

Conflict Sequences and Social Structures in Online Communication:

A Case Study of the Sherdog.com Forum

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Autumn 2014

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1 INTRODUCTION

With the rapid technological developments and innovations made in the past two decades, the amount of face-to-face interaction between human beings has begun to decrease. The Internet, computers, tablets and smartphones provide an abundance of opportunities to communicate socially without physically occupying the same space. Through these advancements in the field of technology, online communities, such as chat rooms, forums and discussion boards have formed to facilitate the growing need for information systems and a desire to be a part of an online world. Nowadays, due to the increasing amount of digital communication and social media, these virtual communities are an inseparable part of most cultures operating in an information age. As such, the study and analysis of these communities can be considered a part of cultural studies aiming to explain human behavior.

The purpose of this thesis is to define and explore such a community through the analysis of the communication, social actions and linguistic features found within it. The forums on Sherdog – The Global Authority on Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) were chosen, in no small part due to personal interest, as the virtual community under inspection. Mixed martial arts is a relatively new sport that combines techniques from multiple different disciplines of martial arts with a minimal amount of rules. It is also known as No Holds Barred fighting or Ultimate Fighting. The latter is a common mistake based on the fact that the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) is by far the largest and best known MMA promotion in the world and the two terms are synonymous for most people.

Sherdog is an Internet site containing information about MMA. It features news, rankings, radio broadcasts and a comprehensive user forum with over 60,000 users and 4 million posts. The aim of this thesis is to identify, study and analyze the linguistic and social features of online communication found on the abovementioned forum in order to establish the parameters of the community. The theoretical framework through which the forum will be inspected includes mediated discourse analysis and conflict sequence analysis. Mediated discourse analysis will be

explained, and applied to a certain extent, in section 2.2 and the theory on conflict sequences will be presented in section 2.1.4.

The conflict sequence theory was chosen due to the nature of the sport. In addition, the study of conflicts is a part of cultural studies. The entire idea behind modern MMA was originally to discover which form of martial arts or self-defense was the most effective. Nowadays it has evolved into a discipline of its own, but the basic idea of combat sports remains: two athletes enter the ring in order to find out who is stronger, faster and more skilled, and they fight until the conflict is resolved. The resolution or reconciliation of the conflicts was the primary focus of the research (Ahti 2011) on which the conflict sequence theory presented in this thesis is based.

With the nature of the sport in mind, the aim of the conflict sequence analysis in this paper is to discover whether or not there is any correlation between the conflicts in the ring and the conflicts online. Ahti's discoveries and results will be discussed in order to define whether or not they are applicable to the sequences found on this forum as well. The detailed analysis of the conflict sequences comprises the bulk of this thesis, and the results, however insignificant they may seem, are discussed to a great extent.

In addition to analyzing the communication on Sherdog, the community itself, and the social structures within it, will be discussed. Due to the relative anonymity of the participants, this will be accomplished by inspecting their online profiles instead. The theoretical framework through which this will be achieved is provided by mediated discourse analysis. While MDA will not be applied to the entire thesis as the research program it was intended to be, almost all the segments and sections of the paper are influenced by this theory. As stated above, MDA will be further discussed and explained in section 2.2.

Before the two main theories are introduced, it is necessary to establish the parameters and general features of online communication in order to understand its nature and the limitations set by it. Without going into too much detail concerning the technology involved, the differences between face-to-face communication and online dialogue will be discussed, and the prevailing terminology of the field

explained in section 2.1. This section relies rather heavily on Crystal's (2001) research and published papers.

Once the theoretical framework has been established, the general features of the material found on Sherdog will be discussed. While most of the statements concerning the community will be justified with the use of examples, some generalizations will be made based on personal experiences as a user of the forum. Most of the examples are in the form of written text and are, therefore, easy to replicate on paper. However, a certain amount of the observations are based on images, videos and the overall atmosphere within the community. These features are relatively difficult to reproduce in the context of this thesis and while some links to the aforementioned features will be provided, it proved counter-productive to explain all of them. The most significant findings are, naturally, evidenced and justified within the paper.

Section 4.1 of this thesis includes the identification and analysis of the conflict sequences selected for closer inspection as well as discussion on the implications and results of said analysis. The hypotheses for each section will be discussed in the meta-text segments at the beginning of each respective section. The latter part of section 4 includes most of the findings and significant results as well as further analysis of the most prominent linguistic features found on the forums.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purposes of this thesis, a theoretical framework consisting of two sections has been established in order to be able to analyze the social structures, conflict sequences and their implications within an online community. In addition to providing a brief history of online communication and the limitations set by it, this section introduces two different theories through which the material will be analyzed. The conflict sequences will be approached using a traditional definition of a three turn conflict found in conversation analysis, while the theory itself relies heavily on Ahti's research on the role of the second turn. The social structures, actions and their implications will be analyzed through mediated discourse analysis.

2.1 Online Communication

As the entire corpus of this thesis consists of data collected from an online forum, it is necessary to establish the history and general features of online communication. Forums, such as the one selected for inspection in this thesis, are a relatively new form of discourse and while it can be viewed as a conversation between all the participants, it is necessary to establish the differences between face-to-face talk and online dialogue. Furthermore, in online communication the lack of certain semiotic systems, such as gestures, body position and speech render the language different to conventional written language as well. Therefore, establishing the nature and features of online communication becomes paramount in order to understand and analyze the language. This section will introduce the prevailing theories and terminology on the field of computer mediated communication as well as the most noticeable aspects of the "language of the Internet". Furthermore, the nature of postponed communication will be discussed and the theory on three turn conflict sequences introduced.

2.1.1 Computer Mediated Communication

Online communication is a relatively broad term nowadays, and for the purposes of this thesis it is necessary to explain, and limit, the terminology used. While the term CMC is somewhat outdated, due to the fact that most online communication is not limited to just computers anymore, it is possibly the most suitable one when discussing forum-based communication.

In the 1980s the term “computer-mediated communication,” more commonly known as CMC, emerged to encompass a range of platforms used for conversing online, including email, listservs, chat, or instant messaging. (Baron 2008: 11)

Furthermore, Baron argues that ‘information communication technologies’ or ‘electronically-mediated communication’ are more modern and comprehensive, but CMC remains the most commonly used term.

2.1.2 Language of the Internet

Regarding the “language of the Internet”, the prevailing opinion amongst researchers seems to be that the increasing amount of time we spend in chat rooms or posting on forums etc. has a negative influence on our grammar and vocabulary. The language found on such sites is often quite colloquial and informal and it is described by many as a new form of communication somewhere between written word and speech, or “interactive written discourse” (Werry 1996: 47). A quick look at almost any chat room will reveal that some posters spell words similarly to the way they are pronounced instead of how they are actually spelled, further supporting the claim that the “language of the Internet” is different from the regular written word. Hereafter

these newly formed languages will be referred to as 'Netspeak', a term coined by Crystal (2001).

Another opinion seems to be that such Internet forums are a medium for natural development in languages and that we should adapt words, idioms and grammatical rules used there into our speech and accept them as part of the language. Furthermore, Baron argues that these emerging linguistic features have an impact on our social behavior as well (Baron 2008: 161-162). This notion will be further discussed in section 4.3.2.

Regardless of how they feel about the consequences the Internet has on languages, most researchers seem to agree on the fact that the speed with which technological advancements shape the Internet makes their studies expire quite fast. What is true about online communication today was most likely unheard of ten years ago and the same can probably be said ten years from now.

Any attempt to characterize the language of the Internet, whether as a whole or with reference to one of its constituent situations, immediately runs up against the transience of the technology. The different arenas of communication described in earlier chapters will not remain for long as they are, given that the technological developments upon which they rely are constantly evolving, putting users under constant pressure to adapt their language to the demands of new contexts, and giving them fresh opportunities to interact in novel ways. (Crystal 2001: 224)

It should be noted, however, that some forums, such as the one on Sherdog, rely on older technology and are not affected by the newer innovations as heavily as other forms of communication.

