put differently, how are these interactional and sequential features shaped by the mediated environment?

b) How does the fact that the participants are Greek affect these features? More specifically, given the significance of narrative as a mode for self-construction and meaning-making in communication in general (see papers in Bamberg 2000) and in Greek in particular, what kinds of subjectivity do stories in this context make visible as well as afford? What sorts of channels for the participants' construction of cultural identities do they provide?

The discussion will show that participants explicitly orient to the activity of narrative in the course of their email messages: they frame stories metapragmatically, that is, in ways that refer to and comment on the communication under way (Silverstein 1993); they bid for and initiate them by explicitly referring to them as "stories"; they attach further labels to their own and their addressees' stories (e.g. funny, interesting, long, etc.) on the basis of which they seek or shun, accept or reject the "telling" and "hearing" of stories. The above suggests that they operate with specific (local, if not global) norms of what stories are tellable and hearable in this kind of environment.

Furthermore, the kinds of stories that are initiated or told in the data at hand will be collectively labeled as ongoing narratives or narratives in the making (five distinct types of ongoing narratives will be identified). Their main characteristic is that they are presented as part of a trajectory of interactions rather than as a free-standing, finished and self-contained unit. To this effect, they establish and refer to links between the participants' previous and future (on- and off-line) interactions. One notable case of such cross-referencing is to be found in bids for stories the full telling of which is deferred to an offline (FtF) interaction. Finally, the stories' point (both as newsworthiness of reported events and as norms of what

is tellable) and the use of the two languages (Greek-English) for their evaluation make the participants' contact identities and shared cultural understandings operative and relevant.

The implications of these findings will be addressed on the interface between aspects of the mediated context and the participants' cultural identities and intimate roles and relationships.

2 Data

The data analysed for this paper come from the latest phase (end of 2000 – now) of a collection of email messages that started in 1995.[1] The first data-set comprised email messages which I had received from friends and colleagues as well as messages received by three men and three women. The participants, aged 28-35 (when the collection started, the concentration was in the age-group of 24-30),[2] have on average spent the last 10 years of their lives in England; no-one in the sample has been in England for fewer than 5 years. In this respect, it is also important to stress that all of the participants are involved in professional roles (academic or not). (At the point of the first data collection, some of the participants were still studying).

The newer data-set on which this study is based comprises the participants-informants' email interactions with local (mostly based in London but also other parts of England) Greek friends with whom they closely socialize. As I have stressed elsewhere, a significant factor in the data at hand is that "the participants know one another personally, their email interactions thus mediating past and future face-to-face interactions" (1997a: 145). I have also argued that this type of data "helps analysts gain deeper insights into the differences in

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[1] Anonymity or pseudonymity has been unexceptionally applied to all messages of my data-sets: I have also obtained the written consent of all the informant-participants as well as of my own correspondents whose messages I have analysed (for a discussion of ethical issues involved in the collection of private email data, see Danet 2001b).

[2] Their correspondence is largely with people at that age-group (only 7% of the collected messages were sent or responded to by people older than 35, the eldest being 42 years old).

identity construction and participation frameworks between CMC and face-to-face communication" (ibid.) What this study will show is how this shared interactional history and the fact that online interactions are preceded and followed by offline interactions decidedly shape the ways of telling stories in the context at hand.

In my study of 1997a, I randomly extracted 500 messages (200 from my personal corpus and 50 from each of the six participants-informants) from communication with the four friends that each participant-informant emailed most frequently in the period of selection.[3] In this study, I have kept to the same principle of selection and number of email messages, exchanged between the end of 2000 and now. To this number, I have added 120 messages (20 from each participant-informant) which I call "catching up" messages: these are aimed at re-establishing communication after a (variable) period of lack of communication between sender and addressee. In the selection of all the messages, I made sure that responses to messages were included (and, in that respect, trails of communication followed), as well as previous messages to which the sample messages were responding (when those were available).

Greek is more often than not the main frame of communication in the messages, and English is the code that is switched to.[4] As already pointed out, in most cases, the emailers type Greek in Roman characters instead of using Greek fonts. The various socio-linguistic aspects of this phenomenon (e.g. individuals' and society-wide attitudes, factors contributing to its use, etc.) are outside the scope of this chapter but they have already attracted the analysts' attention (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2000, Koutsogiannis & Mitsikopoulou 2003). Most messages exemplify the dyadic scheme of participant roles, namely addresser-addressee;

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[3] It has to be noted that, in the whole of data, same-gender interactions outnumber mixed-gender interactions.

[4] Of course, in their detail, choices are more dynamic and nuanced than presented here. For instance, a switch to English occasionally leads to English becoming the main frame of communication. In other cases, the intermingling of the two codes is such that it is virtually impossible to talk about a main frame of communication. Still in other cases, there are no switches to English and the messages are through and through monolingual (for strategic code-switches to English, see Georgakopoulou forthcoming).

there are very few group-directed messages in the data. In terms of content, the majority of the data comprise rapid exchange of news, wishes, and social arrangements. Fewer messages involve some form of professional co-operation, i.e. requests for papers, invitations to lectures and seminars, co-participation in projects, etc. A final case involves the aforementioned catching up messages. The time lag between sending a message and receiving a reply to it is normally short, ranging from half an hour to one day.[5]

For additional insights into the findings of the analysis, the study will also refer to interviews with the participants-informants, when appropriate.[6] As it transpired from the interviews, email does a significant part of the relational work in the participants' friendships: it is the most frequent type of communication with friends, followed by phone calls, and FtF interactions in third place. Another important fact was that the participants in question hardly ever used text-messaging for communication with friends: they claimed that "they were too old for it"; also that it did not fit in with their professional lives, while email did. As one of the participants put it jokingly, "you can subtract value by doing your email at work, that is, if you are in the bottom end of management". On average, the participants met up with their Greek friends once a month, while they phoned one another once a fortnight and exchanged messages twice a week.

