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## **At the intersection of text and conversation analysis: analysing asynchronous online written interaction**

This paper demonstrates how two approaches from discourse studies – digital Conversation Analysis (CA) and Textual Interaction Studies (TIS) – can be used in tandem to analyse asynchronous written conversation. The main motivation for this mixed-methods approach is our observation that interaction in many asynchronous platforms, such as blogs and discussion forums, tends to be located somewhere in between the main focuses of digital CA and TIS. On the one hand, the posts in these platforms are often textually complex, multiparagraph entities. Furthermore, the opening posts usually address an imagined audience similarly to mass media texts. On the other hand, interaction within the conversation threads unfolds through the co-operation of at least two participants, and the meaning of each contribution is jointly negotiated by the participants. Our paper illustrates the benefits of combining digital CA and TIS by presenting a case analysis of one conversation thread from a Finnish book club blog.

**Keywords:** technology-mediated written interaction, conversation analysis, text analysis, methodology

**Asiasanat:** teknologiavälitteinen kirjoitettu vuorovaikutus, keskustelunanalyysi, tekstianalyysi, metodologia



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## 1 Introduction

This paper introduces a mixed-methods approach for analysing asynchronous written online conversation in the field of discourse studies. We define this type of conversation as technology-mediated interaction in which the production and reception of messages is not simultaneous and in which the conversationalists do not need to be logged on to the system at the same time. Examples of platforms that offer this type of interaction are blogs and discussion forums. Our methodology consists of, on the one hand, digitally oriented Conversation Analysis (digital CA; e.g., Giles et al. 2015) and, on the other hand, Textual Interaction Studies (TIS). Digital CA is a relatively new variant of Conversation Analysis (e.g. Schegloff 2007) and its applied approaches. TIS is an umbrella name of a field that covers the various theories and models used to analyse the dialogical phenomena of written texts, such as Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann & Thompson 1988), Systemic-Functional Appraisal Theory (Martin & White 2005), and Hoey's (2001) social-interactive model of writing and reading.<sup>1</sup>

Our aim is to illustrate how digital CA and TIS can be used in tandem to analyse asynchronous written conversation and, above all, to demonstrate how they can complement each other. CA was originally designed for analysis of spoken synchronous conversation, but its methods have subsequently also been applied to the analysis of (quasi-)synchronous written conversation, such as chat discussions (Garcia & Jacobs 1999). In contrast, TIS has focused on traditional written texts which are produced entirely by one participant and which are not embedded in a local sequence of communicative acts or turns.

TIS and CA have a mutual interest in analysing naturally occurring language use as a form of social action. Methodologically, both are based on a close, qualitative analysis of the interactional organisation of discourse. This distinguishes them from corpus-based approaches that put more weight on computational analysis. For example, Grieve et al. (2010) have used factor analysis to study linguistic variation between blogs. Our position on quantitative and qualitative approaches is that they are complementary and benefit from dialogue with one other. In relation to the field of pragmatics, in which the study of technology-mediated discourse has been very active, the distinctive characteristics of both CA and TIS are much more difficult to pinpoint; the borderline between the fields is fuzzy (see Herring et al. 2013).

The main motivation for our mixed-methods approach is our observation on the hybrid nature of written conversation in asynchronous online platforms such as blogs and discussion forums. On the one hand, postings in these platforms may consist of multiple sentences and even paragraphs through which a sequence of

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

actions is produced. During these extended sequences, interaction is advanced completely on the terms of the current participant who, in turn, needs to anticipate the reactions of the others. Furthermore, the opening posts usually address a more or less unknown and imagined audience, resembling mass media communication.

On the other hand, the threads as a whole constitute the interactional achievements of at least two participants. That is, the participants treat their postings as conversational turns that are, or should be, connected in terms of topic and line of action. In turn, these postings-as-turns implement sequentially organised courses of interaction, from local adjacency pairs to more overarching, large-scale activities. During the course of their exchange, the participants jointly construct (negotiate) the meanings of the turns and of the whole thread. In short, an analysis of this type of interaction appears to be at the intersection of CA and TIS, underlining the importance of a “bespoke” research design that respects the diversity of technology-mediated interaction (Giles et al. 2015).

Our paper illustrates the benefits of this particular mixed-methods approach by presenting a case analysis of one conversation thread from a Finnish book club blog. From a TIS perspective, we analyse how the interaction unfolds within complex, multi-unit turns. Based on their structural properties, we divide our case postings into two categories: genre-based postings and free-form (“ad hoc”) postings. Moreover, we demonstrate how TIS methods may be used to analyse the opening post as interaction between the blog host and an imagined audience.