2.1.3 Asynchronous Interaction

Crystal (2001) demonstrates how online conversations can be divided into two groups based on whether they happen in real time (synchronously) or in postponed time (asynchronously). Forums, by their nature, are a form of asynchronous

communication as the users are able to access earlier posts and messages, and the conversation may take a long time to develop. Crystal collected data from different forums and groups and observed that sometimes a reply to a thread may appear immediately while at other times it may take months, and that “individual contributions to a group are saved and distributed as they come in, which may be at any time and separated by any period of time.” (Crystal 2001: 134)

Crystal also identifies quoting as an essential part of asynchronous communication. In a real time conversation all the parties involved are usually aware of what the others are talking about at any given time, but in a postponed setting it might become difficult to recognize to whom a poster is replying or what they are talking about. As a result, most forum users utilize a system where they quote the post to which they are replying. Because all the posts are saved and available for browsing at any given time, users can keep quoting what someone wrote for a long time and hold them responsible for it. Crystal compares this phenomenon to politicians being reminded of what they said or promised in interviews ages ago by the media. Such conditions, and the fact that whatever you post can be accessed by other forum users even years after the time of the original post, creates an environment filled with conflict sequences, as users attempt to undermine those who do not agree with them by bringing up earlier posts where the other poster was wrong. (Crystal 2001: 135)

2.1.4 Conflict Sequences

Ahti (2011) states that in the field of conversation analysis a conflict is usually defined as a sequence consisting of three turns. The first turn works as a ‘trigger’ to the sequence, the second is an argument against the trigger and the third is another argument against the second turn. It is also possible that the third turn is a reconciling one instead of another argument. This structure will be used to identify and analyze

the conflict sequences found in the material. A conflict sequence, in its simplest form, could look like this:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. Trigger | John: Football is the best game in the world! |
| 2. First argument | Peter: I think it's boring and useless. |
| 3. a) Second argument | John: You're boring and useless! |
| b) Reconciling turn | John: I guess football is not for everyone. |

In her article, Ahti focuses on the nature of the second turn, i.e. the first argument, and its role regarding the result of the argument. In other words, she is attempting to discover whether or not there are specific identifiable features in the second turn that result in another argument or a reconciling turn. Ahti argues that the affectivity of the statements made in the second turn is crucial to the end result and claims that posts which feature extra-linguistic elements, such as capital letters to indicate shouting, are more likely to trigger an emotional response than posts that do not feature these elements. (Ahti, 2011: 12-13)

This theory will be applied and tested in the context of the conflict sequences discovered on Sherdog. While the nature and role of the second turn will be discussed in each example, they are not the primary focus of this thesis. Rather, the focus here is on the entire sequence as social action and how it reflects the social structures of the entire community. While the sequences themselves will be analyzed using Ahti's theories, the social aspects of the data will be discussed through mediated discourse analysis.

2.2 Mediated Discourse Analysis

Mediated discourse analysis (MDA) is a form of linguistic discourse analysis. The term was coined by Ron Scollon. While the main body of this study is comprised of the conflict sequences which will be identified and analyzed using the theory and method introduced in section 2.1.4, the social actions and structures of the forum will be analyzed using MDA. Scollon's theory will be applied as a research methodology to parts of the thesis in order to identify the nexus of practice. According to Scollon (2001), the social actions of any discourse can be identified by recognizing three key variables: the historical body of the participants, the interaction order and the actual discourses in place.

Social action occurs at the intersection of the historical bodies of the participants in that action, the interaction order which they mutually produce among themselves and the discourses in place which enable that action or are used by the participant as mediational means in their action. (Scollon, 2001: 3)

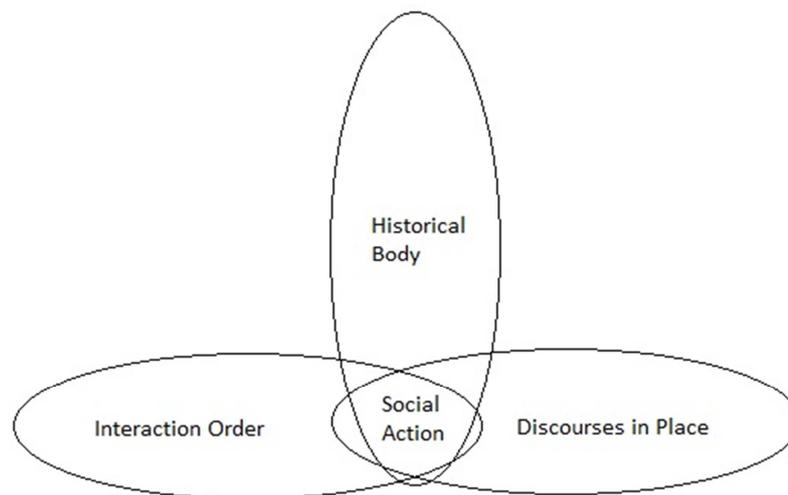


Figure 1 Social Action in Mediated Discourse Analysis (Scollon 2001)

Scollon recommends a five-step approach to identifying these variables:

1. Establish the social issue you will study
2. Find the crucial social actors
3. Observe the interaction order
4. Determine the most significant cycles of discourse
5. Establish your zone of identification

Applying this research method to the material found on Sherdog in order to identify the social structures will comprise the bulk of theoretical section of this thesis. The main social issue studied in this paper is conflicts in online communication, as disagreements and the ensuing arguing are very common on the Internet. This issue will be approached from a sociological and linguistic perspective, and the conflicts will be analyzed as sequences.

In an online forum environment the most crucial social actors are the posters. They are the ones who converse and create the content. The most common topics on the forum being analyzed in this paper revolve around MMA and as a result the fighters, promoters and everyone involved in the sport can be considered minor social actors as well, as their actions directly influence the discussions that take place.

2.2.1 Historical Body

At first glance, establishing the historical bodies of the participants can be difficult when the social action under analysis takes place online. The key social actors, the posters, are relatively anonymous and only familiar with each other through their previous encounters on the forum. The information about the posters available on Sherdog is relatively limited, and most of it is rather useless when attempting to analyze the historical bodies.

However, Scollon notes that the historical bodies can be constructed by asking the question: “How did these participants all come to be placed at this moment and in this way to enable or carry out this action?” Most, if not all, posters on Sherdog are presumably combat sports enthusiasts and since all the data has been collected from the UFC sub-forum, it is safe to assume that they are also followers of that organization. From this it can be effectively established that the posters wish to discuss the events, past and future, that take place within and around the UFC with their peers. While this may seem like a rather redundant or self-evident observation, it becomes highly significant when discussing the conflict sequences and the motivation behind certain posts.

2.2.2 Discourses in Place

As the social actions under study take place online, the focus of the analysis of the discourses in place should be in what Scollon describes as ‘overt discourse’. Due to the fact that there is no physical environment to observe, it is impossible to analyze the semiotic aggregates such as the movements of other people present in the room, for example. Scollon suggests that the guiding question for analyzing overt discourse is: “What discourses in this place are central or foregrounded as crucial to the action on which you are focusing and what discourses are backgrounded?”

Here it is necessary to separate the two actions under study: the conflict sequences and the social structures. When looking at the example post below while focusing on conflict sequences, the most crucial foregrounded discourse is the post itself; the text that the user wrote and posted. Other information, such as the username, join date or post count remain on the background, unless a poster directly refers to them in the post.

Correspondingly, when attempting to analyze the social structures in place, such as the hierarchy between posters, the focus shifts and the post itself becomes less relevant. Belt color, post count and vCash among other things become foregrounded

as they relay more information regarding the social position of the poster within the community than the actual post does. In the analysis section of this paper the focus is divided so that sections 4.1 and 4.3 address the posts themselves, and section 4.2 focuses mainly on the elements provided in addition to the post.



Figure 2 Example Profile and Post on Sherdog

In an online environment other notable backgrounded information may include banners, commercials, pop-ups and the secondary information provided at all times by the browser used by the poster. Sherdog features some commercials and other miscellaneous information that could be considered relevant when posting, but as it is nigh impossible to analyze their significance to the posts discussed in this thesis, they will be ignored.

2.2.3 Interaction Order

The interaction order is quite straightforward and simple in a forum environment such as the one under study. Online communication differs from face-to-face interaction mainly in the sense that participants must usually wait for the complete responses from each other before they can reply. This effectively nullifies turn-taking and the importance of analyzing the interaction order. The posts appear in a chronological order and while it is possible that multiple conversations take place simultaneously in a single thread, the interaction order remains logical in order to

ensure that the conversations remain understandable. The historical bodies of the participants may influence the interaction itself, but for the purposes of this thesis the order is rather irrelevant, as the conversations are analyzed as three turn sequences. The nature of this type of asynchronous interaction order was established in section 2.1.3 and its significance to the conflict sequence itself will be discussed in the analysis section (4.1).

3 MATERIAL

The material for this thesis is gathered from online discussion threads on the forums of Sherdog. The forum is divided into six categories and each of these categories has been further divided into sub categories. The threads discussed in this paper (section 4.1) are randomly selected from 'Fight Discussion' category's 'UFC Discussion' sub forum. The forums on Sherdog are arranged so that threads are shown in a chronological order, meaning that the thread with the latest entry will always appear at the top of the page. Since it is possible to go back and post in threads that were originally created years ago, it is quite common that the topics being displayed on the front page of the forum are outdated. And since the selection of the threads being inspected was done randomly, a few of them were indeed over a year old. Such threads usually have hundreds of posts in them and for the purposes of this thesis it was not reasonable to inspect such massive threads in their entirety. As a result, the conflict sequences found in the threads are singled out and analyzed individually.

This section illustrates the general atmosphere of the forums by providing examples of the communication that takes place. These discussions are then further analyzed in section 4. In terms of mediated discourse analysis, this section is significant to the historical bodies of the participants, particularly section 3.2, as well as the discourses in place.

Because Sherdog.com is an open website that requires no registered username or account to access, it is unnecessary to change usernames or ensure the anonymity of the posters analyzed. All the information analyzed in this thesis is available to everyone for free at the original source: Sherdog.com.

3.1 Communication on Sherdog

This section includes some of the general features of communication typical to Sherdog. These preliminary observations were made, for the most part, during the gathering of data for this thesis. However, having been a member of the community since 2011 and having established a solid zone of identification during this time, some of the following generalizations are based on previous experiences using this forum. Evidence and examples supporting these claims can be found at the end of this section, as well as the analysis section of this thesis.