When appropriate, the present discussion will also refer to supplementary data that include a corpus of email messages of the given participants with a) friends and relatives based in Greece (100 messages) and b) English friends (100 messages).

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[5] Rapid and frequent exchange of email messages is intertwined with brevity of content. Longer messages (i.e. over 200 words) as a rule occur in catching up messages.

[6] The interviews, relatively unstructured, mostly focused on the informants' range and frequency of communication practices with friends and acquaintances.

3 Methods

3.1 Narrative structure and cultural variation

Non-literary oral narratives, occurring in everyday interactional contexts, are undoubtedly the most researched type of narrative in linguistics.[7] This may be attributable to Labov's (1972) influential study of narrative structure that was based on personal, past experience oral narratives in interview settings. The study resulted in the description of a fully-formed (or classic) narrative which "begins with an orientation, proceeds to the complicating action, is suspended at the focus of evaluation before the resolution, concludes with the resolution and returns the listener to the present time with the coda" (369).[8]

In the light of the above, the telling of a story emerges as largely monologic and sustained, granting specific floor-holding rights to the teller vis-à-vis the audience. Labov's concept of evaluation has been particularly influential, as it allows analysts to tap into the linguistic resources which tellers draw upon in order to signal their attitudes, feelings, emotional interest and involvement in the events narrated, but also in their audience. In Labov's model, there are two identifiable kinds of evaluation: external evaluation breaks the flow of the narrative, in that the teller suspends the action and tells the addressee what the point of the story is, using explicit statements such as: "It was great!", "It was so funny!", etc. Internal evaluation shows rather than tells a story's point: as such, it is deeply embedded in narrative action and signaled by various devices that encode the intensity of experience and/or dramatize the telling of events (e.g. repetition, tense shifts, etc.).

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[7] This is at the expense of a wide range of narratives particularly in written contexts, such as that of letter-writing, which may well underlie evolving communication norms on private email.

[8] Very briefly described, the abstract is a brief summary statement that encapsulates the point of the story; orientation identifies the time, place, situations, and characters; the complicating action answers the questions "Then what happened?"; resolution marks the end of the events of the complicating action; evaluation comprises the devices by which the narrator indicates the point of a narrative, i.e. why it is worth telling; finally, the coda closes a narrative off, normally by bringing it back to the moment of telling.

Labov's study stimulated a systematic enquiry into the cultural and contextual variability of his model of narrative structure (e.g. Johnstone 1990, Polanyi 1989). It thus became apparent that fully developed (i.e. classic) personal past experience stories are by no means the only type of story and telling that is to be found in FtF interactions. In fact, their frequency in Labov and certain post-Labovian studies seems to be intimately linked with their context of occurrence (e.g. relationships between interviewer and interviewee, the fact that they were elicited, etc.; see Georgakopoulou 2003b, Ochs & Capps 2001).

As far as storytelling in Greek is concerned, its culture-specificity has been partly located in the systematic use of a constellation of devices that key stories as performances (see Georgakopoulou 1997b, 1998; cf. Tannen's list of involvement devices, 1983), i.e. as dramatized deliveries during which the tellers assume responsibility to display to their audiences verbal artistry and communicative skill (Bauman 1993). These devices include the sustained use of the narrative present, the animation of characters' speech and thoughts, the proximal deictics now and here instead of then and there, various repetition forms, and rhythmic, intonational and thematic segments that are evenly balanced across the texts as a whole and mostly organized around tripartite patterns (Georgakopoulou 1997b: 123ff). In Labov's terms, all these performance devices would qualify for internal evaluation. External evaluation has in fact been found to be minimal in Greek stories (ibid.)

I have also found stories in Greek to be integrated into conversational events, thus readily dispensing with abstract, coda, and frequently ending at the highpoint or climax. This "climacto-telic" pattern (ibid.: 55-56) foregrounds the main events and is symptomatic of the stories' emphasis on their (internal) evaluation: the telling of the main events routinely provides a space for audience contribution, even within family narrative events, where I found children chipping into their parents' stories and jointly drafting their evaluation (e.g. by means of repetition; Georgakopoulou 2002: 42-45). Thus, more than other components of Greek storytelling, evaluation is the one that seems to call for interactional (i.e. teller-

audience) drafting. This contribution to evaluation allows the exploration of a point from different angles and the piecing together of a perspective (ibid.)

3.2 Coding narratives in the data

In the light of the above, while the largely uncontroversial definitional criteria of temporal ordering of events and emplotment were adhered to in the identification of narratives in the present analysis, Labov's classic structure was not taken as an absolute requirement for a unit to be identified as a story. Instead, it was accepted that stories can be unfinished, that is, ongoing, and/or elliptical, as opposed to fully developed units with a beginning-middle-end; they can be interactionally drafted (Polanyi 1989) as opposed to monologic; dialogically related (Bakhtin 1981) and intertextually linked as opposed to self-contained and autonomous; finally, their tellings can be heavily embedded in their surrounding stretch of discourse as opposed to readily detachable and free-standing (Ochs & Capps 2001).

Messages were first coded for story initiation or introduction. As many as 296 out of the 500 sampled messages presented the occurrence (169 messages) or initiation (i.e. bid for telling, 127 messages) of one or more stories. Of the 120 catching up messages, only nine had no instances of story telling or initiation. All messages in which the occurrence or initiation of stories had been identified were subsequently analyzed sequentially: this involved identification of entry and exit points for stories, emerging structural parts (e.g. plot, evaluation, see below), and types of responses or follow-ups to stories. Details of language and style in the telling of different story parts were also identified.

