'I'M SORRY, I'VE NO DOUBT THAT I'VE OFFENDED SOMEONE HERE' INTERACTIONAL REPAIR IN A PUBLIC MESSAGE BOARD DISCUSSION THREAD

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This study analyzes a complete discussion thread of a Public Internet Message Board with regards to the use of interactional repair strategies. It considers micro- as well as macro-level strategies and compares these to findings in natural interaction. This study shows that different micro and macro strategies are implemented in different stages of the discussion. Participants use the special framing conditions of public Internet Message Boards to carefully renegotiate their interpersonal relationships after conflictive passages on a one-to-one basis: this cannot be accomplished in the same way in natural poly- or multilogues.

KEYWORDS: Computer-Mediated Communication, Public Message Boards, Interactional Repair

1   INTRODUCTION

For more and more people, computer-mediated communication is becoming an interactional practice. Participants use Public Message Boards on the Internet (PIMBs) in order to exchange views and profile their own stance on issues, which are often highly sensitive. Public Internet Message or Discussion Boards (often also referred to as 'forums') are run by different providers on the Internet and they allow participants to enter into multi- or polylogal discussions. Unlike face-to-face interaction, this 'many-to-many' discussion format enables them to present their own views to many people simultaneously and in return to receive responses from multiple other participants.

Stegbauer (2000:32) characterizes internet discussion groups as "(virtual) social spaces" ('Sozialräume') which not only produce social inequalities but in which these social inequalities prove indispensible in the long run. As many researchers have observed in the past, this may lead to highly confrontational discourse practices (Baron 1984, Hiltz et al. 1986, Adrianson et al. 1991, Dibbel 1993, Herring 1995, Kramarae 1997, Kayany 1998, Kolko et al. 1998, Herring 2003, Avgerinakon 2003, Zhou 2004, Kleinke 2007, Kleinke 2008b). Thus far studies of such confrontational practices have mainly focussed on describing the verbal techniques of offence and have discussed them with reference to the specific framing conditions of message-board discussions

(relating them to the more general features of computer-mediated communication and to the 'discussion frame').

Participants in PIMBs do, however, develop special verbal (and non-verbal) techniques in order to cope with the lack of contextual information, and this also presents a potential risk for miscommunication and conflict talk. Researchers are only beginning to study more thoroughly the verbal interactive practices which help participants to overcome some of the shortcomings of the medium, as used in a potentially confrontational communicative frame such as 'discussions'. Tidwell et al. (2002) and Walther (2007), for instance, focus on systematic personal disclosure in message board communication as a strategy to compensate for extended greeting rituals in face-to-face communication. Danet (2001:18, 62 and 224) and Thaler (for asynchronous chat-communication, 2003:88f.) mention the use of emoticons in order to compensate for the lack of non-verbal clues and non-genuine speaker meanings such as irony and sarcasm. Harrison (2000) describes several politeness strategies used in the mitigation of potentially face-threatening acts. Tanskanen (2007:87f.) and Hancock et al. (2001) focus on meta-pragmatic acts used to "help avoid breakdown in communication". Korenman et al. (1996) report on meta-communication and oral discourse practices used to create a sense of community. Tanskanen et al. (2008:1588) analyse and describe the more subtle techniques of concessive repair in news-group discussions, in which speakers anticipate potential problems, "take the perspective of their fellow participants and construct their messages in a manner which contributes to a successful communicative exchange".

This study investigates how participants in one discussion thread ('Inkstampers on the back of the hand?', consisting of 130 posts to the Online Forum of BBC-Talk) use a broader range of interactional repair strategies in order to negotiate 'social equilibrium' in their ongoing interaction. More specifically, it addresses four questions:

1. What linguistic techniques of INTERACTIONAL REPAIR do participants in this discussion use in order to negotiate potentially conflictive passages in the discussion?
2. Are these techniques basically the same as the ones described in natural face-to-face interaction, e.g. Cheepen (1988) or Aijmer (1996), and the ones Meier (1996) found in her experimentally elicited responses, or do the participants of this discussion thread apply different or modified strategies?
3. How are strategies used throughout the macro structure of the discussion thread from a sequential point of view? Are there any clusters in certain sequences of the interaction?
4. Does the POLYLOGAL[1] character of the discussion board have an influence on how repair work contributes to the negotiation of equilibrium on the macro level of the entire discussion thread as compared to polylogues in natural face-to-face interaction?

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[1] The terms polylogal and MULTILOGAL are used throughout this paper in the same way as Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2003) and others use it for natural conversation.

The present study does not claim to present statistically relevant results. Instead it focuses on the qualitative analysis of interactional practices in one online discussion of one online-discussion board in order to demonstrate how the use of a variety of repair strategies may foster the construction of 'social equilibrium' in a virtual speech community. Although this study uses qualitative rather than quantitative analysis and no frequency counts have been made, some observations on the tendencies of use are included where relevant.

Section 2 of this paper first considers the specific framing conditions of public message board discussions as a specific form of poly-/multilogue and briefly characterises the data base chosen for this study. Section 3 deals with the notions of 'conflict (talk)' and 'repair', and outlines the analytical framework of this study. Section 4 presents and discusses the different repair strategies used by the participants in this discussion thread and focuses on their visible interactional effects. Finally, section 5 briefly summarises these findings and poses additional research questions arising from them.

2   PUBLIC INTERNET DISCUSSION BOARDS AND THE DATA

2.1   COMMUNICATING IN PUBLIC INTERNET MESSAGE BOARDS – THE FRAMING CONDITIONS

Public Internet Message Boards (PIMBs) have become increasingly popular as more people use the Internet in their private spheres as well as work spheres. In September 2007, the British Internet Forum BBC-TALK maintained more than 40 topically different message boards[2], each dealing with more than 300 different macro topics. A total of 825 unique discussion threads with participation numbers ranging up to 385 active participants were run on BBC-Talk between the end of May 2007 and September 2007. Richardson (2001:51) observes that people are becoming increasingly interested in "more interactive explorations" of "salient political issues". Claridge (2007) and Schlobinski (2006) see PIMBs as an established form of collective communication. Their specific framing conditions foster this development. They offer ideal conditions for exploring personally salient and highly complex sensitive issues, with a much lower risk of severe face loss than in direct face-to-face communication. This can obviously contribute to 'a harsh atmosphere' and occasionally seems to induce participants to be less sensitive towards the face wants of their addressees and possible lurkers[3] (Kleinke 2008b). As a result, interactionally smooth communication is in danger and it depends on the participants' intentions and skills to reestablish a social equilibrium in the virtual group through the use of different linguistic strategies.

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[2] BBC-Talk, retrieved September 08, 2007, from http://www.bbc.co.uk/messageboards/newguide/messageboards_a-z.shtml

[3] 'Lurkers' are people who only read messages in a discussion thread, without posting any contributions themselves.

Among the framing conditions of PIMBs, the following seem to be particularly relevant for the implementation of interactional repair: Participants contribute to the discussion as 'virtual identities', often anonymously, thus maximally protecting their face as 'real-life' persons. Users can enter and leave a discussion at any point as is convenient and desirable to them. There is no defined number of participants (Marcoccia 2004:117) which are, in fact, virtually unlimited. PIMBs offer a broader audience than do most other forms of real-life communication. Messages can be read by all discussion participants and also by possible lurkers. Based on Baym (1998), Marcoccia (2004:118) describes message-board communication as hybrids of interpersonal and mass communication. Their public nature and the chance of many virtual 'bystanders' eavesdropping on the verbal interaction and acting as a 'third party' adds a new dimension to the vulnerability of face wants of both sender(s) and addressee(s).