The most common topics of discussion on Sherdog revolve around upcoming events and the athletes' skills compared to one another. A large amount of the threads inspected for this thesis were somewhat repetitive, which was often pointed out by the more experienced posters; if a topic has been discussed extensively, it is considered redundant to create new threads about it. Furthermore, some of the topics discussed on the forum are rather ridiculous and do not contribute anything significant to the community. However, these threads are usually deleted by the moderators shortly after they are created. Nevertheless, certain posters seem to be somewhat rude towards threads they do not consider up to their standards and as a result the general atmosphere on the forums can be considered hostile, as evidenced by the example posts below. The examples were randomly selected from threads that were active at the time of inspection.

05-20-2014, 07:05 PM – GUSWER: “You've always known that [Aldo has weak hands]? Wow, what a fucking genius...”¹

¹ <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/kz-jose-aldo-much-weaker-person-than-i-thought-mendes-stronger-person-2742773/index4.html>

05-19-2014, 08:22 PM – IloveTHIS: you are fucking retarded. I sincerely mean that. not just throwing that out there to argue with someone online, you are truly fucking retarded.²

Certain topics that are considered concluded often reappear after new information is made available. An example of such a topic is the pound-for-pound thread. The term pound-for-pound, or P4P, refers to a ranking system in which the fighters' weight and size are not taken into consideration. It was first coined in boxing when Sugar Ray Robinson was considered the most skilled athlete, but as he was fighting in the lower weight classes, he could not be marketed as the best boxer due to the fact that he would most likely be unable to defeat the heavier opponents. Almost every time one of the top athletes of the sport has an impressive performance, their appreciation on Sherdog rapidly ascends to preposterous proportions and as a result, the P4P threads emerge with inexperienced viewers claiming that this athlete should now be considered the best of all time. Vice versa, whenever a fighter loses, he appears to lose all credibility and generally speaking the users of this forum appear to have relatively short attention spans. The following examples are titles of threads found using the search engine on Sherdog. They were all created during one day and illustrate the amount of P4P threads on the site relatively effectively.

Is Chris Weidman #1 p4p, if not how long till he is?

Aldo vs Pettis and the p4p rankings

Fact: Aldo has a definite chance to beat Pettis, no other champ has this P4P claim.

Dana White picks Barao over Aldo for #2 P4P

The pound-for-pound argument is rather redundant by its very nature, as it is virtually impossible to discover how fighters from different weight classes would

² <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/jose-aldo-never-going-lose-his-prime-2742181/index4.html>

fare against each other if they were similar in size, weight and stature. Often the more experienced members of the community point this out, but as evidenced by the example thread titles, the sheer number of P4P threads is remarkable.

3.2 Profiles

Sherdog is a forum that focuses primarily on fight discussions and martial arts. The community utilizes a ranking system to categorize its users based on their activity and experience. This has been achieved by implementing a color belt system similar to most martial arts: the more experienced you are, the higher your rank. The sheer number of posters and posts alone prevents the use of knowledge and coherence of discussion as a base for awarding belts. As a result, the community awards belts based on the number of entries each user posts. The rankings are:

150 = Yellow

250 = Orange (comes with ability to have an avatar on your profile)

500 = Blue

950 = Green

1500 = Purple

2500 = Brown

5000 = Black (comes with ability to have custom text and/or a custom belt)

7500 = Red

10000 = Silver

In addition to the belt, a user profile shows the username, avatar (provided the user has the ability and desire to use one), join date, location, post count, amount of virtual cash, status (online / offline) and signature. The user is in charge of how much information she wishes to divulge, but the belt color, join date, post count and vCash are always visible. Moderators and premium members are separated from regular

users by customized avatars and belts, which are usually designed to be more memorable than the standard ones in order to distinguish these users from the others.

Furthermore, registered users of the forum have the ability to inspect each other's profiles in order to browse their posting history. In addition, users can post private messages in order to contact each other and to avoid clogging the forums in case there are only two participants in a conversation. The example profile in section 2.2.2 illustrates most of these features as they are presented on the forum.

In addition to the belt ranking system borrowed from martial arts, Sherdog utilizes a warning system similar to that in football. For unacceptable conduct, such as posting banned images and advertisements or using offensive language, a user can receive a warning; a yellow card. As it does in football, a yellow card indicates that a user has disobeyed the rules and lost some privileges as a result. On Sherdog, these privileges include the ability to post images and videos, the ability to edit one's posts and the use of an avatar to create a more distinguished profile. An even more severe warning is displayed in the form of two yellow cards and any following unacceptable conduct can result in a permanent ban from the community. All the penalties expire in 30 days if the user does not break any more rules.

4 ANALYSIS

This section includes the conflict sequences chosen for inspection in this thesis as well as the analysis of social structures by establishing a profile hierarchy within the community. As the main theoretical framework used to analyze the sequences stems from conversation analysis, a certain amount of linguistic analysis is included as well. As stated before, from a mediated discourse analysis point-of-view this section should be approached in segments: in sections 4.1 and 4.3 the foregrounded information is within the posts, in section 4.2 it is within the user profiles.

4.1 Conflict Sequences

This section includes the identification and analysis of the conflict sequences that were selected for closer inspection. The sequences have been divided into two categories based on the nature of the third turn: unresolved conflicts (third turn is another argument) and reconciling turns (third turn is a reconciling one). In order to make the text more readable, the quotes have been omitted from the examples, even though they are there in some of the original posts. The examples also feature the time and date of the posts, as they are presented in the actual forums. The wording in each example is taken directly from the post, including all the typos and extra-linguistic elements. The profiles of each participant, as they appeared during the gathering of data, will be presented at the end of the examples. The significance of the information available in these profiles, if any, will be discussed in relation to the posts analyzed. Links to each thread will be provided at the beginning of each respective example.

4.1.1 Unresolved Conflicts

This section features four examples of conflicts where the third turn is another argument. To differentiate these sequences from the reconciling ones analyzed in section 4.1.2, they are here and after called ‘unresolved conflicts’, though they may have been resolved later in the conversation. The end results of the sequences, however significant to the sequence itself, are stated at the end of each example.

Example 1 - <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/ufc-fighter-you-most-thankful-2616847/>

11-28-2013, 01:50 PM - JonJackHAMMER: “Yeah I’m doing the holiday theme question...”

But in all honesty, which UFC fighter are you grateful to have been able to watch? Current or retired, doesn't matter. I would have to say mine is Frankie Edgar. I know he gets a lot of heat here, but I really admire his ability to fight through adversity and reach deep down when there seems to be nothing left.

So what do you guys say?”

11-28-2013, 01:52 PM – wellsdj1: “None and why should I? I make them money by buying the PPV’s not the other way around.”

11-28-2013, 01:56 PM - JonJackHAMMER: “You remind me of my grandpa. He seems to dislike our hometown football team... cries... complains about their lack of skills... yet **continues to watch the games.....????**”

This example is from a thread created on Thanksgiving Day to discuss which fighters the posters were grateful for. This type of “who is your favorite fighter?” threads are quite common, and they are often discredited by posters because they tend to be somewhat repetitive.

JonJackHAMMER’s post works as the trigger in this sequence, but besides the typo in ‘grateful’ and the acronym ‘UFC’ there is very little analyze in it. For the purpose of analyzing this conflict sequence, the only relevant sentence of the post is the question itself: who are you grateful for? The post, while relatively neutral in itself, acts as a trigger to the entire sequence without being hostile on its own.

Wellsdj1’s response is the first argument. It features a syntax error in the first sentence as well as an acronym and a missing comma in the second. The first sentence lacks the word ‘be’ from the end in order to function as a correct response to the question posed in the trigger, and there should be a comma after ‘PPV’s’. The acronym means ‘pay-per-view’ and it is the most common way of viewing UFC events in the United States. While there is essentially nothing argumentative about wellsdj1’s post, the overall tone is somewhat provocative and the conflict is created when JonJackHAMMER remarks that it is peculiar for wellsdj1 to pay for something he claims he does not like.

JonJackHAMMER’s response is an example of ‘interactive written discourse’ as it is written in a vernacular style, as evidenced by the spelling of ‘grandpa’ and the use of ‘...’ to set the tone. The humoristic tone arguably works, as the entire post is an attempt to ridicule wellsdj1 by comparing him to an almost caricature-like figure while questioning his actions. He is essentially asking ‘Why are you here, on a forum dedicated to MMA, and why do you keep paying to see the sport if you do not like it?’ The extra-linguistic element, bolding, is used here, in addition to the excessive use of question marks, to draw attention to the last statement in the end in order to make it function as a rhetorical question.

Another interesting aspect of this particular sequence is the defensive position assumed by JonJackHAMMER regarding his thread. As stated in section 3.1, the prevailing presumption most posters assume is that the atmosphere is relatively

hostile in Sherdog. As a result, some posters react rather strongly when their opinions are questioned, especially in threads they have created themselves.

The thread continued for another 112 posts (by 1.12.2013), and there were no more responses to this specific sequence.