4 Analysis

4.1 Types of stories

As is evident from the above, sustained (i.e. long, full) stories with a classic fashion of development (i.e. gradual building up of a complication, evaluation, and resolution of it) are

normally not to be found in the data, except in a) catching up messages and b) communication with friends and relatives in Greece (this was identified in the analysis of the supplementary data). In both cases, stories seem to be important for the relational work that such messages do: specifically, they are aimed at re-establishing communication and/or keeping in touch, thus presenting the addressee with a "slice" of the addresser's life. In catching up messages in particular, the events that the stories report tend to be presented as the main reason for the sender's lack of prior communication with the message's addressee, as can be seen in the initiation of a story below:

(1)   Sugnomi gia tin toso kathusterimeni apantisi sto teleutaio sou email, alla ixame

        peripeteies me to Jani.

        'Sorry for this delayed response to your last message, but we have had an incident

        with Jannis […]'

        (from 27 year-old female)

It is arguable that such stories are more akin to those found in letter-writing than in FtF interactions. More generally, the whole catching up activity seems to be modeled on letter-writing. However, the migration or recasting of letter-writing expectations, norms, and practices on email is done so as to suit the mediated context at hand. For instance, unlike what one would expect in the context of letter-writing, sustained stories in catching up messages are framed in ways that justify their occurrence and seek their acceptability:

(2)   Na min sas kourazo, omos. Apla i8ela na moirasto mazi sas autes tis omorfes stigmes.

        'But I don't want to tire you. I just wanted to share with you these lovely moments.'

        (From a message of 28 year-old female, based in Greece, to her brother, 35 years old,

        and her sister-in-law, 32 years old).

On numerous occasions, the tellers also explicitly filter stories: whatever is judged to be a "long story" or is at odds with the rest of the context is left out. In this way, there is a

visible orientation to issues of appropriacy and tellability as shaped in the context at hand and in the light of a requirement for brevity:

(3)   To kalyterotero apo to Giorgo (exei polla alla staxyologv).

       'The very best by George (there's lots, but I am handpicking).'

       (35 year old male, based in Greece)

(4)   Kathoti meros tou fthinopvrou to evgala me sick leave (megalh istoria, tha sthn pv

       kapoia fora efoson exoume pei ola ta efxarista)

       'For I was on sick leave for a good part of the autumn (long story, I'll tell you at

       some point when we will have exhausted all the cheerful news).'

       (32 year-old male, in a catching up message to 32 year-old female)

Notably, the uptake of such storytelling is not always positive, as the following example shows:

(5)   An einai na grafeis oles aftes tis istories, boreis toulaxiston na vazeis paragrafous?

       'If you are going to write all those stories, can you at least have paragraphs?'

       (From a reply of a 30 year-old male, to a message by his mother, based in Greece,

       who routinely sends him long messages with fully developed and detailed story

       tellings in them).

In the light of the above, sustained stories emerge as being at odds with the story norms of the context at hand. In fact, they differ substantially from the most common narratives in the data, which I call *ongoing narratives* to emphasize their dynamic properties as unfinished, still in the making stories. The main characteristics of ongoing narratives are as follows: a) the events they report have some kind of immediacy, i.e. they are very recent past or near future events, or are still unfolding as the story line is being constructed; b) they establish and refer to links between the participants' previous and future interactions (mostly FtF but also online).

Ongoing story-lines present the following distinct types:

a) **"Stories to be told"**: These are initiated and bid for on email, but their actual telling is deferred for an offline interaction (see example 4 above). In this way, they present inter-textuality, more precisely, inter-mediality between on- and off-line interactions:

(6)   > Pos ise?

Megalh istoria afth pou elpizo na soup o apo koda otan me to kalo vrethoume. Mou leipoun akoma kapoia chapters allvste, kalo einai na xv kati peran tou Prologikou shmeivmatos.

' > How are you?

Long story that, which I am hoping to tell you face-to-face when we hopefully meet up. In any case, there are still some missing chapters, it would be good if I had something other than the Prologue.'

(34 year-old female to 40 year-old female).

In the example above, the telling of the story, as well as being explicitly constructed as narrativization-in-process, is deferred to a temporally non-specified future face-to-face interaction. In most cases, however, the stories' to be told anchoring in offline interactions becomes specific, as can be seen below, where the telling of the story is deferred till later that day:

(7)   Date: Wed, 27 Sep 2000 16:15:55 +0100 (BST)

From: Jannis

To: Klio

Subject: Re: Evrisa ton Charlie (kai th gynaika tou)!!

> Tha sou pv to vrady, megalh plaka.

nai eh? tha erthei katholoy - or is he history?

Jannis

ps thlepathiko: vrizoyme thn idia wra.

Date: Wed, 27 Sep 2000 16:15:55 ＋0100 (BST)

From: Jannis

To: Klio

Subject: Re: I gave Charlie (and his wife!) an earful!!

＞I'll tell you tonight, great fun.

Oh really? Will he come back at all – or is he history?

Jannis

ps. telepathic: we give people an earful at the same time.

As can be seen in example 6 above, an evaluative statement of some sort (e.g. *long story*) serves to justify the deferral of the story's telling, while at the same time orienting to local norms of tellability in the specific environment. In cases when the full telling of the story is deferred for the near future (example 7 above), the initiation of stories to be told is normally done with a summarizing statement of the story's main event(s) (*I gave Charlie (and his wife) an earful!!*), and/or its point (*great fun*), reminiscent of Labov's (1972) abstract. This commonly appears in the message's subject heading. As can be seen below, part of the story's abstract is in the message's subject, building a suspense element, and the rest in the main body.