From the perspective of digital CA, we reveal how the book club interaction is advanced in the comment postings. As departure points, we adopt the notions of sequentiality and progressivity, and we demonstrate the difference between topic-progressing comments and responding comments. The former comments contribute to the discussion on a general level, whereas the latter comments advance it in terms of reciprocal actions between specific turns (e.g. QUESTION–ANSWER). Furthermore, we demonstrate how the technological properties of our case platform reflect on the practices of commenting.

The article begins by introducing digital CA and TIS as well as our case data. Our analysis first focuses on the initiation of a conversational thread using TIS methods, and then on the responding contributions by combining CA and TIS.

## 2 Mixed methods for analysing asynchronous written interaction

### 2.1 Digital Conversation Analysis

Digital CA is a form of applied CA that focuses on the interactional dynamics of online communication. The major aim of digital CA is to explore how mediating communication technology is – and can be shown to be – relevant and consequential in the organisation of social interaction (Giles et al. 2015; Arminen et al. 2016). Interaction in digital platforms is made possible by the affordances that are available in the system – either as pre-designed or as invented by the users (Hutchby 2001).

The digital CA approach is based on principles and concepts that were invented in traditional CA but utilised and partly re-invented so as to be sensitive to the digital environment in which the interaction is embedded in. For example, previous digital CA studies have explored communication in terms of how a participation framework is constructed and maintained in video blogs (Dynel 2014) as well as how the turn-taking system functions in chats (Garcia & Jacobs 1999). Additionally, studies have illustrated how sequentiality is accomplished in different platforms, for example in SMS messaging (Hutchby & Tanna 2008) and in asynchronous digital learning forums (Kääntä & Lehtinen 2016). As Meredith and Stokoe (2014: 181), focusing on repair in chat interaction, have put it:

While the practice of message construction repair [which is not visible to the addressee] is made possible through the affordances of the online medium, it nevertheless shows how participants in written interaction are oriented to the same basic contingencies as they are in spoken talk: building sequentially organised courses of action and maintaining intersubjectivity.

Both in traditional and digital CA, interaction is considered to be progressive activity that is sequentially organized. Thus, the positioning of a turn in the ongoing conversation is “fundamental to the understanding of its meaning and to the analysis of its significance as an action” (Stivers 2013: 191), and the continuation of turn-by-turn activity is likewise fundamental to the analysis of conversational cooperation and progression (Stivers & Robinson 2006). Nonetheless, for many types of technology-mediated interaction, sequentiality and progressivity occur differently than in traditional face-to-face conversation. This has demanded methodological adjustments. Whereas traditional CA analyses sequentiality from the perspective of adjacency pairs (e.g. QUESTION–ANSWER) and activity sequences (e.g. TROUBLESTELLING–ADVICE–ACKNOWLEDGEMENT) that are produced by two or more interactants in cooperation, digital CA has begun to study sequentiality not only between turns but also within single turns (as in turn-internal CLAIM–JUSTIFICATION sequences). For example,

in discussion forums, turns are often interactionally complex, performing multiple actions of responding and/or initiating during their course (e.g. Kääntä 2016). Owing to its growing interest in multi-unit turns, digital CA resembles the TIS approach on some points (see Section 2.2).

Furthermore, digital CA has established that in written online conversation, sequentiality between turns often follows different principles than in traditional conversation. This is due to the system properties: it is often impossible for conversationalists to produce adjacency pairs so that the second pair part follows immediately after the first one, especially in multiparty conversations (Arminen et al. 2016: 296–297). Additionally, digital CA has shown that technological environments often affect preference-related issues in interaction. For example, leaving a question unanswered in an online learning environment is not usually treated as problematic (Kääntä 2016).

While adjacency is undoubtedly a relevant phenomenon for the organisation of synchronous (spoken) conversation, the organisation of asynchronous (written) conversation appears more as a loose progressive continuum (Kääntä 2016). Progressivity means that “interactants are concerned with advancing in-progress activities through sequences” (Stivers & Robinson 2006: 386). In digital CA, progressivity is further defined as the gradual continuation of the on-going activity through turn-internal moves or cross-turn moves (Kääntä 2016: 34). Progressivity refers to the continuation of activity in general, while sequentiality refers to a continuation of activity based on reciprocal actions (e.g. INVITATION–APPROVAL) that are not necessarily adjacent (*ibid.*; see also Hutchby & Tanna 2008).

In brief, the organisation of digital conversation may differ in many respects from face-to-face conversation. We agree with Arminen et al. (2016) that digitally mediated interaction should be analysed in its own right, not as a “deviation” from “ordinary” conversation. The aim of digital CA is not to reproduce the analyses on face-to-face conversation but to search for new analytic viewpoints.