Profiles:

	JonJackHAMMER	wellsdj1
Belt colour:	Orange	Black
Join date:	June 2011	February 2011
Location:	Tucson, Arizona	-
Posts:	308	5,028
vCash:	500	500

Table 1 Profiles for users in example 1

These profiles convey a relatively small amount of information significant to the conflict sequence. Apart from an orange belt member seemingly mocking a black belt member, there are no implications regarding the social status of the participants within the community. However, it is worth noting that the participants have joined Sherdog at approximately the same time but one of them has over 16 times more posts. This illustrates the fact that the belt color in itself is a rather untrustworthy indicator of the posters' experience concerning MMA. Profile hierarchies and social statuses of the posters will be discussed in more detail in section 4.2.

Example 2 - <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/next-nate-diaz-2618635/>

12-01-2013, 01:05 AM - Warchida: [Give Nate] Tj. They both messed Gray up, seems to make sense

12-01-2013, 01:13 AM - Jawth: Not really, TJ is very close to a title shot and Nate still needs 3 or 4 fights to get there. I think RDA would be a better choice, he's on a streak too but not as good of one as TJ is.

12-01-2013, 01:15 AM – GrindingANARCHY: 3 or 4? Uhhh he's just KO'd the #5 guy. He beats another top 5 guy, he's fighting for #1 contender especially if Pettis is champ. If Gil wins the belt, he's moving to 170.

This example is from a thread where posters discussed the next possible opponent for Nate Diaz, a fighter who recently had a convincing victory. In this example, Warchida triggers the conflict by suggesting that Diaz's next opponent should be 'Tj', referring to Timothy Jerome 'TJ' Grant. Grant is a lightweight contender who has been promised multiple title shots, but lingering injuries have prevented him from actually competing for the title. Diaz is a former contender, who recently won against Gray Maynard, an opponent whom Grant has also defeated. Before his fight with Maynard, Diaz had lost two consecutive bouts.

In addition to having misspelled 'TJ', Warchida's sentence lacks a full stop from the end and features the relatively colloquial term 'to mess someone up', used here to describe a dominant victory over an opponent. The conflict here is created by Jawth, who questions Warchida's premise of ranking both Diaz and Grant near the top of the lightweight division. Jawth argues that Diaz needs a longer win streak to be considered a contender, whereas Grant has already been promised a title shot. As a solution, Jawth suggests that Diaz should compete against 'RDA' (Rafael dos Anjos). The second sentence in Jawth's post features quite a low register and is missing the article 'a' from "not as good of _ one as TJ is."

In the second argument, GrindingANARCHY disagrees with Jawth about the number of wins Diaz needs in order to be considered a contender again. The post features the conversational filler ‘Uhhh’ in written form, and references to Anthony Pettis (current lightweight champion), Gilber Melendez (lightweight contender and a training partner of Diaz) and Maynard, who was ranked #5 lightweight in the world by the UFC before his fight with Diaz. ‘Moving to 170’ means moving to the welterweight (170lbs) division, and the common acronym ‘KO’ means knockout. In addition, GrindingANARCHY has omitted the conjunction ‘if’ from the beginning of the subordinate clause “He beats another...” in the second sentence of his post.

The sequence continued for four more turns by Jawth and GrindingANARCHY, each an argument against the latest post by the other, until it was reconciled by GrindingANARCHY who ‘agreed to disagree’. It is worth noting that Warchida did not participate in the conflict after the trigger turn.

Profiles:

	Warchida	Jawth	GrindingANARCHY
Belt colour:	Blue	Black	Silver
Join date:	June 2011	November 2011	July 2012
Location:	New Zealand	-	In the clouds
Posts:	922	5,312	16,115
vCash:	500	50	324

Table 2 Profiles for users in example 2

Apart from the staggering amount of entries GrindingANARCHY has posted in under two years and Warchida’s username (derived from Lyoto Machida, a middleweight fighter in the UFC), there is relatively little to analyze in these profiles. It is noteworthy, however, that both members with higher post counts have lost virtual cash in betting, while the member with the lowest post count has apparently not participated in online gambling.

Example 3 - <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/gustafsson-very-underrated-sherdog-2729091/>

05-02-2014, 02:22 AM – Substance Abuse: “Gus at his apex lost to Jones on the cards. The second fight will be much worse for him, I believe.”

05-02-2014, 02:25 AM – HeexX: “What is it with this ‘Gus was at his best, Jones at his worst’ circlejerk? Get real. Gus could have fought a way better fight. He could have followed up on his shots more when Jones was on the move, he could not have ducked into the shot that made him lose the 4th round and therefore the fight etc.”

05-02-2014, 02:27 AM – ABSthetics: “What makes you think he didnt fight better? Jones ate his ass up in the later rounds.

Its not a circle jerk its a fact. Jones said he came in cocky and wasnt at his best. He said he wrote the fight off. Gus came in and threw the kitchen sink at him and still came up short.”

05-02-2014, 02:41 AM – HeexX: “No, Jones got his ass handed to him for 4½ minutes of the 4th round and then landed a hail mary elbow Gus should have been prepared for. Have you not watched the fight?

A ‘fact’ ... You keep using that word. I don’t think you know what it means.

I get it though, I do. You have to convince yourself Gus was at his best and Jones at his worst so you don’t have to get so worked up when it’s time for the rematch. That’s living in ignorance though, and will inevitably put you up for another rude awakening. I wonder what the next excuse will be. Gus had another apeX super fight and Jones had already beat him once so he took him lightly again. :D”

05-02-2014, 02:45 AM – ABSthetics: “I’m already worked up for the rematch. How is it ‘another’ rude awakening when Gus lost the damn fight?”

I say it was a fact because there are a dozen different interviews where Jon Jones says it himself.”

05-02-2014, 02:49 AM – HeexX: “Well, since you’re talking about how Jones is going to come in and absolutely smash Gustafsson, I’m assuming that’s what you thought were going to happen in the first fight? It was a rude awakening for many Jones fans, and I’m quite sure you were on of them, correct me if I’m wrong.

Yeah, and before the fight he said he was breaking records in his camp. Doesn’t mean too much, does it? Sounds like someone desperately trying to preserve his now shattered unbeatable aura.”

This example consists of six turns instead of three and it demonstrates the nature of an unresolved conflict sequence rather effectively. The topic of the thread in question is whether or not Alexander “The Mauler” Gustafsson is an underrated fighter. Gustafsson competes in the light heavyweight division (186-205 lbs.) of the UFC and recently fought for the championship title against Jones. The fight lasted all scheduled five rounds and was the most competitive one in Jones’ dominant career so far. In fact, a very large number of fans believe Gustafsson deserved to win, and debates about the fight are constant on Sherdog. Some of the controversy is created by the fact that leading up their fight, Jones had been extremely dominant and this was the first time he was in any sort of trouble during a match. Because the fight was significantly different to Jones’ previous matches, a common conclusion among his fans was that he was not properly prepared for the fight and that he did not take Gustafsson seriously as an opponent.

Substance Abuse’s post works as the trigger to this sequence. He states that Gustafsson essentially fought a perfect fight and was still unable to defeat Jones, and that in their upcoming rematch the champion will be more prepared. As stated above, this is a very common explanation to the relatively unexpected events that took place in their first match. Apart from the somewhat uncommon use of the word ‘apex’, there is not much to analyze in the first turn of this sequence. “Gus” is a commonly

used abbreviation for Gustafsson, and it is believed to have originated from the fact that people were unable to correctly spell the Swede's last name.

HeexX's reply acts as the first argument. He questions the entire premise presented in the opening turn and points out aspects of the fight where he believes Gustafsson could have been better. He also refers to a critical moment in the fight, where Jones was able to hit Gustafsson in the fourth round with a very powerful elbow to the forehead, visually staggering him and almost finishing the fight by knockout. The conflict is created by HeexX disagreeing with the other two posters concerning the potential abilities of the athletes involved. He also uses the somewhat contemptuous term 'circlejerk' to disrespect the opinions of those who believe Gustafsson fought to his maximal potential. Urbandictionary.com defines 'circlejerk' as follows:

When a bunch of blowhards - usually politicians - get together for a debate but usually end up agreeing with each other's viewpoints to the point of redundancy, stroking each other's egos as if they were extensions of their genitals (ergo, the masturbatory insinuation). Basically, it's what happens when the choir preaches to itself. (Ninja Disaster, 2004)

The third turn of the sequence consists of ABSthetics' argument against the second turn. The question in the first sentence is somewhat poorly structured. Apparently, ABSthetics attempts to convey that HeexX does not have any proof that Gustafsson could have had a better performance. However, HeexX has just argued what Gustafsson could have done differently. A more understandable wording would have been "What makes you think he didn't fight to the best of his abilities?", for example. ABSthetics then states, with a rather colourful choice of words, that Jones won the so-called championship rounds (4.-5.).

In the second part of the post, ABSthetics responds to HeexX's circlejerk comment. He argues that the aforementioned scenario concerning each fighter's performance vis-à-vis their potential during the fight is factual based on comments made by Jones after the fight. The last part of the post consists of an expression derived from the somewhat clichéd saying in fight terminology: "to throw everything but the kitchen sink" at an opponent. A reversed version of the expression is used here to

figuratively state that Gustafsson actually threw even the kitchen sink (i.e. everything he had) at Jones, but it still was not enough to earn the victory.