(8)   Date: Thu, 29 Mar 2001 18:19:08 ＋0100 (BST)

From:

To:

Subject: Guess who sent me an email

apo to surrey vs lecturer of Social Psychology: o Kostas Efthimiou. More apo

koda ..

'Date: Thu, 29 Mar 2001 18:19:08 ＋0100 (BST)

From:

To:

Subject: Guess who sent me an email

From surrey as lecturer of Social Psychology: Kostas Efthimiou. More close up …'

b) **"Breaking news":** In these cases, senders seem to wish to share the reported events straight away, almost as they are still unfolding. As in examples 7 and 8 above, some of the stories to be told are also based on the reporting of breaking news. What is provided is the abstract (commonly to be found in the message's subject), an elliptical skeleton of the main events (the gist) and their evaluation:

(9)   Subject: feedback from our German agent (fwd)

me phran apo th germania shmera legontas theloyme ena akrivws opws h spl gia 20-30 xiliades.

it's been a good day☺

'Subject: feedback from our German agent (fwd)

they called me from Germany today saying we want the same thing as X for 20-30k

it's been a good day☺'

(10)   From: Nick

To: Kostas

Subject: Me pire o Thanasis tilefono

ke ti mou lei? Padrevondai me tin Eleni to Martio! Tis ekane lei protasi proxthes over dinner, meta pirane tous dikous tis, kata to ethimotipikon, ke tora to lene se filus.

Kala nea, e? To mono pu me fovizi ine min arxisun ki ales ke theloune tetoia …

'From: Nick

To: Kostas

Subject: Thanasis rang me

and what did he say? Eleni and he are getting married in March! He said he proposed two days ago over dinner, then they rang her folks, as is customary, and now they are telling friends.

Good news, eh? The only thing that worries me is if others [in the original the inflection is feminine, i.e. other women] start wanting similar things …'

c) **References**: These stories normally "re-open" communication by looking back and alluding to co-experienced (between teller and addressee) events from their last interaction as well as by providing an evaluation of them (e.g. *I am very flattered!!!!!, Bless you … mention!* in example 11 below); in some cases, a coda is also added which closes the gap between the here-and-now of the email message and the there-and-then of the participants' previous referred to interaction, by providing some kind of a follow-up to it (e.g. see *This morning I followed your advice …* in example 12 below):

(11) Subject: Re: last night

Kale me ehoun pei polla pragmata alla tourta genethlion proti fora! Les tora

na paroun ta myala mou aera? I am very flattered!!!!!

Na 'sai kala - you have always been good for my morale (unlike some others I

will not deign to mention)!

Polla filia

H tourta!!!

'Subject: Re: last night

Well I have been told many things but birthday cake never before! Do you think that

I will now get too big for my boots? I am very flattered!!!

Bless you - you have always been good for my morale (unlike some others I

will not deign to mention)!

Many kisses

The cake!!!'

(12)   Subject: Re: geia sou

Geia sou Xara,

Ki emeis perasame para polu wraia ki elpizoume na sas ksanadoume suntoma.

Egw symera akolouthisa ti soumvouli sou kai ksanaenoxlisa ti midwife, i opoia de me

egrapse, antithetws mou eipe oti tha mou kanei referral gia physiotherapy pou mporei

na voithisei tous muikous ponous. Kai katopin toutou aithanomai kalutera.

[…]

Xara P. wrote:

> Poly xarhkame pou sas eidame proxthes, estv kai gia ligo. Kataplhktikh h

> koilitsa sou, opvs eipe ki o Givrgos, h Evi einai hdh yperhfanh mama"!

[…]

'Subject: Re: hi

Hi Chara,

We too had a great time and hope we can see you again soon.

This morning I followed your advice and went back to the midwife, who did not

ignore me, on the contrary, she said to me that she would write a referral for me to have physiotherapy which may help with the muscular pain. And after that I am feeling better.

[…]

Chara P. wrote:

> It was great seeing you the other day, even if for not long. Your ((little)) tummy was > wonderful, as George said afterwards, Evi is already a "proud mom"! […]'

References are based on and evoke shared understandings between addresser and addressee. The following example was explained to me at an interview with one of the participants-informants:

(13)   Subject: atakti Vassoula...

...se epairna piso alla eixa ton palio arithmo. Steile mou to neo kodiko (ksana!)...

'Subject: naughty Vassoula …

… I was calling you back but had the old number. Send me the new code (again!)

…'

The participants had been talking on the phone when the 2-year-old daughter of the participant-informant managed to cut them off: subsequently, the addresser of this message emailed to say that he could not have got through to her, as he was missing the new code of her phone number.

d) Updates: Such cases add events and evaluative comments to an already established (on- or off-line) story line. In this respect, they echo the "updates" (i.e. retellings) of soap opera episodes in Baym's study of the Usenet newsgroup rec.arts.tv.soaps (1995). In Baym's data, the insertion of various evaluative comments was paramount for signaling the teller's involvement in the narrated events.

(14a)   Subject: Syzhthsh me thn Emma

nomizv oti to xeiristhka kala, an kai den mou edvse vra synadhshs: arxise na mou

klaigetai, na mou leei oti to eixame symfvnhsei, klp klp, ki egv ths eipa oti let's not

dwell on who said what when, let's move forward, see if we can resolve this, klp.

Idvmen: nomizv oti th fovizei ligaki kazi to endexomeno oti borei na parv drstikh

apofash, kai katalava oti prepei na xrhsimopohsv afth thn efkairia esti vste na kanv

kapies nees symfvnies apo Septemvrio, ki an thelei kalvs, an oxi tha prepei

ksekathara na ths eipvthei oti tha kanv alla arrangments.

afta ....