## 2.2 Textual Interaction Studies

The analytic focus of TIS is on written, singly-constructed texts that are directed at a mass audience, examples being journalistic and administrative texts (e.g. Hoey 2001; Martin & White 2005) and social media texts (e.g. Zappavigna & Martin 2017). These types of texts are conceptualised as interactions between the writer-in-the-text and reader-in-the-text. These terms refer to discursively constructed participants who interact in the dialogical space that is created in the text. This interaction is “scripted” beforehand by the author, with recipes being the paradigm example (e.g. “1. Skin the tomatoes, 2. Cook the onion and garlic”). The longer the text is, the more the actual writer needs to anticipate the interpretations and reactions of the imagined reader(s) and advance the text accordingly (see Section 4). In addition, the actual

writer needs to take into account the imagined reader's ideology (such as the relevance of ethical eating in recipes) and prior knowledge (for example, whether the reader knows how to skin tomatoes) when creating a preferred reading position for the text. These decisions can be both unconscious (and highly conventional) or tactical. As individual readers, of course we may react to texts in many different ways and diverge from the offered reading position.<sup>2</sup>

Both synchronous and asynchronous discourse involve discourse structures that can be analysed as interactional frames. An example of a widely analysed structure in both CA and TIS is the QUESTION–ANSWER pattern. In CA, this pattern is usually analysed as an adjacency pair, produced by the cooperation of two interactants (Schegloff 2007). By contrast, it is analysed in TIS as a discourse pattern which allows the writer to introduce a topic (QUESTION) and then discuss it (ANSWER) (Mann & Thompson 1988; Hoey 2001).<sup>3</sup> We define discourse patterns as flexible discourse resources, which can be used in many kinds of texts irrespective of their genre. Some patterns are interaction-focused (e.g. CONCESSION–CLAIM), while others concentrate more on the “ideational” organisation of texts (e.g. CAUSE–REASON). Discourse patterns may be grammatically or lexically signalled, or they may rely solely on the interdependency between the pattern and its constituent acts (see Linell 2009: 186–188).

In addition to discourse patterns, it is commonplace in TIS to study textual interaction from a genre-analytic perspective. Following Martin and Rose (2008), we define genres as discourse resources which allow the production and interpretation of discourse as culturally recognisable activity that aims at achieving a common social purpose or goal. Genres typically unfold through certain stages, but this is not mandatory (*ibid.*). Furthermore, genres may be used to organise not just entire texts and conversations but also stretches of them. For example, the internal structuring of turns in a blog conversation may draw on various genres, including arguing and storytelling genres (see sections 4 and 5.1.1). An important difference between genres and discourse patterns is that the latter are not defined in relation to social purpose. For example, questions are never asked only to obtain an answer (even though people sometimes say “just asking” as a frame for a rude or critical question). Instead, the QUESTION–ANSWER pattern is a resource to achieve an overarching local or genre-based purpose (in media texts e.g. Makkonen-Craig 2014: 105–109).

Like discourse patterns, the use of genres may be explicitly projected (e.g. “Let me tell you a **story**”). Moreover, an absence of genre-related activity may be treated as an accountable breach of shared norms (see Virtanen 2015: 64–70, 110–124). What could be far more common is that genres are used without participants explicitly

2 The notion of reader-orientation (and more generally, other-orientation) in TIS may be compared to the notion of recipient design in traditional CA (Virtanen 2015: 26).

3 In traditional CA, few studies have thus far been conducted on turn-internal discourse patterns (but see Koivisto 2012).

orienting to them. Nonetheless, what is important from a digital CA perspective is that by using the same genre as the previous participant, continuity of topic and action between turns may be signalled (see Section 5).

### 3 The case study: data and background

In order to illustrate the mixed-methods approach described above, we will analyse data from a Finnish blog called *Lukupiiri* (The Book Club), a literary fiction blog that was active from 2006 to 2011. It was published on the website of *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland's most widely-read daily newspaper. The host was an ex-politician and communications consultant Kirsi Piha. Every month she selected a (recent) title and wrote a post on it. Readers could then post their comments and discuss the book. In addition to the actual book club postings, Piha posted on literature in general. The blog had on average of 3 000 readers per week and had dozens of active commentators (Ahola 2013: 91–92).

As is typical for blogs, the front page of *Lukupiiri* contained links to the latest posts in reverse chronological order. The comments to a blog post were displayed on their own page in a simple linear order. For each comment, the name of the commentator (often a pseudonym), date and time of publication were indicated. The system did not allow to post comments directly to other comments – this had to be done indirectly, by commenting on the blog post. This resulted in what is referred to as the disrupted turn adjacency (e.g. Arminen et al. 2016: 296) and users' strategies to overcome it (see Section 5.2). Screenshots of the platform are available in a master's thesis by Kokko (2013: 32–33).

Our data consist of one conversation thread from Piha's blog.<sup>4</sup> We selected the data from a master corpus of a project called *Contexts of subordination* (see Visapää et al. 2014). The thread consists of a short general posting by Piha on fictional characters in general. The post is followed by 11 comments from 9 readers. One of the comments is written by Piha as a response to a comment.