In addition to being linguistically inadequate (failure to use apostrophes to mark omission of letters), ABSthetics' post can be characterized as a weak argument. His entire premise, whether truthful or not, is based on the comments made by one of the participating athletes after the event took place. These comments, especially when considering they were made immediately following the most competitive fight of his career, could have very little truth value and do not prove anything concerning the fight as a 'fact'. It is only natural for both athletes to argue for their own victory in a situation such as this but their opinions, while potentially more valuable than the opinions of anyone else concerned, remain subjective, not factual.

HeexX addresses this issue in the fourth turn of the sequence. He also responds to ABSthetics' comment about Jones being better in the championship rounds with a play on words. HeexX argues that instead of "eating his ass up" (winning decisively), Jones actually "got his ass handed to him" (lost decisively). Here the sequence comes close to addressing what is arguably the most common cause for conflicts on the forum: the scoring system in MMA. Unlike other sports, e.g. football or ice-hockey, MMA matches do not always end in a clear result, i.e. win, lose or draw. If the fight lasts its entire scheduled duration, the result will be decided by three judges using a 10-point must scoring system. This means that each round of the fight is scored individually, with the round winner gaining 10 points and his opponent 9 or less. However, the judges' decision, while official, can be controversial due to the vagueness of the rules.

During a fight the judges attempt to "evaluate mixed martial arts techniques, such as effective striking, effective grappling, control of the ring/fighting area, effective aggressiveness and defense." (UFC website) These rules, while theoretically sound, are very dependent on how the judges view the fight. It is very difficult, even for a professional, to judge how hard a punch or a kick landed, or how effective a fighter's aggressiveness is during a fight. Nowhere in the rules is it specified how much

weight is put on a weak punch compared to a heavy one, for example, or how much the judges are supposed to value certain techniques over others. As a result, each viewer tends to score the fight subjectively instead of accepting the official scorecards as facts. This is a source for constant debate on Sherdog.

In the fourth turn, HeexX again brings up the elbow strike that Jones landed in the fourth round of the fight. The reason that strike is so often discussed is that it was the most significant strike of the entire fight and possibly secured Jones' victory. According to fight metric, an unofficial site that counts all the strikes landed in each UFC fight and categorizes them according to power and significance, Gustafsson was winning the fourth round by quite a large margin, until Jones hit him with said elbow strike. This is where the controversy originates: it is unclear in the rules whether it was Gustafsson who deserved to win the round based on his success during the majority of the round, or Jones based on the fact that the elbow strike was significantly more powerful than anything else in the fight and nearly resulted in him getting a knockout.

HeexX ends the turn by expressing his belief in Gustafsson's abilities and ridiculing the other two posters by claiming that they are using excuses to rationalize the quality of Jones' performance. ABSthetics responds by pointing out that Jones in fact won the fight and again attempts to argue that his opinion on the matter is factual since "Jones says it himself". In the sixth turn, HeexX explains his earlier post and finally addresses the somewhat suspicious nature of the comments that are the basis of ABSthetics' argument. HeexX points out that according to Jones, he was in the best physical shape of his career prior to the fight as he was breaking his own records at the gym, and how this contradicts with the comments he made after the fight. The rhetorical question in the post emphasizes the point that it is highly unlikely that Jones did not prepare for the fight properly if during the preparation he was in the best physical condition he had ever been.

Out of all the conflict sequences examined for this thesis, this example is the most linguistically coherent. While nearly all the posts feature some mistakes in spelling or grammar, and emoticons and colorful language are used, the overall quality of the text closely resembles formal written language. Both HeexX and ABSthetics also

attempt to create actual arguments to counter each other's opinions instead of resorting to mere insults. As a result, this sequence offers perhaps the most significant pieces of data when examining the social structures of the community.

The thread continued for another 91 posts (6.5.2014) with no more responses to this particular sequence. All three posters continued to post on thread, however, and were participants in other similar conflict sequences. Substance Abuse and HeexX both posted a somewhat reconciling turn, though not directly related to this sequence, where they agreed that the fight between Jones and Gustafsson was very close, and that they would have accepted the outcome no matter who won.

Profiles:

	Substance Abuse	HeexX	ABSthetics
Belt colour:	Silver	'Double yellow'	'Double yellow'
Join date:	August 2008	August 2012	December 2010
Locaiton:	Constellation Funk	The snowy plains on which the Mauler roams	Projecting in the Astral Plane
Posts:	67,887	4,533	4,223
vCash:	500	500	500

Table 3 Profiles for users in example 3

By all indicators visible in these profiles, Substance Abuse is the most experienced poster involved. While he participates in the sequence, it is evident that the main conflict revolves between HeexX and ABSthetics, both of whom express their opinions relatively strongly. Consequently, both posters have received the double yellow warning due to improper behavior. It is unclear, however, whether the warnings are a result of this argument or other posts. Additionally, all three posters have customized their locations. The most relevant of these customizations is HeexX's location, which, in addition to his posts, indicates he is a fan of Gustafsson's.

Example 4 - <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/does-sonnen-stand-chance-vs-wand-2733425/>

05-07-2014, 02:06 PM - AxeMurderer2010: "Sonnen lost to Terry Martin..."

05-07-2014, 02:09 PM – Perfecto: "u r an idiot...Wandy lost to Leben recently in 2011....Sonnen lost to terry martin 10 years ago in 2004...seriously..u should learn to argue or just get smarter...come on...dont try to play with the big boys..you play a mans game...you pay a mans price...dont throw stones at a glass house friend!!!!"

05-07-2014, 02:13 PM – AxeMurderer2010: "Why does it matter when they lost? Since the Wand smashed Cung's face in, and corpsed Brian Stann, everybody has that 1 loss on their record people will go to to refer to them as no good like Terry Martin lol .Step up and put your big girl pants on, you won't last long here white belt.

Edit: Also I find it hilarious how you tell me to get smarter, yet you're typing like a 16 year old teenage girl.

Lol this will be fun."

This sequence is from a thread discussing an upcoming fight between Chael Sonnen and Wanderlei 'The Axe Murderer' Silva. Prior to the three turns chosen for inspection, 'Perfecto' stated that Silva has a loss to Chris Leben on his record and that he thinks that fact alone is enough to come to the conclusion that Silva will lose to Sonnen as well. While that post can be considered as the trigger to this sequence, it had very little to analyze in it apart from prompting a response from AxeMurderer2010.

AxeMurderer2010 responds to Perfecto's post by reminding him that Sonnen also has losses on his record. The somewhat correct punctuation in AxeMurderer2010's second post of the sequence suggests that the use of the three dots is not an accident

or a mistake resulting from carelessness. To a mixed-martial-arts fan, the most likely scenario is that AxeMurderer2010 is referring to the fact that a loss to Martin can be considered more significant than a loss to Leben, and is using the inconclusive punctuation at the end of his sentence as a means to draw the reader's attention to this. Neither fighter reached top 10 statuses in their respective divisions, but prior to his retirement Leben was a household name and holds a victory over Martin, who has not fought in the UFC since February 2008.

Perfecto's response acts as the first argument in this sequence. The hostile tone of the post is made evident to the reader in the very beginning of the first line, as Perfecto calls AxeMurderer2010 an idiot. He then proceeds to argue that Silva's ('Wandy' is a nickname for Wanderlei) loss is more significant to the upcoming fight due to the fact that it happened recently, whereas Sonnen lost to Martin in December 2004. The remainder of the post consists of a series of somewhat clichéd phrases repeated to the point of them becoming tautological. Taking into consideration the apparent shortcomings in his spelling and overall logical thinking, the irony of Perfecto suggesting that AxeMurderer2010 should "get smarter" and not "throw stones at a glass house" while succumbing to hypocrisy himself seems lost to him.

From a linguistic point-of-view, Perfecto's post offers perhaps the largest amount of significant data of all the posts examined in this thesis. In addition to the use of incorrect punctuation, the post lacks capital letters, possessive suffixes, apostrophes indicating omission and incorrect spelling of the words "you" and "are". Combined with the inconsequential phrases in the post, these grammatical shortcomings are indicative of a lack of intelligence. Perfecto has not included his hometown in his profile, but even if a non-native English speaker could be forgiven the spelling mistakes, the arguments remain unintelligent and incoherent.

Comparing Perfecto's post to JonJackHAMMER's second post in the first example illustrates how the use of the same extra-linguistic element "..." can cause different reactions in a reader. As stated in example 1, JonJackHAMMER uses this stylistic feature to achieve a conversational tone in his post, but in Perfecto's post the same feature comes across as linguistically incompetent. The other aforementioned linguistic inadequacies found in Perfecto's post are possibly the source of this

difference in tone, but the overall structure of the two posts should be examined as well. Perfecto separates all of his sentences with three dots, while JonJackHAMMER uses the feature to indicate pauses in the part of his text that should be read as a list. While both users essentially utilize this form of punctuation incorrectly, it can be argued that JonJackHAMMER achieves the desired effect.