The impact of a third party for the conversational behaviour of people interacting in a communication is often stressed. Brown and Levinson commented on an increase of the seriousness of a Face Threatening Act in the presence of third parties (1987:12). Austin (1987:20) related the vulnerability of an individual's face proportional to the number of people someone's face is presented to in an interaction (see also Luginbühl (1999) for TV-discussions, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2003:7) for trilogal communication, and Kleinke (2007) for PIMBs.) Although in PIMBs people do not interact as fully-fledged real identities, the presence of a large audience, typical for public message board discussions, increases the risk of severe face damage as virtual identities within the discussion group. This then often calls for interactional repair in order to prevent serious miscommunication.

In addition to the public character of the communication, some other aspects of the structural frame of message boards can be seen as potential threats to a smooth interactional atmosphere. Marcoccia (2004:118) characterizes PIMBs as ON-LINE POLYLOGUES ('a communicative situation which gathers together several participants'). Comparing PIMBs with other kinds of informal polylogues (Parker 1984:48), he observes that PIMBs generate fragmentation, the emergence of subgroups, interactional isolation, and divided attention and bifurcation, and he stresses that this special form of communication is characterized "like many other polylogues, by their lack of collective focusing and the existence of varied focuses" (Grosjean et al. 1998:55-56). This calls for two different types of repair activities. On the one hand, it makes it difficult for the participants to keep track of the conversational flow, which may result in TECHNICAL REPAIR (see section 3). On the other hand, it also opens up a multitude of potentially conflict-loaded single adjacency pairs, produced by different participants simultaneously, which calls for interactional repair.

Focusing on the technicalities of floor sharing for naturally (non-virtual) multi-participant conversations, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2003:5) observes that they are "both more conflictual (there are more opportunities for a struggle for the floor and for violations or failures in the functioning of the turn-system) and more open to mediation and conciliation than dialogues". The author links the potentially risky character of natural multi-participant interactions to the fact that this type of interaction places "fewer constraints on participants, since the obligation to cooperate – which is somewhat 'diluted' by the larger group – is not as strong for each individual speaker" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2003:5). The present study aims to show in section 4 that both

features, the more conflictual character and the greater potential to negotiate and reconcile conflict, also have an impact on the organization of interactional repair in PIMBs.

Another factor contributing to the potential of PIMBs to be interactionally risky enterprises is that they show a broad range of possible sender-addressee relations (Seidel et al. 2002, Kleinke 2003, Marcoccia 2004, Schütte 2004). Two of these are particularly relevant to the need for and occurrence of repair sequences: the TRIBUNE FORMAT and the AGORA FORMAT (Largier 2002:295). In the tribune format, a sender essentially addresses the entire group. Participants attach their posting not explicitly to another posting in the discussion, but rather to the subject of the discussion – sometimes stated in an initiating turn – or to an otherwise problematic issue from the discursive world outside the forum. In the agora format, postings refer directly to previous postings of other participants in the discussion and are respectively referred to later on by other participants, thus constructing true independent sub-threads within the macro thread of a discussion, cf. Figure 1 and Figure 2.

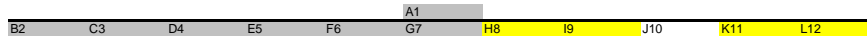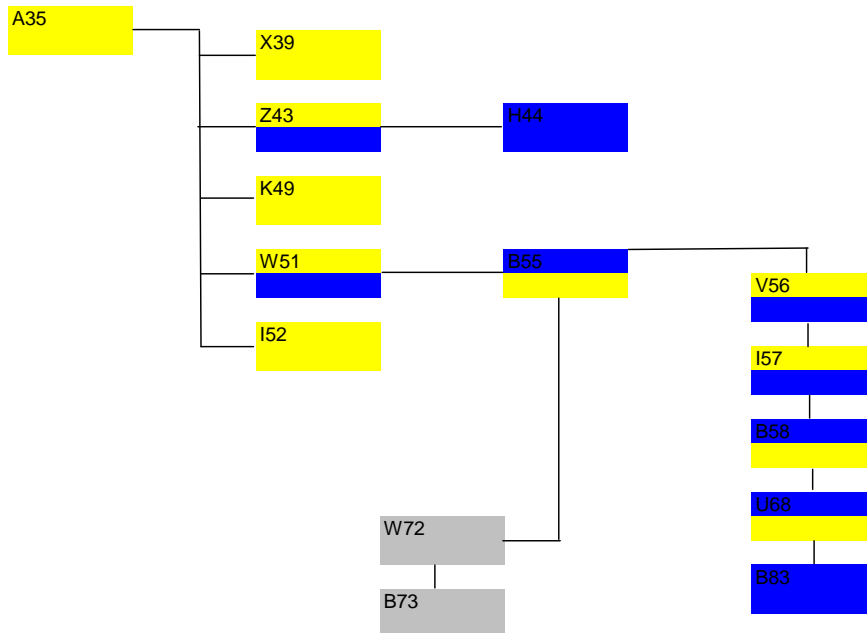Figure 1: A passage of 'Inkstampers …?' in tribune format

Figure 2: A passage of 'Inkstampers …?' in agora format

Most of the contributions to PIMBs tend to be produced in the tribune format (cf. Kleinke 2008b and Claridge (2007:93) on users sending one posting). This may make it more difficult for the participants in a discussion group to develop emerging networks and (re-)negotiate the social equilibrium when it has been distorted by one or more particularly confrontational postings. Truly emerging networks in the sense of (re-) negotiating power relations between single participants are often dependent on participation in the agora format, i.e. mutual and sometimes repeated interaction of the participants involved in a verbal conflict (Kleinke 2008b). This present study attempts to show that in the interactional practice of the discussion thread 'Inkstampers …?' both techniques of participation are in principle suitable for interactional repair work and that it remains a matter of the preferred interactional style of a discussion group as to whether participants actively strive for interactional harmony.

A further factor of consideration is linked to the discussion frame. The largely technically based general framing conditions typical of message board communication[4] merge with the specific framing conditions of discussions, such as controversial topics or preference for disagreement (Taboada 2004, Kleinke 2007, 2008). As will be shown in section 4, this may give rise to rather extensive sequences of confrontational contributions, which then, however, in the data studied here, are regularly followed by sequences in which participants collectively indulge in interactional repair work.

Another factor which may contribute to the participants' desire to re-establish the social equilibrium is the fact that the text produced by participants in a discussion group is relatively permanent. Users can indulge in multiple readings of single postings, making repeated contemplation of the issues dealt with possible. This not only allows an issue to be pursued for a longer period of time, but also for the construction of a collective view or evaluation of the potentially face threatening impact of a posting, which then may give rise to realignments and extensive interactional repair work in the group.

2.2   'INKSTAMPERS ON THE BACK OF THE HAND?' – THE DATA

The discussion thread studied here consists of 130 postings on the topic 'Inkstampers on the back of the hand?' (cf. Kleinke_InkStampers_Corpus), in which 36 users participate actively, contributing between 1 and 28 postings each. The discussion took place over a period of nine days between November 5 and November 13, 2006. The data were retrieved from the public Internet Discussion Board 'Forum' run by BBC-TALK in June 2007. The discussion thread is suitable for analysis because it is of medium size, with an average number of participants contributing average numbers of postings as compared to other threads of the same board. It had already been completed when the data were retrieved. In addition to the average length, number of participants and number of postings contributed by single participants, the factor of 'completion' is particularly relevant for this study. Only a complete thread allows full observation of different techniques of interactional repair over the stretch of a

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[4] For details, see Collot and Belmore (1996:14-15), Crystal (2001:129-130), and Claridge (2007).

complete discussion, including the actual outcome of attempts at repair at the end of the discussion.

The question debated by the participants had been posted in an initiating turn by participant A1, who invited others to contribute their views explicitly, and read as follows:

(1) *My son (4) came home (from the nursery class attached to school) with a stamp inked onto his hand 'as a reward', but when I mentioned this to my mother, she thought it was 'abuse' and that it was very bad, because of the chemicals, and what if he had been allergic (which I would have gone ballistic, I suppose, but never thought of it)*

What do you think? [A1][5]

For some of the participants this is a highly sensitive issue, since it is about personal preferences and responsibilities in child rearing. Others react to the topic with less sensitivity and more distance, thereby giving rise to a secondary topic of discussion, focusing on personal and collective responsibilities in bringing up children, cooperating with educational institutions and dealing with the people working there. During the discussion some participants obviously lose track of the original question posed by A1 and assume it is A1 rather than A1's mother who suggested that inkstamping in this context can be equated with child abuse.