We have translated the data from Finnish into English; space permits us to only show the translations. We have anonymised all the user names, including pseudonyms, except the blog host. The original Finnish data may be requested from the authors.

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4 Blogs and other discussion forums are typically highly polylogal, meaning that one thread produced by the technological platform may actually consist of various smaller threads (e.g. Giles et al. 2015). Thus, a thread may be defined in either formal or interactional terms. On formal terms, our data consist of one clear-cut visual thread. On interactional terms, it is more difficult to analyse whether that thread divides into sub-threads, and if so, exactly how many sub-threads there are. However, this might not always be a relevant structural factor or distinction for the participants themselves; multiple sub-topics and lines of action may be advanced fluidly within one comment post (see Section 5.1.2).

## 4 Analysing the thread-initial posting

In this section, we analyse the opening post of our case thread, written by the blog host. Our aim is to demonstrate how the methods of TIS may be adopted to examine the discursive practices by which asynchronous interaction is initiated when addressing an assumed public audience. A general function of opening posts is to assign a topic or theme to the thread and the possible commentators are expected to adhere to it (Giles 2016: 486). Resembling mass media communication, these posts construe interaction between the author, construed as the writer-in-the-text, and an imagined audience, the reader-in-the-text.

As a whole, the opening of our case thread seems to take advantage of the conventions of the so-called Challenge genre, which belongs to the family of arguing genres (Coffin 2006: 83–86; Martin & Rose 2008: 118–124). These genres are used in many cultures for putting forward arguments, as well as comparing and rebutting them in (more or less) formal written interaction, such as in pedagogical discourse (Coffin 2006; Kääntä 2016).

As we observed in Section 2, it is common for many genres to unfold through certain stages. The Challenge genre has the following three conventional stages (Coffin 2006: 83–86): 1) POSITION CHALLENGED, 2) REBUTTAL ARGUMENT, and 3) ANTI-THESIS. The blog post seems to comply with these conventions rather faithfully. Thus, the first paragraph that follows the headline serves as the POSITION CHALLENGED, the second as the REBUTTAL ARGUMENT and the last one as the ANTI-THESIS. We have marked the beginnings of genre phases using grey text in the example.

1 What's the point?  
 2 POSITION CHALLENGED  
 3 Somebody asked me a little while ago what's the point in discussing characters in fiction and treating them as real,  
 4 living people. Wondering why they did or didn't do something. Why wouldn't there be a point? Isn't that the whole  
 5 point of fiction. Isn't it one of the pleasures of reading – to be able to see the world from the viewpoint of someone  
 6 else. To get under the skin of a person whose situation in life is completely different from ours and to understand  
 7 something.  
 8 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT  
 9 Conversation [and] small talk often circles around famous people from e.g. television. We talk about Idols stars,  
 10 Matti Nykänen [a former skijumper] and Susan Kuronen [a short-time partner of the then prime minister of  
 11 Finland]. Why does Matti drink? Why does Matti beat his wife? Why does Susan babble [about her relationship]?  
 12 How did a difficult childhood affect the life an Idols star? What's the point in discussing these things, then? In what  
 13 way is it more sensible than discussing characters in books? Let's be honest: there's no difference really.  
 14 Celebrities are fictional characters too because we don't really know these people. We talk about them solely on the  
 15 basis of a mental image created by the media. How can it be less sensible to discuss characters created by a  
 16 novelist?  
 17 ANTI-THESIS  
 18 Oftentimes it is a more positive and fruitful way to learn things about life. And who could say that the people in  
 19 fiction are not real? Right now Benjamin, Paul and Claire are walking somewhere.

EXAMPLE 1. The blog post.



The POSITION CHALLENGED phase begins with a sentence that introduces an unspecified third party who is reported to have posed a challenging question to the blogger: what is the point in discussing fictional characters and their intentions (lines 3–4). By using an indefinite pronoun, *somebody*, the blogger may be interpreted as treating the third party as a non-member of the book club and, more generally, as a person whose identity is not relevant in the situation. The reported question is elaborated in the second sentence, which is elliptical to the first one (line 4: [what’s the point in] *Wondering why they did or didn’t do something*). These two sentences introduce the topic of the blog post, which is also echoed in the headline (line 1: *What’s the point?*). The sentences may also be analysed as displaying an orientation to the general conventions of blog posting by introducing a topic which is both current and personal to the poster.

After reporting the challenging question, the blogger responds to it with a counter-challenge that poses an opposite ‘why’ question and returns the argumentative pressure back to the original questioner (line 4: *Why wouldn’t there be a point?*). The pressure is increased in the remaining sentences of the paragraph by continuing the counter-challenging. These sentences consist of negative polar interrogative clauses (*Isn’t it – –. Isn’t it – –*), which are used to take a persuasive and challenging stance: a positive (‘yes’) answer is expected from the opponent.