AxeMurderer2010's response acts as the second argument in this sequence. In it he argues that because Silva has defeated Cung Le and Brian Stann since losing to Leben, the loss no longer matters. While his point about fans putting too much weight on a fighter's loss is valid, the premise of time being irrelevant in the equation is not. Ten years is a long time for an athlete to develop his skills and Sonnen can hardly be considered the same fighter he was when he lost to Martin. The significance of the time gap between the two losses mentioned is made all the more evident when taking into consideration the fact that both athletes are inexorably on the latter part of their careers and close to retirement (Silva was born 1976, Sonnen 1977). While it is impossible to say which athlete has advanced further since their loss, it is somewhat safe to assume that Sonnen made more progress between the ages of 27 and 37 than Silva did between the ages of 35 and 37.

The latter part of the post consists of a counter insult to Perfecto's earlier attempt to ridicule him, as AxeMurderer2010 suggests that Perfecto has to learn how to formulate more coherent arguments should he wish to remain an active member on the forum. AxeMurderer2010 also refers to the belt system utilized by Sherdog to rank users based on their post count. As is the case with most martial arts that utilize a belt color system, a white belt is an indicator of the lowest possible rank on Sherdog and AxeMurderer2010 belittles Perfecto's opinions based on this. Calling someone a white belt in an attempt to undermine their ideas and posts is very common on the forums.

AxeMurderer2010 has also edited his post after initially posting it in order to recognize the ironical nature of Perfecto's post. The edit also features another insult which, when combined with the earlier reference to "big girl pants", suggests a male chauvinistic undertone. While it is entirely possible that Perfecto is of the female gender, AxeMurderer2010 has no way of knowing that and as a result, it is somewhat

safe to assume that he is using the gender references in an attempt to ridicule the other participant. “To put on big boy pants” is an urban slang expression that suggests one should grow up and conduct oneself in a manner more suitable to adults. AxeMurderer2010 has revised the saying to “big girl pants”. The edit ends with an anticipatory notion which suggests that the user expects this conflict sequence to continue.

From a linguistic point-of-view, AxeMurderer2010’s post is more coherent than Perfecto’s. The only notable mistake is in punctuation (full stop in the wrong place), but the register of the post remains relatively low due to the somewhat awkward sentence structure. In addition to the relatively common abbreviation lol (to laugh out loud / lots of laughter), the poster uses two humoristic, yet brutal, euphemisms for winning decisively: “to smash someone’s face in” and “to corpse someone”.

The thread continued for another 135 posts (8.5.2014) with one more argument by each participant. However, the sequence remains unresolved.

Profiles:

	AxeMurderer2010	Perfecto
Belt colour:	Premium member	White
Join date:	December 2010	December 2013
Location:	Mathis, Texas	-
Posts:	2,341	147
vCash:	500	500

Table 4 Profiles for users in example 4

The most relevant information conveyed by these profiles is the username ‘AxeMurderer2010’. It immediately lets the reader know this user is a fan of Silva’s, and that he created his profile in 2010. Furthermore, his location is in the United

States, but he is actively campaigning for the Brazilian fighter. Indeed, certain athletes seem to enjoy popularity on Sherdog that transcends nationality. It is difficult to imagine the situation reversed, however, as Sonnen has publically insulted multiple Brazilian fighters as well as the nation, its inhabitants and their culture as a whole. This was a marketing strategy utilized by Sonnen in order to attract more attention to his championship fights with Anderson Silva in 2010 and 2012.

4.1.2 Reconciling Turns

The examples in this section differ from the previous ones mainly in their third turn. In these sequences the third turn is a reconciling one, which essentially prevents the conflict from escalating into an actual sequence.

Example 5 - <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/mike-winkeljohn-jon-jones-will-soon-reach-anderson-silva-level-striking-2243837/>

10-24-2012, 08:50 AM – SL9: “He's almost there, he's almost to that Anderson Silva place where he is going to start getting those one punch and one kick knockouts.”

10-24-2012, 08:55 AM - Ohioan: “JBJ is a phenom and among the greatest talents in MMA's short history. That said, he'll never approach Anderson's striking prowess.”

10-24-2012, 09:35 AM – MMAwisdom:** “Jones has been doing striking for like 3,5 years. Anderson has been striking for 30 years.”

This example is from a thread where the striking abilities of the UFC light heavyweight champion Jon ‘Bones’ Jones were discussed. In the trigger to this sequence, SL9 is comparing UFC light heavyweight champion Jon Jones to former UFC middleweight champion Anderson Silva. The two were frequently referred to, and widely regarded as, the two best MMA fighters in the world until Silva lost his championship title in July 2013. Before that he was undefeated in the UFC, setting the records for most consecutive wins (16) and most consecutive title defenses (10) in the organization. Silva is known for his precision striking, speed and overall prowess with stand-up techniques. Jon Jones is the youngest champion in UFC history, and he is undefeated, except for a disqualification loss due to the use of illegal techniques. Before Silva’s loss (i.e. during the creation of the thread), a bout between the two was often discussed and seemed inevitable since there is only a 20lbs difference between their respective weight classes, and Silva often competed in the light heavyweight division as well.

SL9 opens the discussion with a quotation from Jones’ coach, saying that Jones, despite his young age and relative lack of experience, is already close to Silva in terms of striking skills. This is a relatively strong statement, considering the experience gap between the two (Jones was born in 1987 and Silva in 1975) and the fact that Jones has never scored knockout win, nor is he known for his striking skills. Due to the controversial nature of the statement, and the fact that both fighters have large, quite vocal fanbases, the ensuing conflict can be described as somewhat expected.

Ohioan’s response to SL9 acts as the first argument in this sequence, though it is not excessively argumentative. ‘BJJ’ is an acronym for Jon ‘Bones’ Jones, and the first sentence of the post is an acknowledgement of his skills. However, the statement is somewhat undermined in the following sentence where Ohioan claims that Jones will never reach Silva’s skill level. The conflict is created by the use of the absolute ‘never’, keeping in mind that the participants are discussing a very young athlete, who is arguably not even close to his physical prime. In other words, it is virtually impossible to say how skilled Jones will become, and even if he surpasses Silva,

comparing two athletes with each other is always relatively subjective, even if they compete with each other.

MMAwisdom** acknowledges this in the reconciling turn of the sequence, as he remarks how absurd it is to compare the two when taking their experience gap into consideration. Without stating it explicitly, MMAwisdom** expresses that he is impressed with Jones' striking, considering how short of a time he has been training, but at the same time he realizes that Silva is, for the time being, the better stiker. The thread continued for another 266 posts (by 1.12.2013) with no further references to the sequence.

Profiles:

	SL9	Ohioan	MMAwisdom**
Belt colour:	Premium member	Brown	Banned
Join date:	September 2010	June 2004	October 2010
Location:	-	The Heart of it All	-
Posts:	2,647	3,196	16,387
vCash:	500	500	500

Table 5 Profiles for users in example 5

The only relevant piece of information found in these profiles is the fact that the most experienced poster, based on post count at least, is the one who reconciles the argument. Ironically, he has since been banned from the site due to continuing improper behavior. Additionally, Ohioan's post count is indicative of a deliberate pace in posting when taking his join date into consideration.

Example 6 - <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/who-more-deserving-title-shot-woodley-lombard-2697933/>

03-18-2014, 07:07 PM – Augustus Caesar: “Hector, but Woodley has some great wins and is doing a stellar job campaigning for a title shot, so I wouldn't mind seeing him get it.”

03-18-2014, 07:38 PM – Andre Xiong: “define "stellar job at campaigning". In my opinion, it should not matter how good at you are at "campaigning" outside the ring but your fight record, specifically your UFC fight record. Woodley indeed has some very nice wins but I'd like to see one more win (to further erase the Shields loss).”

03-18-2014, 07:45 PM – Augustus Caesar: “It seems like he wants a title shot more, he is not only making a good case for himself with his fights, but looks ready for it; that is important in this business, Dana White loves fighters whom he believes are more hungry than others. It was Woodley's persistence that got him the fight with Condit, and after winning it, he has done several interviews, in which he makes a case for himself to get a title shot.”

This conflict sequence is from a thread where the participants are discussing who should become the number one contender in the welterweight (156-170 lbs.) division, Hector ‘Lightning’ Lombard or Tyron ‘The Chosen One’ Woodley. The UFC has not implemented a clear system to determine contenders and often certain athletes get overlooked due to their fighting style, personality or relationship with the people in charge. Some fighters have to win 7-8 consecutive fights to get a title shot while others have received their opportunity coming off a loss. Dana White, the President of the UFC, often appears to change his mind concerning “promised” title

shots and some posters on Sherdog argue that the ambiguity of the rankings prevents certain people from viewing MMA as a legitimate sport: currently an athlete's achievements in the ring do not guarantee advancement in the rankings. This quote from White prior to Woodley's most recent fight illustrates said ambiguity.

It's a great card with great fights, but there's a lot of great fights at 170 [pounds] on this card. I think pretty much anybody who's fighting on this card to come off looking great and exciting, anybody can get a shot. (St. Martin, 2014)

The first post by Augustus Caesar acts as the trigger to the sequence as he says that Lombard deserves the title shot based on accomplishments, but also states that Woodley could be seen as a worthy contender based on 'campaigning'. At first glance the post seems relatively neutral as Caesar does not disrespect either athlete and quite clearly states that he could see either one deserving the title shot. However, the true conflict in this sequence lies within that juxtaposition: should the reward (the title shot) go to the fighter who has a more impressive record or the fighter whom the general public sees as a more interesting person outside the ring and who has the better relationship with the executives in charge?