The participation framework users choose is already indicative of the controversial nature of the discussion. As is to be seen in appendix 1, only 58 postings (less than half of the total amount of 130 postings) are in the tribune format. They either refer directly to the initiating posting by A1 or to certain aspects of the topic raised by A1. A total of 72 postings, the majority, refer directly to some other previous posting and thus contribute to the discussion in the agora format. This may be interpreted as indexical for the high degree of interactivity between the participants in this online polylogue, which opens up opportunities for conflictual strategies as well as their mediation and conciliation.

3   INTERACTIONAL CONFLICT AND INTERACTIONAL REPAIR

3.1   INTERACTIONAL CONFLICT AND CONFLICT-RAISING TYPES OF BEHAVIOUR

Participants in the Inkstampers-thread show different types of conflictive behaviour. In order to classify and capture them, this analysis draws on the analytical framework for natural non-virtual face-to-face interaction developed by Cheepen (1988) with slight

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[5] Examples from the discussions were anonymized, reduced to the chunk of text necessary for illustration, and were otherwise left unchanged as to spelling and grammar. The capital letter indicates the participant and the number following it is the sequential number of the turn in the discussion.

modifications. This discussion thread can be seen as "conversational encounters where interactional trouble may arise, and where, if this trouble does arise, repair is necessary" in Cheepen's sense (1988:87). Due to the special framing conditions of PIMB conversation outlined above, it actually partially and overlappingly fits into two of the author's categories of encounters which make repair necessary in case of interactional trouble: On the one hand, we are dealing with a prototypically informal interaction between equals – such as a 'chat between friends'; on the other hand, the chat is performed in public and thus partially resembles the format Cheepen describes for a TV chat Talk Show (see also Marcoccia 2004:118).

Based on Cheepen, conflictive behaviour is understood as interactional trouble in the wider sense,

> which arises in the RELATIONSHIP of the co-conversationalists; this kind of trouble always arises from some alteration in the current interactional balance of the encounter – it is a change in the status differential between the speakers, which, if prolongued, becomes problematic for them. (1988:86)

This understanding of interactional trouble is wider than the notion of CONFLICT TALK in interactional sociolinguistics and only partially overlaps with it. As is shown in section 2, the framing conditions of PIMBs in general, as well as the contribution format of the Inkstampers thread, may contribute to the conflictual nature of the discussion in various ways. This leads to a slightly modified understanding of the notion of conflict talk in the present analysis as compared to its generally accepted use in interactional sociolinguistics for non-virtual natural conversation. The use of the term conflict talk in this latter realm is usually restricted to highly standardized structural patterns of interaction, in which "participants contradict each other in three consecutive turns" (Norrick et al. 2008:1661). This canonical structure of conflict sequences can also be found in PIMBs and the Inkstampers thread, e.g. between Participant B and W as is illustrated in sequence W113 to B127 in Figure 3. However, in PIMBs in general, and also in the Inkstampers thread studied here, the sequencing of turns is often less straightforward. Participants frequently communicate in the tribune format, where two participants mutually contradicting each other is practically excluded. Instead, just as in non-virtual polylogues, more than one participant may actually contradict another one successively, thus collectively constructing a sequence of contradictory turns on the screen. This series of contradictory postings all refer to one single posting, but are not produced by two posters referring to each other respectively (compare for instance postings H8 to Q18 in appendix 1, in which yellow indicates the controversial and conflictive character of a posting, blue is used in order to signal the use of interactional repair strategies, and white marks more or less neutral contributions in this regard).

Despite the deviation from the standard structural pattern of interaction, participants seem to experience the relevant sequences as conflict-loaded. They make ample use of lexical markers signalling conflict such as *the thing is*, *the only thing*, and the hedge *I (don't) think,* which in this context may be interpreted as signalling potential conflict (Turnbull et al. 1997:169).

There are also clear signs that the status balance between the interactants seems to be disturbed and participants obviously feel the need to re-negotiate it. They implement strategies of interactional repair fairly regularly, after clusters of postings which are

exclusively confrontational (or at least contain conflictive material) have appeared on the screen. The Inkstampers thread studied here contains four such longer sequences of conflict bearing postings. In this case, a posting with no such controversial material is sent subsequently, in which the poster implements an explicit strategy of interactional repair (H20, B54, B66, $C_1$77, V97) – either immediately directed at a previous posting or at the group as a whole, as is shown in the meta-pragmatic comment in (2) and the joking remark in (3), both produced by the same participant. Sometimes repair occurs earlier, as is the case after postings R21-T23, W51-W53 and B60-B66. The sequential placement of conflictual and repair turns throughout the thread is given in Figure 3.

(2) 	*FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT!*
	Oh Fatty - you are a wind up merchant!!! [H44]

(3) 	*Having said that, if he takes after his Dad he should be OK as I cannot see him getting many gold stars!! [H20]*

Cheepen (1988:91ff.) distinguishes among three broader categories of interactional events which have a clear potential for causing interactional trouble[6]. They are all "connected with an imbalance in the established status pattern in the encounter" and can, again with slight modifications, be applied to the conflictual patterns found in this study as well. The category of trouble or conflict-promoting events that arises most often in the Inkstampers data is an EVALUATION CONFLICT. In Cheepen's study, in this category a Participant A chooses not to provide positive evaluations matching those provided by Participant B, but rather resorts to minimal responses instead. In my data, the canonical case of an evaluation conflict is a blatant disagreement, which may or may not be mitigated. Disagreement is to be understood in the widest sense (cf. also Kleinke 2007) and may be directed at a proposition or at an opinion (assumed to be) held by the entire group or a single participant in the discussion. It may also be directed towards a type of conduct or behaviour shown either by the entire group, a subgroup or just a single participant as illustrated in (4) and (5). Another type of evaluation conflict includes open personal offences, as illustrated in (6)

(4) 	*I thought those personal comments were appalling.* … *[D86];]; … Can't pps see that crucial difference? [B31]*

(5) 	*To my mind this is the 3rd time you have complained about the school. The 1st was over the time of a meeting or something similar and now about the book and ink stampers. My 1st feeling was that you had a complete over-reaction to something quite trival but having giving it more thought i wonder if it's something else.... [Z43].*

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[6] Cheepen also distinguishes between overtly and covertly acknowledged trouble, a distinction the present paper does not make. Both types of acknowledgement occur in the data. Further investigations must show if they can be linked systematically to different structural patterns on the macro level of the entire thread as Goffmann (1972) suggests for natural conversation.

(6) *<name> thanks very much for your comments, they have cheered me up as always! <u>Funny how those people who post with an opposing view to you are derided and those who vaguely agree are posted to with an abundance of winks and smileys!</u> I am merely posting my opinion, no one else has to agree with it. [B₁88]*

The second type of interactional events causing trouble is called DEPERSONIFICATION by Cheepen (1988:92ff.). It refers to incidents in the encounter, in which participants talk about another participant as if this participant were not 'present' in the interaction. In the special framing of PIMB communication, the presence of a participant has always to be assumed as the default option, since members of the thread are not able to see on their screens who is actually presently online, and who may be at least following the discussion without actively participating – cf. lurkers or RATIFIED BYSTANDERS in Marcoccia (2004:140). In the worst case, when several participants jointly construct this type of discursive activity, this may lead to the virtual mobbing of a participant (Kleinke 2007). No such extreme case occurred in the Inkstampers thread. Nevertheless, depersonification causes an interactional imbalance in that a participant becomes "an object to be discussed" rather than being treated like an equal participant in the discussion as Cheepen (1988:93) observes for her data and tellingly assumes to be frequent in parent-child interaction. An example of this type of trouble- or conflict-inducing interactional activity in Inkstampers is given in (7).