The second paragraph of the blog post serves as the REBUTTAL ARGUMENT phase of the Challenge genre. In the blog post, this phase argues against the inferred stance that it is more sensible to discuss celebrities than fictional characters. This stance is rebutted by expressing categorical claims which are either framed as uncontestable (lines 13: *Let’s be honest: there’s no difference really*) or justified in another clause (line 14: *Celebrities are fictional characters too because – –*). At the same time, a repeated expression of challenging questions maintains the dialogical-polemical tone set in the first paragraph (e.g. in lines 15–16: *How can it be less sensible to discuss – –?*). Finally, the last paragraph of the example serves as the ANTI-THESIS phase which puts forward the bloggers’ own, opposite opinion on the issue: fiction is a “fruitful way to learn things about life”.

At this point, it should be noted that the interaction which is construed in the blog posting is not, of course, primarily between the blogger and the third party (the “somebody”) but between the blogger and her imagined audience. This means that by challenging the third party’s claims and justifying her own viewpoint, the blogger is doing something in relation to her audience, namely construing a reader-in-the-text who needs to take sides – is s/he with the blogger or against her? Giles (2016: 489) has expressed this, following Sherif and Sherif (1969), as “one of the most effective ways of bonding a group together is to identify a common enemy”. This polarisation is constructed particularly through the repeated use of interrogative clauses which question the third-party claims and contract the dialogical space of the text (see Martin & White 2005). Thus, the blogger indicates a heightened investment in her

own stance and, consequently, a low tolerance for those who think differently. In this type of dialogical space, expressing an alternative viewpoint means confrontation and a threat to solidarity between participants. This interpersonal effect is evident if we consider the alternate means of taking a stance, such as claiming the reported question as being worthy of discussion (e.g. *that is a very good question*).

The aim of this section has been to demonstrate how the opening contribution of a thread may be analysed as an initiation for social interaction by applying methods and analytical tools from TIS. By examining the opening post first on its own, we have focused on the interaction between the-writer-in-the-text and the-reader(s)-in-the-text as construed by the initiating poster. The opening contributions of threads are significant data to determine the discursive practices of initiating written asynchronous interaction when addressing a more or less heterogeneous and varying audience in a public setting (compared to private e-mail threads). One of these practices is the use of genres, which offer a frame for producing and interpreting social action in relation to a common, conventional goal.

## 5 Analysing the comments

This section presents our analysis of the actual interaction between participants in our case thread. Firstly, in section 5.1, we analyse topic-progressing comments which maintain or advance the topic of the thread and contribute to the discussion on a general level. We divide the topic-progressing comments further into two categories: genre-based comments (5.1.1), which have a conventional, more or less predictable overall structure, and free-form comments (5.1.2), which are structured more loosely in a chat-like manner by using only simple discourse patterns. In section 5.2, we turn our analytical gaze to responding comments. These contributions are explicitly responsive and directed to a specific contribution in the thread. Exploring these brings to the fore the CA concept of sequentiality as a central analytical tool.

### 5.1 Topic-progressing comments

#### 5.1.1 Genre-based comments

We begin by analysing the responsive features of the first comment post, which is shown below.

COMMENT 1. MARI NISSI, 18 FEBRUARY 2007, 17:39

1. Was it Hayakawa who once said that by reading fiction and relating to fictional characters one doesn't only
2. live one's own life. One also lives the (hundreds, thousands) lives inside the books. - Why wouldn't we discuss
3. our lives?
- 4.

5. Some book lover had wondered “why all these books are about me”. - And isn’t it fun to talk about yourself!
- 6.
7. That’s why we discuss fictional characters. [They] are more fascinating than the celebrities Kirsi mentioned.

In comparison to construction of the responsive turns in prototypical synchronous conversation, we can first notice that the comment post does not begin with an explicitly responsive linguistic item or phrase such as *I agree*. Instead, a responsive relation is created by re-using the same genre as in the blog post (Challenge), while omitting the first part (POSITION CHALLENGED) and thus treating the topic as already established. In Figure 1, we illustrate how the Challenge genre and its staging conventions contextualise the comment.