'Subject: Discussion with Emma

I think I handled it well, although she didn't give me a time for us to meet up: she

started whinging, saying we had agreed on it, etc. etc., and I told her let's not dwell

on who said what when, let's move forward, see if we can resolve this, etc. We shall

see: I think that she is rather worried about the possibility that I may have to make a

drastic decision, and I have realized that I should take this opportunity to make a

new agreement as of September, and if she wants that fine, if not she has to be told

that I will make other arrangements.

that's all ...'

Here is the response to the above message:

(14b)   nai mwre – pistevw oti tha ta vrite otan milisete. De nomizo oti theli na figi - she

was just a little misguided in her gastarbeiten mentality to maximise her income.

'yeah – I think you will patch things up when you talk. I don't think that she wants to

leave - she was just a little misguided in her gastarbeiten mentality to maximise her

income.'

This story line, involving a professional conflict between the addresser and one of her

employees, is regularly updated on email in the course of two weeks. The following

example also comes from a conflict between (this time) a male employer and a male employee. Regular updates on the story line are to be found in his communication with his best friends over a period of six months!

(15) Subject: htan exallos o robin shmera

(to be expected) kai einai olo foveres (oti psaxnei gia doyleia kai eimaste fucked xwris ayton) - but i made him do what i wanted him to do - maybe a pyrrhic victory - we shall see.

'Subject: robin was furious today

(to be expected) and he is threatening us (that he is looking for a job and we are fucked without him) – but i made him do what i wanted him to do – maybe a pyrrhic victory – we shall see.'

e) Projections: All the above types involve the telling of very recent past events. Stories of (near) future events are also common in the data, particularly in messages by means of which the participants make social arrangements (e.g. for outings). Such stories thus involve making plans with the addressee or talking about one's planned activities:

(16) > Subject: Re: Tonite

Pvs sou fainetai to parakatv as a plan?

Synadiomaste ekso ap to Notting Hill Coronet stis 7. Paizei tainia me p. gelio stis 8.40 me R. de Niro (Meet the parents, o,ti prepei gia goneis korhs…), pairnoume ta eisithria kai tsibame kati/pinoume ena poto kapou ekei koda metaksy 7 & 8.40.

Ti les?

' > Subject: Re: Tonite

How about the following as a plan?

We meet outside Notting Hill Coronet at 7 o'clock. V. funny movie showing at 8.40 with R. de Niro (Meet the parents, just the ticket for parents of a daughter…), we buy

the tickets and grab sth to eat/have a drink locally between 7 & 8.40.

What do you say?'

(17) […] Anipomono na pao Ellada gia diakopes, proti fora nomizo niotho toso entoni tin

epithimia figis pros tin patrida...Tha fygo mallon gia 1+ mina, Ioulio-Aygousto.

Tha pao na tin peso kato apo kamia elia sto ktima mou na akouo ta poulia kai as

erthoun oi Aggloi na me vroune!

Mexri tote vevaia provlepetai piksimo, 3 taksidia (varsovia, porto, vienni), 2 journal

papers, ena EPSRC proposal, marking 250 exam papers, mastores kai building klp

klp.

'I am looking forward to going to Greece on holidays, first time I think that I feel the

need to go back home so much. I will go for 1+ month, July-August.

I will go and lie down under an olive tree in my farm so that I can hear the birds

singing and let the English come and find me!

Of course until then piles of work are in store, 3 trips (warsaw, porto, vienna), 2

journal papers, one ESRC proposal, marking 250 exam papers, builders and building

etc. etc.'

4.2 Introducing a story

In his study of conversational stories, Sacks (1974) reported that the telling of stories is

commonly preceded by the teller's offer to tell a story (story preface) and the audience's

acceptance of it. At the same time, Greek (and other cases of conversational) storytelling

routinely dispense with any kind of such initial framing. Introducing a story in the data at

hand departs significantly from both observations above: a) stories are explicitly oriented to

and metapragmatically framed; b) stories can be bid for, but their telling is frequently

deferred to another offline interaction. The former can be aligned more with practices that

emanate from stories in letters than in FtF. However, the second finding cannot be easily

connected with any of the two contexts. Instead, it seems to be intimately linked with the exigencies of this kind of communication, namely asynchronicity on one hand and interactivity (as shaped by the speed in reply) on the other. Asynchronicity rules out on the spot acceptance of a story's preface by the audience but interactivity ensures a quick reply. The frequent separation between bidding for a story and the actual telling may be one way of orienting to this and providing the addressee with the opportunity to accept the offer.

At the same time, the introduction of stories in this context is also bound up with appropriacy and tellability norms. As already argued, certain stories are saved for FtF interactions: there is certainly a strong association between long stories and FtF interactions. In addition, local norms seem to be such that bids for stories to be told off-line are invariably accepted. In the few cases where the teller is invited to tell the story, what follows as a response is still not a full telling, but a preview or the gist of the story that provides the addressee with a clearer indication of what the story is about:

(18)   Date: Thu, 29 Mar 2001 18:19:08 +0100 (BST)

        From:

        To:

        Subject: Re: Guess who sent me an email

        lefta apo tous kalous goneis mou! The deposit for my flat is sorted!

        On Thu, 29 Mar 2001, Maria K. wrote:

        > Ti, paidi mou, mh me kratas se agvnia!

        hmmm - exw kapoia alla KALA nea btw

        panos

        > apo to surrey vs lecturer of Social Psychology: o Kostas Efthimiou. More apo

        > koda ..

'Date: Thu, 29 Mar 2001 18:19:08 +0100 (BST)

From: Panos

To: Maria

Subject: Re: Guess who sent me an email

money from my good parents! The deposit for my flat is sorted!