(7) *<u>It does seem strange the way so many posters rush to jump on any parent who seems oversensitive or overanxious (in THEIR opinion I hasten to add!).</u> I mean- there have even been a few cruel suggestions on here that the original poster may have mental health problems, such is her concern about her children etc.* 😎 *<u>That's just uncalled for and quite unjustified, isn't it?</u> [B85]*

The third category in Cheepen's work which also occurs in the Inkstampers-thread is ALIENATION BY IMPARATIVE. Here the conversational balance is disturbed in that a participant literally instructs another participant to take action in a certain way and thereby ostentatiously violates the principle of 'participants being equal in status', which is generally assumed for PIMBs. This type of conflict-raising behaviour is illustrated in (8). The initial hesitation marker *Um…* in this example additionally marks this sequence as a dispreferred second turn and potentially conflict-raising.

(8) *Um...perhaps you should take the time to read the previous posts properly before wading in with attacks of this kind?... [B75]*

3.2 INTERACTIONAL REPAIR

The analytical framework for the description of different repair strategies in this study is drawn from Cheepen (1988) and Meier (1996) and, like Cheepen, Meier and Tanskanen et al. (2008), it takes a wider view of repairs. According to Cheepen (1988:84) repair work in the broadest sense occurs on "occasions when for some reason, the flow is not so smooth and the course of the conversation is temporarily interrupted or even permanently diverted". She distinguishes two basic types of repair.

The first type is PRACTICAL REPAIR, in which the focus is on the speaker's ability to understand one another's utterances at the basic level of hearing correctly, and in which speakers ensure that verbal messages are sent which accord with their intentions and that they have correctly received the message from their co-conversationalist. This is the canonical type of repair often described in Conversational Analysis (cf. e.g. Schegloff et al. 1977 and Schegloff 2000).

Due to the framing conditions of PIMBs, practical repair is of minor importance for this study. The messages posted are stored for a long time in written format and re-reading them is possible at any time. In addition, the production process can involve several revisions and corrections of a message before it is posted and appears on the screen, so that participants can carefully check if it expresses their view as intended. The difficulties in the organization of coherent talk in PIMB communication as described by Grosjean et al. (1998:55-56) and Herring (1999) may occasionally result in technical repair, but there is only one such instance of a turn-allocation misunderstanding in the Inkstampers thread, which is easily solved by the participants.[7] Like Cheepen's work, the present study focuses on the second type of repair, which looks at "the role of repair in terms of the INTERACTION of the participants" (Cheepen 1988:86). According to Tanskanen et al. (2008:1588) this type of repair is a communication strategy which is not restricted to spoken communication, but plays a crucial role also in computer-mediated communication and has a

> significant role to play in the negotiation of affiliation in interaction: the use of repair shows how participants of online-discussions collaboratively take the perspective of their fellow participants.

Meier (1995:388) defines interactional repair as a strategy that remedies face damage incurred "to an actor's image upon the establishment of a responsibility link between an actor and behaviour which fell below the standard expected relative to a particular reference group". This responsibility link also "allows for cases in which the actor takes responsibility for another's action"[8]. Meier's description precisely captures the polylogal situation of PIMBs, in which a third party or third participant may take over the responsibility for 'repairing' a conflictive sequence in an interaction and conduct repair work on behalf of the participant who initiated or fostered the trouble (see for instance example (18) in section 4).

In Inkstampers, participants also conduct repair on behalf of another participant who instigated a potential conflict in a dialogical sequence in the agora format. Example (9) is a posting containing two repair tokens (smiling and laughing emoticons) which

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[7] The same tendency was observed in another study on a much larger data base, with a total of about 1,800 postings in Kleinke 2009. This confirms Beißwenger (2007:222f.), who observes that 'technical repair' cannot easily be observed in synchronous chat communication and can hardly be studied by the researcher without actually watching participants typing their messages on the computer board, since much of the technical repair concerning the production process obviously does not happen 'live' on the screen.

[8] Other than the definition given in Meier (1996), this one given here explicitly includes third party issues. It is hence more suitable for the polylogal situation of PIMB communication and is preferred here to the one given in Meier (1996:152).

participant B produces after participant U had explicitly acknowledged twice not to have read (yet) the posts of B, without making any attempt at self-repair.

(9) *Thanks for that <name>! Good to know you're so interested in my opinions....*
Perhaps you'd like my msn address so that we can communicate in even more depth? *[B54]*

Meier (1996:165) distinguishes 14 different strategies of interactional repair in her corpus of role play-elicited data from 100 Midwest American speakers of English and 100 Austrian native speakers of German, which are predominantly realized on the micro-level of a single turn. These strategies include EMOTIVES, ROUTINE FORMULAE, NEGATIVE FEELINGS, EXPLICIT ACCEPTANCE OF BLAME, EXCUSES, FORBEARANCE, EMPATHY WITH HEARER/VICTIM, HOPE FOR CONTINUATION OF STATUS QUO, EXPRESSION OF NO HARM DONE and JUSTIFICATION. Unfortunately, Meier does not give a clear definition of all of her strategies. Section 4 introduces each of these strategies which can be applied to the Inkstampers thread in detail. It discusses examples from this thread and shows how these strategies are used collectively in order to regain interactional equilibrium after conflictive sequences.

Interactional repair work is often closely linked to politeness and face work. Strategies from these three areas of conversational interaction may overlap. This is often the case when participants strive for a social equilibrium in emerging (and rather outside the frame of one single discussion thread, possibly also latent) networks. Repair work and politeness are, however, not identical. Repair work focuses more narrowly on the short term social goal of keeping the interaction going. In the data studies here it is mostly reactive (the prospectively used technique of concessive repair as described in Tanskanen et al. (2008) is not subject of this study).

Aijmer (1996:80ff.) provides an example for the overlap of repair, politeness and face work and shows how politeness and repair may be intertwined. In her study she focuses on apologies as one type of strategy that clearly serves the purpose described here as 'interactional repair'. Drawing on Goffmann (1976:68), she characterizes apologies as ritual work:

> … the ritual work of apologies allows the participants to go on their way, if not
> with satisfaction that matters are closed, then at least with the right to act as if
> they feel that ritual equilibrium has been restored.

Other than in Holmes (1990:159), who sees apologies basically as addressee-directed, this includes face saving acts directed at the instigator of the conflictive situation her- or himself. Aijmer's understanding of apology also captures the social function of apologies (Norrick 1978:280), in which speakers use an apology in order to show socially appropriate behaviour and thus also protect primarily their own face-wants, rather than those of a potential addressee - just as in (10). This strategy is used in Inkstampers many times, particularly when formulaic expressions serve as repair work strategies (for more details see section 4).

(10) Message 65 - posted by <name>, Nov 11, 2006
    Well I'm sorry, but I still can't see that it can be classed as disrespectful either!

    As I have previously stated , if a parent has an issue with something that is being done with their child, then they should speak to the school about it.
    …[I65]

This broader view of the social functions of apologies is extended in the present study to other types of repair strategies, since the data of the Inkstampers discussion thread show that participants do not always strive for the ultimate convergence of interests between addresser and addressed participant, but sometimes can also simply 'agree to disagree' and yet protect their owns face using repair work strategies.

Drawing on Cheepen (1988) this study also looks at repair techniques which are located on the macro-level of the entire thread. Cheepen describes SCAPEGOAT REPAIR and LOOPS, which are closely linked to topic shifts in her data and which occur also in the Inkstampers thread, however, again in a slightly modified fashion. Section 4 gives a detailed description of both strategies and explains how they are used in the data of this study.

4   STRATEGIES OF INTERACTIONAL REPAIR AND THE NEGOTIATION OF SOCIAL
     EQUILIBRIUM IN 'INKSTAMPERS ON THE BACK OF THE HAND?'