Andre Xiong's post acts as the first argument in which he addresses this problem. While the post is not very argumentative *per se*, Xiong does indicate that in his opinion a fighter's actions outside the ring should not matter when deciding who should be awarded the next contender status. He also wishes that Augustus Caesar would explain what he means by "campaigning for a title shot". The second part of the post consists of Xiong's acknowledgement of Woodley's achievements. However, he also points out that Woodley recently lost and that alone should keep him from getting the title shot.

Augustus Caesar's reply is a relatively rare incident where the post essentially acts as a reconciling turn and an argument at the same time. It can be argued that it is the neutral tone of all three posts that render this sequence challenging to analyze. The post consists of Augustus Caesar's explanation to his earlier statement as well as further arguments in favor of his opinion.

Profiles:

	Augustus Caesar	Andre Xiong
Belt colour:	Black	Professional fighter
Join date:	November 2012	January 2005
Location:	Gainesville, Florida	-
Posts:	7,927	6,821
vCash:	1865	500

Table 6 Profiles for users in example 6

There are two points worth noting in these profiles. First, Augustus Caesar has gained a significant amount of virtual cash, implying that he is able to predict the results of fights relatively accurately. This, in turn, implies he is knowledgeable and experienced when it comes to MMA. Secondly, Xiong is one of the few professional fighters who are active members of the forum. Based on his post history, Xiong's opinions are often appreciated and he is able to argue with authority.

Example 7 - <http://forums.sherdog.com/forums/f2/how-f-ck-erick-silva-2-1-favourite-matt-will-humiliate-him-2733893/>

05-08-2014, 07:32 AM – onvoqc: “Like, really ? the guy who got knocked the f- out by Dong Yung Kim is a favourite against Matt Brown ?

wow .. Oddmakers need to get some grasp with reality.
Brown is gonna beat the s- out of this brazillian guy.
Mark my words. ”

05-08-2014, 07:44 AM – fightfan84: “The thing is the odd makers are not shertard fan boys that hang from fighters nuts, they look into everything, and Erick silva is far more skilled everywhere then matt

brown, matt is just more loved around here, plus brown is coming off an injury”

05-08-2014, 07:45 AM – Redhawks100: “Erick Silva is a wild striker with average power and good BJJ with decent durability

Matt Brown is a wild but more technical striker with big power and a shit load of durability

If DHK can catch Silva on the chin, I have no doubt that Brown could also. He has good Muay Thai for MMA. He's no joke, he fucking wrecked Pyle.”

This example consists of a discussion concerning the betting odds for a fight between Matt ‘The Immortal’ Brown and Erick Silva. Onvoqc’s post acts as the trigger to the sequence, and it is also the opening post of the entire thread. Apparently onvoqc disagrees with the notion that Silva is a 2-to-1 favorite over Brown according to some stakeholders and points out that Silva recently lost, whereas Brown is coming into the fight on a six fight win streak. The post ends with the user predicting that Brown will win decisively. In addition to the misspelled name ‘Dong Hyun Kim’ (a Korean welterweight fighter) and ‘Brazilian’, the post features a missing capital letter, two censored profanities and the colloquial term ‘gonna’. However, it is not these linguistic features but the content of the post that renders it favorable to analysis in terms of conflict sequences.

The fundamental argument the poster is trying convey and his opinion on the matter are relatively understandable since, according to the official website of the UFC, Brown is ranked #7 and Silva #14 at welterweight. Therefore, the thread topic poses a legitimate question: why is Brown the betting underdog when he is ranked so much higher than Silva? Fightfan84 responds to onvoqc’s inquiry by claiming that Silva is more skilled than Brown, but the community favors the more popular Brown. In an attempt to undermine onvoqc’s opinion even further, fightfan84 uses the derogatory term ‘shertard’, which is a combination of the words ‘sherdogger’ (a Sherdog forum

user) and ‘retard’. He also paraphrases another common pejorative on Sherdog: ‘nuthugger’. A ‘nuthugger’ is a zealous fan of a fighter who refuses to acknowledge anything negative about them and always defends them in every situation. In addition to the relatively poor level of grammar, the use of these terms as insults displays tastelessness on fightfan84’s part.

In the third turn of the sequence, Redhawks100 reconciles the argument by acknowledging the skills of both fighters. Praising both fighters involved in an upcoming fight is probably the most common way of reconciling an argument on Sherdog. While it usually does not change the opinions of the original participants in the argument, it appears to be sufficient for them to realize they are arguing over opinions. This appears to be the case in this thread as well, as fightfan84 responded to Redhawks100 by stating that he, too, believes both athletes have a chance of winning and explains that in his original post he simply wanted to say that he is not surprised by the odds. In addition to the rather unnecessary use of profanity, Redhawks100’s post features the acronyms BJJ (Brazilian jiu-jitsu), DHK (Dong Hyun Kim) and MMA, as well as two missing full stops at the end of sentences.

The thread continued for another 198 posts (11.5.2014) with no more entries to this particular sequence. It is worth noting, however, that Brown defeated Silva in an impressive fashion, and that onvoqc posted on the thread after the event. Posting on a no longer active thread in order to attract more replies or attention to it is called ‘bumping’ as this action makes the thread reappear on the forum’s front page. Onvoqc’s insight was appreciated by other posters, but neither fightfan84 nor Redhawks100 participated.

Profiles:

	onvoqc	fightfan84	Redhawks100
Belt colour:	Green	Green	Red
Join date:	March 2013	November 2013	May 2013
Location:	France	-	-
Posts:	1,180	1,453	7,503
vCash:	500	500	500

Table 7 Profiles for users in example 7

The most relevant information conveyed by these user profiles is the fact that the reconciling poster is the one with the highest belt rank. While it can be argued that his role as a senior member of the community may have prevented the argument from escalating further, it is worth noting that the join dates of all participants are, in fact, very close to each other. This, again, calls into question the premise of awarding belts based on post count instead of actual experience and knowledge. Redhawks100 may very well be more experienced and knowledgeable in MMA than the other two participants, but the amount of posts alone does not confirm or refute that argument, especially since the join dates are in such close proximity to one another.

4.1.3 Discussion

Looking at the first turns in each example, it would appear that almost any type of a post can act as the trigger to a conflict sequence. There appears to be no specific features in the first turns that trigger the consequential sequences, as all seven first turns are effectively different from one another. Some of them feature strong language (example 7) or statements about controversial topics within the community, e.g. Jones vs Gustafsson in example 3, which render the following conflicts somewhat predictable, while others are merely questions or relatively reasonable arguments that do not invite the level of hostility found in the responses.

Regarding the second turns and the hypothesis that extra-linguistic elements have an impact on the affectivity of the post and, as a result, the nature of the entire conflict, it became apparent that there are very few extra-linguistic elements used on the forums. The second turns, in particular, lack writing in capital letters and similar features that are commonly used in online communication to express emotions. The only extra-linguistic element in a second turn that could be considered part of the reason for the ensuing conflict appears in example 4. It remains unclear what emotions, if any, the user was attempting to convey, but it can be argued that the general appearance of the post combined with the overall stupidity of it acts as an irritating factor contributing to the birth of the conflict. Therefore, it can be argued that the emotional response can be triggered by the extra-linguistic elements as well as the content of the post.

While the hypothesis regarding extra-linguistic elements cannot be confirmed, or refuted, based on these examples, the affectivity of the second turns can be discussed through other means. It is irrefutable, though rather unsurprising, based on these examples that most of the conflicts are born as a result of opposing opinions. Due to the nature of the sport in question all but one of the example sequences are, more or less, conversations about a match between two athletes. When one participant sides with one party and the other with another it becomes difficult for them to remain emotionally neutral and the ensuing conflicts are, again, somewhat predictable.

Analyzing the third turns in the unresolved conflicts separately does not promise a large amount of significant findings, as most of the sequences either died out due to a lack of a further posts or remain, indeed, unresolved. However, the third turns in the reconciled sequences are worth examining. Examples 5 and 7 illustrate a rather typical form of reconciliation where the participants effectively agree to disagree, or acknowledge that the conflict is futile due to the fact that it is based on differing opinions. Example 6, on the other hand, was chosen for inspection as it effectively demonstrates that small misunderstandings are often the source of the conflict. In the third turn of the sequence, the poster further explains the statements made in the trigger, thus reconciling the conflict before its inception.

4.2 Profile Hierarchy

Based on the information available in the profiles of the participants in the seven example sequences analyzed in section 4.1, it would appear that the members of Sherdog appreciate and value users who demonstrate knowledge and coherent argumentation in their posts over the imaginary belts provided by the fabricated ranking system the site has implemented. While a certain amount of the customization privileges associated with a higher rank can make a user profile easier to recognize, a high belt rank does not guarantee admiration and respect from other users. However, certain users are more distinguished than others based on the quality of their posts over a long period of time. The opinions of these users appear to be appreciated almost by default by most of the community, as is also the case with professional fighters who post on the forum. These high profile users are often the members who are promoted to forum moderators, should they so desire.