On Thu, 29 Mar 2001, Maria K. wrote:

> What man, don't keep me in suspense!

hmmm – I have some other GOOD news btw

panos

> from surrey as lecturer of Social Psychology: Kostas Efthimiou. More close

> up …'

In the above communication (from which example 8 was extracted), Maria's initial bid (*Guess who sent me an email*) for a story to be told is (tacitly) accepted by Panos (*hmmm*) and followed up by his own bid (*I have some other GOOD news btw*). This bid is framed in newsworthiness terms and Maria invites him to tell more (*what man, don't keep me in suspense*). Interestingly, a full telling is not provided: just the abstract (*Money from my good parents!*) and an evaluation (*The deposit for my flat is sorted!*).

In conversational contexts, stories can also be elicited of the teller, i.e. offered as responses to prompts. In this context, the questions that are normally interpreted as a cue for storytelling are: *Pos ise?* (How are you?, see example 6), *Ti nea?* (What news?). Finally, as I have already suggested, a notable feature in the introduction of stories in the data refers to their explicit framing: a passage to a story is explicitly signaled and oriented to.[9] Metapragmatic markers are used in all cases in which a story line is embedded in a message

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[9] This does not, however, seem to apply in cases in which stories follow one another. There, the first story is introduced explicitly and the others tend to follow (with paragraph breaks between them) in a listing fashion.

and does not open it; in two thirds of such cases there is also a paragraph change (see examples 12, 17). Below is a list of markers most commonly used (also see example 3):

Kata ta alla, (Other than that,)

Lipon tora pou to thimithika, (So now that I have remembered it,)

Kai erxome tora se kati allo/newsworthy/alla nea: (And now I will come to something else/newsworthy/other news:)

Ena allo efxaristo: (Something else that is cheery:)

As we can see, metapragmatic markers are set off from the surrounding talk in that they are sentence-or paragraph-initial, and followed by some kind of punctuation, mostly '*,*' and '*:*' .

4.3 Telling

We have so far seen (e.g. 9, 10) how story line tellings are elliptical and fragmented: a skeleton of temporally ordered events is provided, sometimes in the form of listing, followed by a (however minimal) evaluation of these events. Various devices accompany and contribute to this elliptical and telegraphic style of telling: e.g. numbering the events, the use of numbers (example 17), the use of "…" (examples 8, 10, 14, 17) , "and so on" (examples 14, 17), deletion of articles and/or prepositions (example 17), and shortening of words (example 15). In addition to suiting the requirement for brevity, these devices are reminiscent of Tannen's (1989) involvement strategies which aim at engaging the audience in the discourse through participation in its sense-making, through filling in the gaps. (Ellipsis was included in Tannen's list of such strategies).

A closely related strategy, frequently an integral part of elliptical tellings in the data, is that of supplementing and substantiating tellings with supporting material, such as forwarded messages by other people. These either provide the background to a story or further substantiate the evaluation of the story in question. In this case too, the teller seems

to be producing minimum output and the addressees are called upon to fill in the gaps. A detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this study, but it is notable that example 15 forms part of a story line that was frequently supplemented by such material.

5 Evaluation

Even if the stories are elliptically told, what is invariably included (and at times even dwelled on) is the point or evaluation of their events. As we have noted, external evaluation is optional in conversational storytelling and rare in Greek stories. From this point of view, the explicit phrasing of evaluation in story lines on email is an interesting departure. What it normally includes is:

a) a global assessment of the significance of the events (example 7, *great fun*; example 9, *it's been a good day*☺; example 10, *good news, eh?*);

b) characterizations of the teller's (and characters') emotive responses and (re)actions to events (e.g. example 11, *I am very flattered!!!!!*; example 12*, and after that I am feeling better*; example 13, *naughty Vassoula*; example 14, *I think I handled it well … I think she is rather worried*).

In addition, it is notable that the participants mainly mobilize resources of linguistic difference (i.e. code-switching from Greek to English) to signal evaluation of the events, e.g.:

example 9, *it's been a good day*☺;

example 11, *I am very flattered!!!! … You have always been so good for my morale (unlike some others I will not deign to mention)*

example 15, *but i made him do what I wanted him to do – maybe a pyrrhic victory – we shall see*

example 18, *The deposit for my flat is sorted!*

The roles of code-switching for highlighting certain parts of a discourse and/or signaling interpersonal relationships between addresser and addressee are well-documented (e.g. Auer 1998). In this case, code-switches assign prominence to the stories' evaluative component, cueing it as noteworthy.[10] It is no accident that many of the evaluative statements in the data, whether code-switched or not, are accompanied by a proliferation of exclamation marks (e.g. examples 11, 12, 18) and emoticons (e.g. see smiley in example 9): these features of digital writing are arguably mobilized as further signposting devices that attract the addressee's attention to the highlighted part. This is in tune with what Kataoka's study (2003) of Japanese female adolescents' personal letters has reported: in his data, affect and involvement in the events narrated as well as the letters' readers were signaled by means of manipulations of the orthographic conventions and by pictorial signs (including smileys). Kataoka argues that in these cases the communicating of affect capitalizes on the mode-switching of the affective channel, i.e. from lexis to orthography and pictures (142-143). In this respect, it is a comparable phenomenon with that of code-switching.