The categories outlined here draw mainly on Meier's (1996) inventory of micro-level structures and Cheepen's (1988) two macro-level structures. In addition, meta-pragmatic strategies, particularly the use of emoticons, and some more subtle techniques of apology given by Aijmer (1996) in her study of material from the London-Lund Corpus have been included.

At the outset it is necessary to state that the categories are adapted from studies on natural, non-virtual communication and may sometimes be used in a slightly modified fashion by the participants, as will be explained in each case. None of these strategies can be viewed as a 'watertight' category. They frequently overlap and more than one category may be used by one participant in one turn or posting. In addition, particularly Meier's (1996) categories are not clearly defined in her work so that it is not always clear if the cases to which I attribute these labels are actually the same ones Meier (1996) had in mind. However, they are used here because many of them succinctly label the types of conduct participants show in this board when they do interactional repair work.

Let us now turn to the micro-level structures. Not all strategies described in Meier's elicited data are used by the participants of the discussion thread studied here. Other than in Tanskanen et al. (2008) on concessive repair, the Inkstamper repair strategies are 'reactive', actually following a posting or passage in a posting that has been experienced as conflictive at least by one participant. The strategies are given now in declining frequency, starting with the most frequent ones and commenting briefly on cases of less frequent strategies in the data at the end of this section.

Conversational Joking

Conversational joking is one of the two repair strategies which are used more than 20 times in the data. It is the strategy which participants use most often in this thread. Although joking is often a matter of the personal style of a single user it is quite frequent in this discussion. After an initial sequence of five joking remarks spread from posting 19 to posting 48, which are all produced by the same participant, eight more of the 36 participants use the same strategy for their repair work. This hints at a comparatively friendly climate in this discussion group and shows that posters try to resolve interactional conflict in a pleasant way. Whereas the first half of the joking incidents is spread more or less evenly throughout the first three quarters of the discussion, the second half is concentrated in the last 30 postings in a sequence of the discussion where participants clearly intensify their repair work. In this phase joking also often occurs in the agora format, directly referring back to the posting of one particular participant.

　　Conversational joking in Inkstampers is often directed at the speaker her-/himself as in (11) and is thus particularly suitable for resolving conversational trouble (cf. also Norrick et al. (2008:1682)) In other cases, however, it may be used in a slightly ambivalent fashion and cannot always be clearly distinguished from irony or sarcasm as can be seen in (12), produced by the same participant, but immediately preceding example (11) in the thread. In this particular sequence of the discussion, a slightly sarcastic undertone is very likely, since participant H immediately adds a truly self-depreciating humorous remark as a 'second' repair, which is even supported by a 'tongue-in-cheek' smiley, stressing the friendliness of the remark on a meta-pragmatic level. Often users in Inkstampers support instances of conversational joking by meta-pragmatic devices, such as the emoticons in (11). Another meta-pragmatic technique supporting conversational joking in this discussion is STAGE INSTRUCTIONS, a technique borrowed from synchronous chat-communication. Here participants verbalize a switch in register, which otherwise may go unnoticed by other users, and which gains part of its funny character precisely from this intertextuality. In example (13) H uses this technique to comment jokingly on the nature of the discussion, supporting the comment, however, by adding a laughing smiley. Sometimes the intention to joke is only explicitly signaled at the meta-pragmatic level of emoticons, as can be seen in (14) where B's reply could well be interpreted as a bitingly sharp comment on user I, had the tongue-in-cheek and laughing smiley not been added.

(11) *Having said that, if he takes after his Dad he should be OK as I cannot see him getting many gold stars!!* 😎 *[H20];* 😎 *Hurrah, that has made my afternoon, but I am also in trouble with Miss CakeShop now* 😊 *[H46]*

(12) *I think home schooling must be the only way forward, to stop my lad suffering this serious abuse* 😠 *It will alter my life, but rather that then both his hands fall off. [H19]*

(13) 😆 *Great thread!!* 😆 *[H40], <ok, rant over.... as you were...* 😆 *>[V56]*

(14) *And with some of your attitudes, <name>, I thank God for that too!* 😎😎 *[B66]*

In example (15) participant V tries for the second time to divert a heated debate by posting children's rhymes and common places. These are topically strictly safe, but equally strictly they are 'off topic'. The first attempt in V97 is concluded by a meta-pragmatic comment: "… *just trying to diffuse tension* 😄" (V97). Both instances are accompanied by a laughing smiley, though in the second case the laughing face is immediately followed by an 'Erm …I wonder what's going on'- face, thus indicating that the first attempt at repair is recognized as having been a failure. The sequence in (15) is closed with a sarcastic routine formulae directed at the group of participants indulging in this heated discussion. This, as well as the failure of other repair strategies such as the Scapegoat repairs discussed later on, hints at the fact that just as in natural face-to-face conversation, once the framing for conflictive talk has been set, participants are not so easily diverted from pursuing their confrontational style of discussion anymore (see Norrick et al. (2008:1668)).

(15) *....repeat after me.....*

"*There's no place like home, there's no place like home...*"

<click heels three times>

😎

😳

(...it's ok - the doctors are here now...)[V100]

Justification
Justification is the second most frequently used repair strategy in Inkstampers. In a justification speakers give an explanation or account of their (verbal) behaviour, which is categorized as an implicit type of apology by Aijmer (1996:83-84). Participants produce justifications when their own image has incurred (potential) damage – see example (16) and (17). Posters also use this repair technique when they take over responsibility for conflict-raising aspects of the posting of another participant as shown in (18). Here B justifies her/his taking sides with A and offers an explanation or justification for doing so. The damage to a poster's image may directly arise from an evaluation conflict with another participant, as illustrated in (16), where participant I obviously disagrees with participant B on an issue previously discussed and his or her point of view deviates from B's and possibly also from other posters' views. In the public framing of a PIMB this can always happen if one puts forward a view possibly not shared by all participants. In this instance, user I repeats a statement made earlier (*It's not only A's child that has to be considered*) giving a justification of his or her own point

of view by resorting to a generally asserted truth. A potential damage of face also may be the result of a self-denigrating remark (*Maybe I'm just a bit over the top*) as in (17).

(16) *<name1[B]>, if <name2[A]> is so unhappy about the way everything is done at the nursery, shouldn't she speak to them about it rather than just moaning on here about it! … After all, as I have said, <u>it is not only <name2[A]'s> child that has to be considered is it?</u>* 😎*[157]*

(17) *Maybe I'm just a bit over the top, <u>but I just think it would be better than a stamp which will wash off and be forgotten about in a weeks time</u>. [R21]*

(18) *Sorry but I have to agree with <name[A]>on this one! <u>There is a clear and crucial difference between applying something to a child's clothes (e.g. a sticker) and applying something to a child's body, in this case a stamp on the skin</u>.[B31]*

Justification is essentially a speaker-oriented technique (sometimes projected onto a third party in need of defence), in which the speaker tries to get the hearer to "see things the speaker's way" (Meier 1996:153). The speaker explains why s/he acts or thinks in a certain way or gives reasons for doing so. Justifications obviously play a crucial role in the argumentatively oriented sequences of the discussion and in the actual negotiation of conflictive issues. This is supported by the fact that tokens of justification are spread more or less evenly between posting R21 and V111, where most of the conflict-raising tokens are located in the thread. Later on, in the last 20 postings, when the conflict is more or less solved, no justification tokens are produced anymore (see also Figure 4).

Like joking, the strategy of justification seems not solely to be a matter of the personal styles of participants. It is used by a quarter of all participants (9 out of 36) and by almost half of all participants who produce interactional repairs in this thread (9 out of 17). However, due to its clearly defined functions, it is not as evenly spread among the participants as joking is. Almost half of the tokens in Inkstampers stem from participant B, who produces many particularly conflict-raising sequences her- or himself, while at the same time taking responsibility also for the views of a third party and defending their positions as in (18). Like any other repair strategy, justification may be combined with other strategies, such as the use of routine formulae or negative judgement of self as in *I am just a bit over the top* in (17).