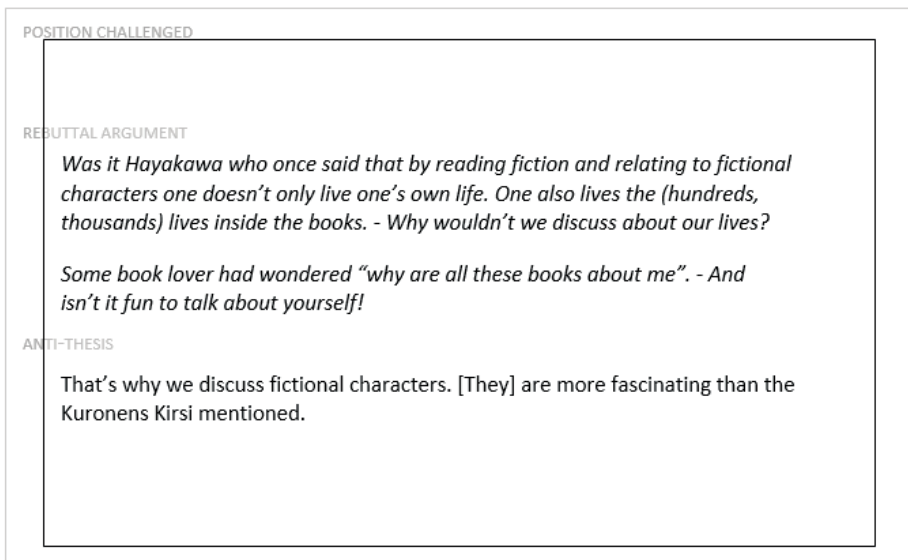


FIGURE 1. Re-use of the blog post’s Challenge genre in Comment 1.

Underlying this finding is the more general phenomenon of resonance between turns: lexical and grammatical items are re-used to create inter-turn links (Du Bois 2014). As our data demonstrate, resonance may also be produced on the level of genres.

By using the same genre as the blogger, the commenter treats the blog post as an invitation for sharing viewpoints and for progressing the topic of the posting. Comment 1 complements the blog post by offering new arguments that support the blogger’s viewpoint. Linguistically, this alignment of stances is achieved by using the same rhetorical question format as in the blog post (lines 2–3: *Why wouldn’t we discuss our lives?*; line 5: *And isn’t it fun to talk about yourself!*). In the concluding paragraph, the commenter affirms the blogger’s stance that it is indeed sensible

to discuss fictional characters. Thus, the commenter assumes a symmetrical role in relation to the blogger: she treats both of them as equally competent in discussing the topic. This can be contrasted to an alternative strategy of merely thanking the blog poster, which construes the role of the participants as more asymmetric: the blogger writes and readers read.<sup>5</sup>

Moving on to Comment 2, storytelling is used here to continue the topic of the blog post. Story genres are one of, if not the most basic genres: people tell stories to each other to share their feelings and values and to construe their identities (e.g. Martin & Rose 2008). The story in Comment 2 resembles the basic Labovian story genre with a COMPLICATION–RESOLUTION staging (see Labov 1972).

COMMENT 2. IDA, 18 FEBRUARY 2007, 17.47

1. A few years ago I wrote book reviews. I struggled finding a natural way of approaching
2. characters. I realised that I had never thought about it while reading others' reviews.
- 3.
4. Finally I settled on a thematic and structural approach. I also commented on the writing style. I
5. highlighted the characters' psychological profiles but I really didn't treat them as people.
6. This thematic-structural-psychological approach worked well for me, and in retrospect, the reviews
7. still feel like my own.
- 8.
9. We express ourselves in everything we communicate to others. Those who are interested
10. in people focus on people. Those who are interested thematic issues focus on thematic issues.
11. Some go both ways.

The first paragraph begins with an orientation (line 1: *A few years ago I wrote some book reviews*). COMPLICATION is then realised by describing one part of the writing process (character description) as a "struggle" (lines 1–2). The second paragraph realises RESOLUTION by presenting an approach which the writer "finally settled on" and which "worked well" for her. The last paragraph functions as a coda: it connects the story to the thread's topic by making a generalisation about what people enjoy in literature.

While Comment 1 mainly supports the blogger's viewpoint, Comment 2 also conveys sympathy to alternative viewpoints: it is pointed out that people enjoy fiction for different reasons, characters being only one of them. From a sequential perspective, Comment 2 continues the topic of the thread but does not create an explicit relationship with either the blog post or Comment 1. Thus, we might describe the relationship between Comment 2 and the previous contributions as a loose, progressive inter-connection that is based on a shared topic and line of action.

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5 The master corpus of the Subordination project contains many examples of "thank you" comments from blog readers. One example is the following: *Thank you for this. Really. You just put into words what I have been thinking many times.*

### 5.1.2 Free-form comments

Moving on in the thread, Comment 3 further continues the topic. However, this comment differs from the previous comments in one important respect: its internal structure is not amenable to genre analysis. Instead, it seems to rely on simple discourse patterns such as CLAIM–JUSTIFICATION.

The comment begins with the phrase *in my opinion*, which in this sequential context accomplishes the following: it 1) indicates (progression of) sequentially relevant action within the thread and/but 2) projects a new perspective to it.