Importantly, evaluation is the most interactionally drafted component of stories in the data: in response to a story, the addressees actively display an understanding of its point[11] by invariably elaborating on and contributing to the teller's evaluative comments (frequently with switches to English). For instance, the response that message 9 gets is as follows: *bravo! Eides pou sto lega! things are looking up!* (well done! Didn't I tell you! things are

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[10] From this point of view, it is the change of codes that is important rather than the direction of switch. A case in point involves one of the very few messages (7 in total) in the data written in English: the breaking news story line concerned a conflict between the teller and an English plumber which was presented as a case of racist behaviour on the part of the plumber towards the teller's Greek identity. The story line ended with the following evaluative switch to Greek: "Ade tora na pisis ellina oikodomo oti oi alvanoi den einai kleftes!" (Now, how can you convince a Greek builder that the Albanians are not thieves!). The use of Greek in this case added an interpretative layer of meaning by creating an analogy with another cultural world as to the one that the reported events belonged to.

[11] Responses to a story's evaluation frequently generate counter-responses from the teller. In this way, the participants jointly piece together a perspective on the reported events.

looking up!). Also, as seen, the response to message 14 adds (in Greek and with a switch to English) to the teller's overall assessment of the character talked about.

In the light of the above, evaluation in the data both exploits devices associated with signaling affect in the context of story-writing and presents an affinity with the participation roles that evaluation in Greek storytelling generates, namely a joint drafting between addresser and addressee of a story's point.

6 Stories and subjectivities

The vital role of storytelling in the construction of subjectivities in FtF interactions amongst intimates is well-documented. It has frequently been described as the *par excellence* experiential mode for developing and constructing a sense of self as well as for reconstructing social and cultural worlds (see Georgakopoulou & Goutsos 2000: 66-69). In the Greek context in particular, the salience and importance of conversational storytelling has deemed the society worthy of characterization as narrative oriented or biased (ibid.) In that sense, it is a treasure trove for an inquiry into the sorts of identities that tellers construct when sharing stories.

At the same time, establishing connections between any kind of discourse activity and identities has not proven a straightforward enterprise. Social sciences in general and socially oriented linguistic approaches (e.g. discourse analysis, sociolinguistics) have recently moved away from normative and simplistic explanations which attempt to form one-to-one and absolute correspondences between linguistic forms and identities. They have instead shifted towards dynamic conceptualizations of identities, according to which identities are neither fixed nor categorical properties that can be postulated a priori of specific instances of communication; instead, they emerge (i.e. come into being) in interactional sites (see papers in Antaki & Widdicombe 1998), i.e. in situ: as such, certain identity aspects may be made more salient or relevant than others at different points of an interaction; identities that are

brought along (e.g. gender, age, etc.) are not necessarily brought about, i.e. made to bear on and invoked in a specific interaction (e.g. Zimmerman 1998, Widdicombe 1998). Personal, social, and cultural identities can also be co-articulated, i.e. constructed simultaneously and in interaction with one another: for example, a language choice may signal a speaker's cultural identity at the same time as bringing to the fore the significance of their gender.

It is evident from the above that attention to details and choices of language is a prerequisite for any linguistically informed identity analysis. Following this widely held assumption, the close analysis of the stories' entry, tellings, and exit/follow-ups, suggested that there are three aspects of the stories that more or less explicitly cue (i.e. signal) certain identities as relevant for the participants' interactions:

6.1 The stories' topics, what they are about and what they base their newsworthiness on
Since Labov's study, evaluation and tellability have been seen as revealing of cultural norms of what counts as important to tell and as newsworthy. As Polanyi aptly argued, "what stories can be about is to a very significant extent culturally constrained: stories […] can have as their point culturally salient material generally agreed upon by members of the producer's culture to be self-evidently important and true" (1979: 207). From this point of view, it is not accidental that half of the stories identified in the data base their point on some aspect of life "here" (England) which is more or less explicitly set in contrast to or compared with life "there" (i.e. in Greece): professional conflicts presented as the outcome of cultural mis-understandings,[12] unpleasant dealings with institutions (e.g. the British National Health System), news from "home", planned or near past holidays at home (see example 17), all these are common story themes.

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[12] This for instance applies to the story lines from which examples 14 and 15 have been extracted. Tellingly, Maria ends one of her updates regarding her conflict with Emma with the evaluative coda: Aggloi, re pousti, aggloi! Ti perimeneis! (English people, man, English people! What to expect!).

Through narrativizing such themes, the tellers call upon and situate their tellings in their place: events take on meanings and evaluation on the basis of where they happen. Their contextualization is also based on a shared sense between teller and addressees of what is at stake. What the participants bring about in terms of their sense of self is contact identities (Greek/English), in fact shared contact identities. As already suggested, this contact on numerous occasions entails and is seen as clash and conflict. In these cases, an assumed contrast between "us" (Greeks) and "them" (English) is the basis to which stories owe their tellability. As Gumperz showed (1982), it is primarily in the "inter-cultural encounters" that involve conflictual situations and moments that cultural perceptions, meanings, and differences can be traced in and articulated.

6.2 The stories' language choices

Discourse research on identities stresses that details of language can cue (i.e. index) and provide a platform for larger social identities (Zimmerman 1998). The participants' contact identities are also cued at the level of language choice, specifically in the ways in which resources are drawn from Greek and English. The participants' communication with relatives in Greece is monolingual. However, as shown, switches to English in their story lines with friends based in England are a vital device for signaling the stories' point: they add resources, layers of meaning, and interpretative spins. Within this framework of bilingual choices, contact identities are not only called upon, but they also provide the context in which the activities underway can make sense.

6.3 Local norms of storytelling appropriacy

In the data, there is a clear orientation to norms that dictate which stories are tellable and hearable in the "here" and "now" of their communication. Some of those norms attend to aspects of the mediated context at hand: there is certainly a requirement for saving long stories for FtF environments. This naturally interacts with the participants' close proximity

that allows for frequent offline interactions. Even so, a tension seems to emerge between this context-adaptability and what can be called a "storytelling imperative" which the participants also operate with. Sharing stories is undoubtedly an important part of what messages are about. Keeping in touch, in particular, as the corpus of the messages from Greek relatives and the catching up messages suggest, is integrally bound up with telling stories. Stories may be framed in justification terms in the email environment but there is still a need to share them, at the very least initiate them. Generally, stories are instrumental in the data for re-opening (and leaving open) a line of communication thus mediating past and future interactions.