Empathy with hearer or victim
Another strategy of repair, which is used almost as frequently as joking and justification, is showing empathy with the victim of a conflictive passage or the addressee. In this discussion frame the victim of a conflictive passage is seen as the participant whose views are contradicted strongly by many other participants, thus sometimes constructing a whole series of evaluation conflicts. In the special framing conditions of PIMBs this may easily lead to the victim simply disappearing from the

group, as did participant A, whose initial posting triggered the debate, at an early stage in the discussion after only three postings.[9] Showing empathy with the victim or addressee contributes to the friendly atmosphere in the discussion and softens the overall damage to the image of the victim, especially when this strategy is not used by only one participant. In the Inkstampers thread, participant B shows empathy with the victim particularly frequently (almost half of all the tokens of this strategy are produced by B), but is not the only person to do so. Seven other participants use the same repair strategy and thus help construct a balanced view of A's and other participants' positions, as shown in *I totally understand where you are coming from* in (19). Like justification, showing empathy is a repair strategy that is focused on the actual negotiation of conflictive views. This can explain why in Inkstampers all but one token occurs in the passages in which most of the potentially conflict-raising strategies are implemented by the participants, i.e. between posting B25 and B99. All of them are produced in sequences in the agora format and refer directly to other participants' postings. There is a cluster of empathy tokens between B80 and D86, where the discussion is particularly heated (also signaled by the fact that in a passage closely following it several postings are deleted by the provider, because their wording or content has broken house rules). Another smaller cluster is produced in an extensive repair sequence between V45 and X50 where participants insert a joking sequence in order to divert from the main topic and ease tension – cf. (20) and also Scapegoat repair further down.

(19) … *I think* <u>the pp who mentioned that it is definitely hard to let go with your first child has a point.</u> …*[C₁77]; Not at all, and sorry if I caused any offence - as a child I had incredibly sensitive and irritable skin myself so* <u>I totally understand where you are coming from</u>. *[S26]*

(20) *FCS is NOT a wind up merchant -* <u>he speaks the truth and i love him</u> *[V45]*

Routine formulae

Formulaic expressions such as 'sorry', 'excuse me', 'I think you all have a point here', etc. occur less frequently in the data than might be expected from other contexts such as Meier's (1996) elicited data and Aijmer's (1996) London-Lund corpus-based study on apologies. Again, this may be due to the special framing conditions of PIMBs, as informal and focused on merely verbal activity, which participants are indulging in for pleasure. In the data, routine formulae basically serve two functions with some fuzzy cases in between these two categories. Their first function is to maintain social reputation (Norrick 1978:280) – in this case they directly precede a potentially confrontational move such as an evaluation conflict or possible alienation by imperative. In these cases they are, strictly speaking, not reactive but anticipatory (cf. also Aijmer (1996:96)). These routine formulae are included here, because like

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[9] There is, however, no clear accounting for the true motivation of somebody disappearing from the group. Leaving the group due to other members of the group, making ones views the target of their argumentative moves, is but one possible motivation (cf. also Kleinke 2007).

'justification' and 'empathy with the victim or addressee', they cluster in sequences of the discussion which are particularly heated and occur between posting 39 and posting 84 in Inkstampers – just as example (21). They are often placed in canonical position in a posting. In these confrontational passages they do not merely protect the writer's social image, but also help keep the general atmosphere of the discussion as 'civilized as possible'. In other cases, such as illustrated in (22), their function is rather intermediate between merely protecting social reputation and a true apology. This is also indicated by the positioning of the token inside the posting, where it is placed immediately after the offending remark.

(21) *Well I'm sorry, but I still can't see that it can be classed as disrespectful either! … [I65]; Hi everyone, I think you all have a point, but I also think that you are all different extremes. [R67]*

(22) *The ability to hysterically blow all matters out of proportion and focus on the trivial seems to be a forte on this board at times! I am sorry if anyone is offended by this, but in my view, I would have run this past RL friend, and they would have said "get a grip!" and the matter would be over! [D84]*

Their second major function is to serve as a truly remedial act, re-establishing the image of (an)other participant(s) as in (23) – here combined with a multitude of other strategies forming a compound repair. It is in this second function where formulaic expressions (mostly of apology) are used to re-establish social equilibrium (often with single participants) one on one. This occurs primarily in the last 30 postings of the thread, when the major conflict related to the subject of discussion has been settled. Here they are, in fact, placed turn-initially but they refer back to offences performed by the same participant earlier in the discussion.

(23) *<name A1>, I apologise if I offended you, I didn't mean to imply you have mental health problems I'm sure you don't & I REALLY do enjoy your contributions on the board, on the whole they are positive and supportive & I'm quite ashamed of myself that I've not been...as explained in my previous post I got my hackles up, sorry! [W114]*

Some other less frequent strategies are used in the same function, also predominantly at the end of the thread, when participants negotiate equilibrium one-on-one. Among them we find expression of no harm done – as in (24): *I didn't mean to imply you have mental health problems*, where participant W is playing down the possible impact of previous evaluation conflicts. explicit acceptance of blame is another strategy, restricted in the data to the last 30 postings, as shown in (25): *I know I argue pretty vociferously on here from time to time- and I know I get up some other posters' noses for that tendency...* This strategy is not only used to negotiate conflict on a one-to-one basis in the agora format. Sometimes acceptance of blame is verbally directed at a single participant, but the posting is sent in the tribune format as if to publicly acknowledge blame also to the entire group, as can be seen in a shorter sequence taken from posting W113 in (26). This latter strategy is close to Meier's category of NEGATIVE JUDGEMENT, which I interpret here as a negative judgment of 'self' such as in expressions like *yes,-perhaps a*

little overpassionately. When these expressions occur in the middle of a sequence of a heated debate, they may be easily interpreted as mock repair, in which the speaker is not being completely honest in his or her self-directed criticisms. In the final section of the discussion, however, this strategy is embedded in the frame of seriously and collectively wanting to establish equilibrium and can be read as a true repair strategy.

(24) *This is getting very heated, but I have to say <name B>you are taking it all too personally. … I was not attacking her in any way, sometimes we just go along with things and don't realise we have other options. [U108]*

(25) *I have to agree with <nameD>on this- I know I argue pretty vociferously on here from time to time- and I know I get up some other posters' noses for that tendency... [B124]*

(26) *… (& I admit this has gotten my hackles up) …. [W113]*

All these different strategies contribute to a bunch of conflict-solving techniques, which cannot be implemented in the same way as in natural face-to-face polylogal communication. This point will be discussed in greater detail with the last micro-strategy, the DOUBLE-BOUND STRATEGY, which is also quite frequently used in this polylogal discussion and which was not described in Meier (1996) or Cheepen (1988).