#### COMMENT 3. AUER, 18 FEBRUARY 2007, 18.30

1. In my opinion, it's the in-depth post-game analysis which completes the pleasure of reading.
2. Particularly on those (rare) occasions when the book has made a great impression on you. Then it's
3. almost necessary to talk about the book with someone. That's the value of book clubs such as this:
4. you can get together with people who have read the same book. Ideas develop in a completely
5. different way than when ranting on to a half-asleep husband (who hasn't even read the book):)
6. Characters may and even must be discussed! Sometimes it only annoys me when the author leaves
7. a little too much space for the reader's interpretation, because if the characters are very sketchy, it
8. doesn't inspire the reader, at least not me, to think about their motives, let alone their destinies. You
9. have to have a certain longing for the characters in order to get truly interested in them.

Comment 3 consists of a collection of loosely linked assessments. Some of them are argued for while some are (merely) elaborated on. The first assessment is produced in the opening sentence, and then elaborated on within the next two sentences in lines 2–3. According to the commenter, discussing a book with others (the “post-game analysis”) is part of the pleasure of reading, particularly if the book is exceptionally good. Examined from the perspective of the thread, this assessment activity continues the on-going topic by offering a new perspective on the value and “point” of discussing fiction books.

The second assessment, focusing on book clubs, occurs in the first part of the sentence in lines 3–4 (*That's the value of book clubs such as this: – –*). The pronoun *that* creates a cohesive tie by indicating that “the value of book clubs” was revealed in the previous sentence(s). The clause complex that follows the assessment (and the colon) re-phrases the value (*you can get together with people who have read the same book*), and thus instantiates the CLAIM–RESTATEMENT pattern (cf. Mann & Thompson 1988). The sentence in lines 4–5 (*Ideas develop in a completely different way than when ranting on to a half-asleep husband – –*) can be interpreted as a justification of the previous assessment, thus instantiating a pattern of CLAIM–JUSTIFICATION (ibid.) between the two sentences. These actions can be understood as extending the topic of the thread from the book-related discussion to the discussion concerning book clubs.

The focus of the comment is again changed in line 6 (*Characters may and even must be discussed!*). This assessment appears to align with the stances expressed in the previous contributions. Alignment is signalled by placing the NP *characters* in clause-initial position and, thus, by treating the referent as an already relevant and

established topic in the thread. The exclamation mark and deontic modal verb (*must*) can be regarded as an expression of alignment with the rather strong stances taken in the blog post and Comment 1. The assessment is not supported by a justification, which, in turn, treats the stance as consensual. This stance-taking continues on a more personal level in the remaining sentences of the comment post (lines 6–9: *Sometimes it only annoys me when – –, it doesn't inspire the reader, at least not me, – –*).

In brief, Comment 3 is a complex turn consisting of a collection of assessments, which continue, extend or affirm the various assessments made in the previous turns. The relevance of this turn within the thread relies on the similarities of the topic and line of action in relation to the previous contributions (see also Kääntä & Lehtinen 2016). Structurally, this comment is rather different from the previous two comments in that it does not take advantage of genres. Instead, it relies on the basic discourse patterns creating a free-form whole.

## 5.2 Responding comments

In this section, we analyse comment posts that are explicitly directed to a specific previous contribution. As case examples, we focus on Comment 7 and Comment 10, which compose an adjacency-like pair (or a series of them). In between these comments were two comments that did not orient to Comment 7. Note that Comment 7 was originally written in English – it is not translated by us. Comment 10 also contains segments that were originally in English; they are marked in the example.

### COMMENT 7. GARY (ROBERTSON), 19 FEBRUARY 2007, 1.03

1. Hi Kirsi I read in finnish but write in english, hope you bear with me - I enjoyed reading your writing.
- 2.
3. Open a book and you walk into another world - as you say lots to talk about - for me the hard thing is to find
4. the world right for you - you gaze at a shelf of books - recognise those familiar worlds and half of you hopes
5. you could discover them all over again.
- 6.
7. I glanced at the Jonathan Coe "closed circle" and hesitated - still do - would you recommend it?
- 8.
9. Was it his book "house of sleep" which I read and really enjoyed..
- 10.
11. my favorite writers are say Murakami, Hoeg, Neil Gaimon.
- 12.
13. Just read a lovely book - White Apples ... (jonathan carroll) steve

[Two comments omitted.]

### COMMENT 10. KIRSI PIHA, 19 FEBRUARY 2007 11.43

1. Gary. [IN ENGLISH:] I'll trust your words that you can read in Finnish, so: [SWITCH TO FINNISH:] Closed
2. Circle. If you enjoyed "The House of Sleep", "Closed Circle" may be a disappointment for you. Personally I

3. liked "The House of Sleep" more. But I enjoyed this one too, worth reading although not a masterpiece.
- 4.
5. I also like Murakami, "Sputnik Sweetheart" was a fascinating book. Hoeg is definitely on the list for this
6. spring. After ten years of wait one cannot wait for much longer! "White Apples" will be the book of month in
7. March. I'm glad you liked it, but don't tell more about before March 15 because we haven't read it yet.