When analyzing the community hierarchy from a mediated discourse analysis point-of-view, the highly customized profiles are perhaps the most significant ones. Features such as a memorable avatar or a particularly noticeable custom belt are indicators of a desire to be noticed within the community. On a basic level, the customization of your online profile is no different from customizing your own appearance through apparel choices etc. In that sense, having a higher rank on Sherdog does offer members the ability to make themselves, and by extension their opinions, more noticed. The ability to customize the overt discourses in place within the community, and make the discourses concerning your profile foregrounded, arguably places users higher on the community hierarchy than those who lack these abilities.

While it has been established that a higher rank does not automatically guarantee experience and a favorable position within the community, based on the examples above it can be argued that the users with higher post counts conduct themselves in a more civilized fashion than the ones who rank lower. In example 3, 'Substance Abuse' is by far the most experienced user, and he does not take part in the argument after triggering it. In example 4, 'AxeMurderer2010' is capable of a more intellectual

and coherent argumentation than the other participant with a lower post count. In examples 5 and 7, the argument was reconciled by the most experienced participant and in example 6 both participants are highly experienced and the entire sequence is conducted in a civilized manner. Most of the profanity, name-calling and other indecent behavior found in the examples were provided by members with a lower post count. The amount of examples is relatively low to offer any conclusive evidence on the matter, but the implications are somewhat clear.

4.3 Linguistic Features

Based on the examples analyzed in section 4.1, it would appear that the language used on Sherdog is of a somewhat low register. Multiple spelling mistakes as well as errors in syntax and grammar were discovered. However, these shortcomings can be attributed, at least in part, to the relative lack of governing codes of conduct on forums such as the one examined. The visual anonymity and an apparent lack of responsibility for one's statements lead to a discourse full of conflict sequences, the resolution of which is ambiguous at best. In addition, the absence of nonverbal cues forces the posters to use 'interactive written discourse' as the language used is often quite colloquial and vernacular. Certain posters attempt to compensate for this by using different fonts, colors and visuals, but the result is often difficult to understand due to said absence of nonverbal cues. This, coupled with the excessive use of acronyms and abbreviations, makes the language virtually impossible to understand, even to experienced language users, without an existing historical body between the social actors involved.

4.3.1 Abbreviations and Acronyms

One of the more distinguished differences between other forms of written word and netspeak is the excessive use of abbreviations and acronyms. While some of them have become fairly common on most Internet forums and social media, and can even be heard in spoken languages, others are more specific and characteristic of the topics being discussed on certain forums. The acronyms on Sherdog, for example, are usually related to fighting or mixed martial arts. A quick look at almost any random thread on the forum alone reveals multiple acronyms that render the text incomprehensible to anyone with no previous knowledge on the topics.

This section includes explanations to the various acronyms found on the threads that were analyzed for this paper. In terms of MDA, the historical body of the social actors involved becomes emphasized when there is a high volume of acronyms, idioms and multiple forms of innuendo within the discourse. The purpose of this section is to illustrate how difficult it would be to understand the posts on Sherdog without said historical body.

WAR

This acronym is a form of cheering for someone in their upcoming fight or in general, and it means Will Always Respect. It is most commonly found at the end of a post or in a signature and is followed by the fighter's name, e.g. "WAR Jones!" Apparently the phrase originates from Auburn University, as the motto, or battle cry, of their sports teams is "War Eagle!" even though the name of all their teams is 'Tigers'³.

³ <http://www.auburntigers.com/>

LnP (example: “Henderson is a boring LnP fighter who is never in an exciting fight!”)

This is a derisive acronym used to disrespect certain fighters’ style, and it means Lay And Pray. It refers to a wrestling-heavy tactic that involves a lot of stalling and holding your opponent down, as opposed to trying to inflict more damage and finishing the fight before the time runs out. Fighters who utilize this tactic are also referred to as ‘blankets’, meaning that their objective is to lie on top of their opponents like blankets without doing any damage, while ‘praying’ that the referee does not stand the fighters up due to stalling. ‘Lay and pray’ derives from, and rhymes with, ‘spray and pray’, which is a derogatory term for firing an automatic firearm towards something in long bursts without proper aiming.

GnP (example: “Coleman is godfather of GnP.”)

Ground And Pound is another acronym for a wrestling-heavy style of fighting that involves taking your opponent to the mat and trying to finish the fight with strikes on the ground.

TUF (example: “He had some good fights in TUF.”)

The Ultimate Fighter, a reality show in which the contestants are eliminated by fights. The winner of the show is awarded a contract with the UFC.

4.3.2 Images and Videos

Another noteworthy form of communication on Sherdog is the use of pictures and videos. Although on Sherdog they are mostly used as comic relief, sometimes the use of photos and videos can help illustrate and fortify the message. Videos, in particular, are often used in an attempt to ridicule certain fighters by bringing up embarrassing defeats or humorous accidents from earlier in their respective careers. Powerful images depicting historically significant MMA events are also frequently used as arguments in conflict sequences.

The use of images and videos is perhaps the most efficient solution to the aforementioned problems regarding the restrictions set by not being face-to-face with other parties involved in the conversation. An image can convey emotions, facial expressions and other nonverbal cues more efficiently than written language, and the constant, excessive use of images and videos within Internet communities has quickly evolved into a cultural phenomenon which serves the growing need for instant responses. As it was stated in section 2.1.2, Baron argues that these features that were developed in order to improve online communication are actually beginning to have an impact on our social lives. In a modern, information age society everyone has to be available for instant messaging at all times, and people are beginning to spend more time communicating with each other through computers, smartphones and tablets than face-to-face. Images and videos provide an even faster way of conveying information than typing, and in a society where attention spans are limited and diminishing they serve to satisfy our growing need for instant reception.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine and analyze Sherdog as a community through the analysis of communication, social structures and linguistic features within it. It was discovered that as an environment for communication, the forums are somewhat hostile and the dialogue there is rather repetitive. However, the somewhat unique ranking system utilized by the site offered an abundance of material for analysis in terms of social structures.

The theoretical framework through which the data was analyzed was established based on conflict sequence analysis and mediated discourse analysis. Earlier results on conflict sequence analysis proved somewhat inapplicable to the examples found on Sherdog, mainly due to the overall lack of extra-linguistic elements. Instead, it would appear that the emotional responses that trigger the conflicts are based on differences in opinions rather than specific traits found in each post. Only 1 in 7 of the examples examined featured the extra-linguistic elements that Ahti characterized important to the birth of a conflict. While this in no way refutes Ahti's findings, it can be stated that within this particular community the importance of extra-linguistic elements to affectivity is minimal.

Furthermore, it appears that the nature of the sport of MMA has an influence on the type of conflict sequences found within the Sherdog community. 6 of the 7 examples were taken from discussions about two specific athletes, which automatically divides most of the potential participants into opposing factions based on which athlete they support. The same is arguably true about any sport where two teams or athletes compete against each other, but it can be argued that the violent nature of MMA affects the conflicts and provides more satisfaction to the party who "wins" the argument, as was evidenced by example 7, where username onvoqc returned to his own thread in order to gloat after his prediction proved correct.

The reconciliation of the conflicts was predominantly performed by the most experienced participant in the sequence. This is indicative of the authoritative position occupied by some of the older members of the community. The importance

of these authority figures was established through the discovery of the visual anonymity and an apparent lack of responsibility for one's statements within the community. In order to establish any meaningful forms of discourse, the communication must remain civilized and the reconciliation of conflicts contributes to this goal.

However, it was discovered through the analysis of the user profiles that a high rank alone does not guarantee authority within the community. Knowledgeable and active participation in discussions appears to be valued more on Sherdog than the amount of posts one has contributed. Furthermore, the most significant function of the ranking system seems to be the ability to customize one's user profile after achieving a certain level. This ability to customize the overt discourses in place within the community enables the users to draw more attention to themselves and their opinions. Therefore, it can be argued that the most esteemed members of the community are the ones with a noticeable profile and a history of posting relevant and coherent arguments. Furthermore, users of all ranks were subject to ridicule if their post was not deemed up to standards by the community.

In addition to providing theoretical backbone to the analysis of the conflict sequences and social structures, mediated discourse analysis was utilized to analyze the importance of a historical body within a communication community such as Sherdog. The language on the forums features a high amount of acronyms, abbreviations and allusions that render it virtually impossible to understand without possessing detailed information about the topics being discussed. The main social issue under study, the actual posting, was made possible by the existence of said historical body, the forum itself and the presence of the users themselves. While establishing a complete hierarchical structure within the community proved virtually impossible due to the lack of physical presence, the analysis of the profiles and interaction between the posters seems to indicate that even though the environment is hostile, it is not completely lacking in social structures.

Linguistically speaking, the communication on the forums appears to be of a rather low register. Multiple errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar were discovered in almost all the posts analyzed and coherent arguments were somewhat rare. This, combined with the relatively short length of the posts, supports the claim that netspeak, even on a forum where the participants have the ability to spend as much time as they want formulating a response, is noticeably different from both speech and standard written word.

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