It is telling that bidding for stories is as a rule absent from the English messages, as opposed to the Greek messages of the data-set. Similarly, tellings of stories are equally elliptical, but they do not generate any meta-discursive comments: their style is neither commented on nor addressed. Silverstein and Urban (1996: 4) suggest that when discourses are taken away from their original context and carried over to a new context, in their terms, *entextualized*, metadiscursive (cf. metapragmatic) references (i.e. talk about and comments on the activity under way) form a key part of this process. It is clear in the Greek data at hand that storytelling on email is seen as a relocated activity that has therefore got to be entextualized in this new context: the way this is done is both by metadiscursively referring to the activity under way and by linking it with FtF contexts (e.g. as in the case of stories to be told, references, and updates). This metadiscursive activity suggests that the main context from which stories are seen as being dislocated from is that of FtF. By extension, even if not singularly attributable to them, this strong association of storytelling with FtF encounters in the data is revealing of cultural definitions of and expectations about storytelling activities; it also resonates with the established significance of storytelling in Greek conversations.

7 Conclusions

Based on a corpus of private email messages in Greek, this study set out to explore the rather neglected activity – within research on CMC – of narratives. This inquiry was felt to be worth undertaking, as the data clearly suggested that there were shared norms in place that the participants invoked with regard to what stories are tellable in the environment in question. At the same time, although non-literary stories in written contexts (e.g. letter-writing) are relatively uncharted too, there is a volume of research on FtF storytelling, including Greek. This background research allowed this study to address the question of what was different or specific about stories in the context of email and the extent to which those differences or specificities were shaped by or revealing of the participants' cultural identities.

The analysis of the data suggested that the stories' main feature was their embeddedness and anchoring in previous and future interactions, both online and offline. In this respect, the stories presented a highly allusive and intertextual (i.e. inter-medial) nature, which was captured by their characterization as story lines.

It was shown that the kinds of stories that are initiated or told in the data at hand can be collectively labeled as ongoing narratives. Five distinct types were identified: (bids for) stories to be told, breaking news, references, updates, and projections. Their common denominator was that they were presented as part of a trajectory of interactions rather than as a free-standing, finished and self-contained unit.

It was also demonstrated that the telling of such story lines was largely elliptical and fragmented, but emphasis was placed on the evaluation of the events reported. This was not only interactionally drafted but also highlighted with the use of various means, particularly switches to English. Finally, it was argued that the stories' point (both as newsworthiness of reported events and as norms of what is tellable) and the use of the two languages (Greek-

English) for their evaluation made the participants' contact identities and shared cultural understandings operative and relevant.

In terms of why stories are told the way they are, on a first reading, these findings reaffirm the conclusion that generic norms on CMC routinely draw on (and recast) a range of both spoken and written genres (see papers in Herring 1997). There were certainly aspects of the stories that echoed letter-writing practices on one hand (e.g. explicit framing, role of stories in catching up messages) and Greek FtF narrative norms on the other hand (e.g. interactional drafting of evaluation). A fuller account of them though hinges on their intersection between attending to aspects of the mediated context at hand (in this case having mostly to do with asynchronicity but also a requirement for brevity) and (re)affirming intimate participant relationships and roles, including their shared cultural identities. To begin with, the metapragmatic references to the activity under way responded to the asynchronicity of the communication by safeguarding that the activities were properly taken up; at the same time, they were attuned to the participants' intimate relationships and proximity by creating a frame for their contextualization. Second, establishing links between current tellings and previous and future interactions attended to email being an integral part of a history of interactions and, in view of the speed of responses that it affords, allowing for a dynamic (literally on-line) shaping and reshaping of events. Such links though also reaffirmed and created new shared understandings and intimacy for the participants. In fact, the "on the spot" narrativization of events that have just unfolded is intimately linked with the immediate access to interaction with friends from within the spatiotemporal confines of a professional environment that email uniquely allows for. Similarly, to juggle the competing requirements for brevity and tellability in their accounts, the tellers frequently mobilized the technique of whetting the audience's appetite for full tellings by just bidding for stories.

The above adaptive ways of telling in the context at hand can be seen both as a means of getting round constraints and as creative strategies for exploiting the opportunities afforded

by this environment. They thus provide evidence for the idea that instances of CMC are doubly-enhanced as well as being doubly-attenuated, to echo Danet (2001a: 12ff). They come with constraints but also with liberating potential for new modes of interaction.

However, as I have noted, the interpretation of the findings cannot solely reside in how participants respond to the mediated context at hand. The choices of how to share a story in this environment also brings to the fore both shared cultural understandings of the activity underway and shared cultural identities that can be signaled through the activity. As we saw, three aspects of the stories cued that sharedness: what the stories were about and what they based their newsworthiness on, their code-switches from Greek to English, and the norms of what was tellable, hearable and appropriate in this context that the participants oriented to. Further research on all three aspects can shed more light on how they interact with different participant profiles (e.g. Greeks who are not in contact situations, who are not in close proximity) in other CMC contexts.

This can be part of the pressing agenda within CMC research of the teasing out of what is local or global, particularly with respect to primary modes of communication, such as that of narrative. As this study has hoped to show, to take steps in that direction, CMC instances should not only be seen as mediated and context-shaped and -shaping activities but also as temporalized and relational practices, interrelated with the participants' trajectory of different types of, past and future, mediated and non-mediated, interactions.

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