The double-bond strategy

Here this term refers to postings in which participants within one posting explicitly announce evaluation conflicts with some members of the group and produce tokens of repair directed at other participants. This strategy is used quite frequently, occurring 14 times in the data – cf. e.g. (27). The example illustrates how participants construct a dense web of alliances and confront parties in this complex polylogal situation. In order to do so, they use different techniques of repair, with no clear preferences for a specific type. They often use more than one single strategy and tend to construct complex clusters of these strategies as can be seen in (27). In this example two routine formulae (*not at all, and sorry if I caused any offence*) are followed by empathy with the addressee (*I totally understand where you are coming from),* an instance of partial agreement (*I agree that ink stamps probably aren't the ideal way to reward good behaviour*) which then leads directly into the evaluation conflict introduced by *But (I really do object to the original poster (or her mother's) assertion that stamping a child's hand with ink could be seen as an act of child abuse.).* This evaluation conflict is then again followed by two tokens of justification *I think it's very dangerous how people are so quick to cry abuse these days* and *Child abuse is unthinkably horrific and I just get cross when it is trivialised like this.*

(27) *Not at all, and sorry if I caused any offence - as a child I had incredibly sensitive and irritable skin myself so I totally understand where you are coming from. I am very careful about what I put near my own son's skin, and I agree that ink stamps probably aren't the ideal way to reward good behaviour.*

> *BUT I really do object to the original poster (or her mother's) assertion that stamping a child's hand with ink could be seen as an act of child abuse. I think it's very dangerous how people are so quick to cry abuse these days... and then we complain when our children get sunburn (far more serious and damaging than a rash/ skin irritation, surely?) because their teachers/ carers aren't allowed to apply sun cream anymore lest they be accused of something horrible....*
>
> *Child abuse is unthinkably horrific and I just get cross when it is trivialised like this. [S26]*

Depending on when participants use this double-bond strategy in the discussion and on the intentions of the participant, the ratio of repair tokens and tokens indicating a conflictive view may vary. In more controversial parts of the discussion, potentially conflict-raising material may supersede repair tokens as in (27), where user S first explicitly expresses appreciation of D to whom S's posting is directly addressed in the agora format. Immediately afterwards, other participants in the discussion are attacked meta-pragmatically for their offensive style of discussion. The posting is closed by S showing empathy with user A and thereby returning to a repair mood again.

By using the double-bound strategy, participants can make the best of the framing conditions provided by PIMBs. Due to the lack of time constraints and the relative permanence of the written text, they can carefully position themselves towards many different other participants in a large group. The process may take several days as can be seen even in this comparatively short thread. In a naturally occurring polylogal face-to-face conversation this is nearly impossible[10]. By the same token, the framing conditions of PIMBs make it possible to renegotiate equilibrium again between all single participants involved in this dense network on a one-on-one basis. Participants in Inkstampers make ample use of this opportunity at greater length throughout the last 30 postings in the thread, often using whole clusters of repair tokens in one posting. Nine users actively take part in this final segment of the discussion. Six of them have produced more than average numbers of potentially conflict-raising tokens in the discussion. They are participating now either in the agora format, in which they directly address other users they may have offended earlier on (B addresses W), or they simply tune in to a friendly posting of another user (D106-D107) as in example (28)-(29). Sometimes postings with repair tokens are directed to the whole group in the tribune format (G_1104, V110, U111, etc. – see Figure 3).

(28) *Message 106 - posted by<name>, Nov 13, 2006*
    OMG, what's with all the modded posts!
    Oh how I've missed them.

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[10] Cf. e.g. Bruxelles et al. (2004) on radio discussions and institutionalized interaction in offices of notaries during divorce-proceedings, where interpersonal conflicts are not solved by adhering to the personal image needs of the participants by an extensive use of interactional repair strategies. Instead, the multi-party negotiations focus on the object of conflict (possessions, evaluation conflicts).

> *Quoted from this message*
> *Oh just the usual stuff, you know........*☺(D106)

(29) *Message 107 - posted by<name>, Nov 13, 2006*
     Might as well go back to the cheebies board then ☺☺(I107)

Emoticons

At the time the discussion was taking place, BBC-Talk provided users with a large collection of ready-made and annotated icons (emoticons), which only had to be (marked and) imported into a text. Most participants make ample use of these icons in their writing.

It is, however, not always clear precisely what they are meant to indicate in a specific posting. Sometimes emoticons may simply give an illustration of what is already verbally claimed or expressed in the text – as is to be seen in the hugging and kissing icon in example (20), or a sad face added to something generally evaluated as sad by a speech community, etc. In other cases they may be meant to signal the poster's emotional attitude towards a state of affairs expressed in a posting, such as *The sun is not shining.* ☹ – or alternatively: *Oh, the sun is shining again* ☺. A third possibility of interpretation is linked to their meta-pragmatic functions. Participants may use an emoticon in order to indicate how an utterance is to be interpreted – the 'tongue-in-cheek'- icon is often used in this function – cf. for instance example (25).

Participants in PIMBs often do not use such emoticons in the same way and with the same frequency (Kleinke 2008a). Some users insert them frequently and do so in quite sophisticated ways, others do not use them at all. Older computer programs do not always display them on the screen, even if someone has used them. Thus, no conclusions can be drawn from their absence. All this makes it nearly impossible to make a straight-forward interpretation of the precise verbal message an emoticon may imply. What can be claimed with some certainty is that when participants do use emoticons, the interpersonal level of their message is at least being attended to.

Let us now finally turn briefly to two strategies on the macro level of the discussion thread described in Cheepen's work. Both strategies have to do with an abrupt change in topic, and participants in Inkstampers use them slightly differently than what Cheepen (1988) observes in her data.

Scapegoat repairs and topic loops

Cheepen (1988:90ff.) describes topic loops and Scapegoat repairs as instances in a face-to-face communication in which conflict is only covertly acknowledged by the participants, but in which subtle strategies are developed in order to repair the obvious social imbalance. In a Scapegoat repair in Cheepen's sense, speakers abruptly take as the new topic of conversation a person whom all participants know and who is equally negatively evaluated by all of them. The attention of the participants is thereby diverted from an offence against a person present in the actual interaction. This gives the

participants an "off" during which they can "recover from the status imbalance", which is not even overtly acknowledged (1988:95).

In Inkstampers this strategy is used in a slightly modified way. The status imbalance is not explicitly between two participants, but is covertly acknowledged for the whole group, after running into a heated discussion. In each of the three Scapegoat-like strategies in Inkstampers, a third party takes responsibility for trying to divert the discussion into a safer direction by suggesting topics that can be safely assumed to be less controversial (e.g. the general danger of getting too little protection against sunburns in nursery schools). The actual victim of the controversial shift in the discussion, participant A1, joins this Scapegoat sequence. Unlike the examples in Cheepen's data, but similar to the two other attempted Scapegoat repairs in Inkstampers, the partcipants who launch the Scapegoat are not successful. Obviously, the discussion frame has been set too firmly already. It may also be possible that in the main stream of a very complex polylogal heated debate, each participant is too focused on potentially conflictive replies to their own turn than to bother about possible ways to resettle the social balance.

In a topic loop, the speakers in Cheepen's data resort to a topic that has already been dealt with (at greater length) in the beginning of the conversation, "which proceeded without trouble at a time before the [current S.K.] trouble arose" (Cheepen 1988:97). Participants in Inkstampers attempt to use the same strategy twice, but also not precisely in the way Cheepen describes with her data. Generally accepted terms of use in PIMBs state that topics already dealt with previously should not be brought up again, unless a user adds a truly new perspective to them or presents them in a new light, relevant for a current discussion. In Inkstampers, however, when the first conflict-loaded sequence begins, K24 and B25 take up a proposal made earlier by R21 that has not been met with critique yet and to which other posters have not yet explicitly replied – see examples (30)-(32). In posting R67, after a long sequence of conflictive postings, R takes up her/his own proposal again four days later. Just like in Cheepen's data, both attempts fail, and are obviously too weak to reframe the complex discussion frame of a PIMB discussion.

(30) *The only thing I can say is, why not put it on some sort of chart so they can keep a record of their achievements, and can aim for more*
Quoted from this message

I do that. Every time my daughter gets a sticker at school it goes on to a chart. When she has 10 stickers she gets a treat - a new hairband or pair of socks for example, not sweets though. (K24)

(31) *Message 25 - posted by <name> (U3721) , Nov 8, 2006*

Yes- the idea of a chart is a great one IMO! They do that at my DS1's school, and he loves it - they get a star under their name and 10 stars make '1' etc. and then when their card is full of stars they get a prize of some sort! Something like that anyway! It's a great way to motivate children I think- and I wish we'd had something of the sort when I was at school.... (In my day, doing well at your work/behaving well was just expected of you...Bad behaviour

was punished, but good behaviour/trying hard etc. seemed to be deemed to be its own reward! Not great psychology really, was it? 😎*)* (B 25)

(32) …
<u>*In my opinion, like I said before, they should use stamps on charts so they can keep a record.*</u>
But I also think this whole thing has been blown out of proportion. Correct me if I'm wrong, but we were only asked for our opinion, not judgement.

<name>   (R 67)

The conflict is only gradually fading into a collective attempt to ease tension. The initiating factor may have been that the provider had deleted six postings (87-94) because they violated house rules. Several things are now going on simultaneously. Around this time a meta-pragmatic discussion about the competitive atmosphere in the thread sets in. Participants V and B indulge in a shorter exchange in the agora format on the strategy of using an off-topic Scapegoat (see example (15) above). Several other participants are now also discussing the atmosphere in this thread on a meta-pragmatic level, directly and jointly referring to the provider's practice of deleting postings – and this may be interpreted as another Scapegoat repair. At the same time others are topicalising participant B's role in creating an adversative atmosphere in the discussion, but are doing so in a friendly tone of voice. This is the point at which participant B now starts indulging in clusters of true apologies, negative evaluations of self, and acceptance of blame. In this segment of the discussion, i.e. between posting V97 and H112, almost all postings contain instances of conversational joking as well as all five tokens of 'no harm done', and the only token of offering 'forebearance'. Thus, participants produce a complex web of strategies, which they use in sophisticated ways to re-create a friendly atmosphere and re-negotiate equilibrium.

Throughout the discussion, participants in Inkstampers use a broader range of interactional repair strategies, which include, in descending order of frequency, 'conversational joking', 'justification', 'showing empathy with the hearer or victim', 'the use of routine formulae', and two macro-level strategies described in Cheepen (1988): 'topic loop' and 'Scapegoat-repair'.

The micro-level categories largely overlap with the categories described in Meier (1996), but not totally. The double-bond strategy is typical for polylogal interactions and is used frequently in Inkstampers, but it is not typical for the interactions described in Meier or Cheepen. The strategy of 'forbearance' (*this won't happen again*) is only used once in this Internet discussion. Conversational joking, the strategy which participants in Inkstampers use most often, is not the most frequent strategy in Meier's elicited data on interactional repair strategies. This may well be due to the different types of contexts and the different framing conditions. Meier focuses on violation types which are very basic for real-life interactions and concern essential human rights: Trust, Time, Possession and Space. This study looks at the very specific context of Internet Discussion Boards – capturing a very limited field of the participants' social experience, in which conflicts arise (with)in verbal interactional practices and have almost no bearings on the real-life image of an interlocutor. Users also take part in the discussion with equal status. On the other hand, they are acting within a discussion frame, which

normally tolerates at least two types of conflicts arising in the data: 'evaluation conflicts', and 'alienation by imperative'. The third category, 'depersonification', tends to be very risky, even in the context of Internet discussions. It can also be found in the conflictive passages of the discussion but interestingly, later on, in the last 30 postings, when respective repair is being done on a large scale, it is not taken up again as a subject of explicit negotiation. It is easily possible that because of embarrassment, users simply do not want to state again explicitly that they have actually used it and therefore rather leave it undiscussed.

As shown in the discussion, and as also observed in Ajmer (1996:94) for compound apologies, users may resort to whole clusters of strategies, which sometimes overlap. A justification, showing empathy with the hearer or victim or even negative evaluation of the speaker, may be put ironically or humorously.

Whereas some of the strategies are used throughout the discussion thread more or less routinely (routine formulae, showing empathy with the hearer or victim), other strategies seem particularly suitable for intensive interactional repair work involving a multitude of parties. These include: joking, acceptance of blame, true apologies, and expressions of no harm done. As is to be seen in Figure 4 in the appendix, these strategies cluster at the end of the discussion when equilibrium is negotiated between nine out of a total of 36 participants respectively.

5   SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

This study looks at linguistic techniques of interactional repair in a public message board on the Internet and thus focuses on an aspect of Internet-based interaction which is only gradually moving into the focus of linguistic description. The subject of study is a discussion, run by the public Internet discussion forum BBC-Talk, about whether or not it is good educational practice to apply inkstamps to children's hands as a reward for good conduct. The discussion is analyzed completely from the first to the last posting in order to show how social equilibrium is negotiated throughout the discussion. The full discussion lasted 9 days in autumn 2006 and contains a total of 130 postings by 36 different participants who contributed between 1 and 28 postings each.

After an introductory survey of the special framing conditions of PIMBs and the data in section 2, section 3 gives a brief description of the types of conflictive behaviour found in the data. This short survey is based on Cheepen's (1988) observations of interactional repair in natural conversation and shows that the three major types of interactional conflict, 'evaluation conflicts', 'de-personification' and 'alienation by imperative' can also be found in the discussion studied in this present paper.

On the basis of Cheepen's framework of repair in conversational interaction, section 3 distinguishes practical repair from interactional repair, characterizes the basic repair strategies to be found on the micro and macro level of interaction in the Inkstampers thread, and briefly discusses the interplay of interactional repair, politeness and face work. Against this background, this study focuses on repair strategies used retrospectively in the discussion by participants in order to re-negotiate social equilibrium following conflictive passages. Based on Meier (1996), Cheepen (1988) and Aijmer (1996), this paper discusses repair strategies on the micro level as well as on the macro level of interaction. It attempts to answer four questions concerning (i) the

specific techniques of interactional repair, (ii) differences in use between this Internet discussion board and the results of studies on natural conversation, (iii) the distribution of the strategies on the macro thread, and (iv) the impact of the specific type of polylogal situation in PIMBs on their use.

This study attempts to demonstrate that participants use a broader range of interactional repair strategies, which is also discussed in Cheepen (1988), Meier (1996) and Aijmer (1996) for natural conversation and in experimentally elicited situations. In the polylogal situation of this discussion board, speakers also use the more complex strategies on the macro level of the discussion thread, described as 'topic loops' and 'Scapegoat repairs' in Cheepen's work. However, due to the special framing conditions of Internet discussion boards, there is no total match regarding micro-level strategies. Participants in Inkstampers use the following strategies to perform interactional repair on the micro level, listed here in declining order with regards to frequency: 'Conversational joking', 'Justificaion', 'Showing empathy with the hearer or victim', and the 'Use of routine formulae'. In addition, they use a strategy not described for dialogal situations, but which can be found in polyloges and in the multilogal situation of Internet Message Boards: the double-bound strategy, in which participants in one posting explicitly take sides with one participant, while simultaneously distancing themselves from others. This technique is used frequently in the discussion studied here and it allows the participants to indulge in re-establishing social equilibrium one-on-one with each participant whom they may have addressed in a conflict-raising way earlier in the discussion. Participants do this at greater length at the end of the discussion, and in so doing they take advantage of the technical and structural features of Internet discussion boards for achieving their social goals. The study also shows that the participants do not use these repair strategies uniformly throughout the discussion. Some strategies such as routine formulae and the double bound strategy are used throughout the discussion and seem to be non-conspicuous and comparatively unspecific in their application. Other strategies, capturing more vulnerable aspects of the speaker's image, such as acceptance of blame, showing empathy with the hearer or victim, expressions of no harm done and offers of forbearance are clearly reserved for passages in the discussion in which (social) conflict is more or less openly acknowledged and mutual redressive action is at stake. Joking is used throughout the discussion in this thread, but it is particularly frequent in passages in which conflict is actively negotiated.

In summary, it can be claimed that a very dense and highly sophisticated practice of implementing social repair strategies is constitutive for the overall friendly atmosphere in this board. Future analyses will have to compare these results with the use of repair strategies in other discussion groups on the Internet, in order to determine if discussions with a less friendly or even harsh atmosphere are lacking such strategies or use them in a less sophisticated manner during phases of negotiating conflict.

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APPENDIX

DATA

Inkstampers on the back of the hand? (cf. Kleinke_InkStampers_Corpus)

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