Structurally, Comment 7 is a free-form turn (see 5.1.2). It begins with a short paragraph that greets the blogger and gives positive feedback about the blog post. The second paragraph first expresses agreement with the blogger (line 3: *as you say lots to talk about*) and then discusses the topic from a personal viewpoint (3–5: *for me the hard thing is to –*). This creates a loose INITIATION–RESPONSE relation between the blog post and the on-going comment. Nonetheless, the third paragraph initiates a new line of action by posing a question to the blogger (line 7:– *would you recommend it [= a title by Coel]?*). This sets an expectation for the blogger to complete the projected adjacency-like pair. The remaining paragraphs create a list of favourite books and authors, which may be interpreted as either assessments or suggestions for the book club.

Comment 10 is a response from the blogger. A responsive relationship is indicated by introducing the comment with an address term (*Gary*) that refers back to Comment 7 (and, furthermore, treats the overall situation as a multi-party conversation). After a short metadiscursive segment concerning which language to use, the blogger orients to the question in Comment 7 first by reiterating its main focus (lines 1–2: *so: [the novel] Closed Circle*). This type of formulation treats the question as conversationally distant and in need of re-orientation – a common practice in asynchronous conversation (e.g. Herring & Androutsopoulos 2015). Next, an answer is produced in the remaining sentences of the first paragraph (lines 2–3), and this completes the expected adjacency-like pair.

Another adjacency-like pair is completed in the second paragraph. Previously, in Comment 7, a positive assessment regarding Murakami and other fiction writers was expressed in line 11. In Comment 10, an alignment with this stance is signalled by using the particle *also* (line 5: *I also like Murakami*). The particle marks the segment as a (distant) second-pair part of the adjacency pair ASSESSMENT – SECOND ASSESSMENT. In lines 6–7, another fiction author mentioned in Comment 7 (*Hoeg*) is promised to be "definitely on the [book club] list for this spring". This can be interpreted as a second pair part of a PROPOSAL–APPROVAL. As a similar response is further given to the book titled *White Apples* in lines 6–7, it is evident that the blogger treats the evaluative segments that occur in Comment 7 in lines 11–13 as assessments on the one hand, and as suggestions, on the other.

As Comments 7 and 10 demonstrate, the technological platform in our case study did not allow users to post comments on other comments directly. This sometimes caused disruption in turn adjacency, which users overcame by making the responsiveness of their comments highly explicit, such as by naming

the respondee and by reiterating the topical focus of the earlier post. Although not shown in these examples, a turn-initial quotation was also used for this purpose (see also Arminen et al. 2016: 296).

## 6 Conclusions and discussion

In this paper, we have illustrated how two approaches from discourse studies – TIS and digital CA – can be used in tandem to analyse asynchronous written online conversation. Through a case study of Finnish blog interaction, we have shown how these approaches can offer complementary perspectives on the dynamics of interaction in threads. The main motivation for our mixed-methods approach was our observation that the interaction in many asynchronous platforms, such as blogs and discussion forums, tends to be located somewhere in between the main focuses of (digital) CA and TIS. On the one hand, the participants' contributions are often textually complex, multiparagraph entities. Furthermore, the opening posts usually address an imagined audience similarly to mass media texts. On the other hand, interaction within threads unfolds through the co-operation of at least two participants and they jointly negotiate the meaning of each contribution. Thus, an adequate analysis of this type of interaction requires analytical tools both from digital CA and TIS.

By first analysing the blog thread's opening post on its own, we demonstrated how the methods of TIS may be adopted to examine thread initiations as interaction between the writer-in-the-text and the reader(s)-in-the-text – in other words, as interaction that is construed ("scripted") by the initiating poster. The opening posts are significant data in that they reveal the discursive practices by which asynchronous interaction is initiated when addressing an assumed public audience. Our case analysis also revealed how the assumed reader was positioned to take sides. This positioning was revealed by analysing the overall structure and lexico-syntactical choices of the posting. We presented evidence that these features activated a genre referred to as Challenge as a frame to interpret the post as social action.

After analysing the opening post, we focused on exploring the interaction between the thread's contributions by conceptualising them as turns. In this analysis, we mainly used digital CA but complemented it with TIS. From a digital CA perspective, we analysed the sequential relations between turns. Some of the relations were found to be occurrences of basic adjacency pairs (e.g. ASSESSMENT – SECOND ASSESSMENT). However, it was observed that most of the turns contributed to the on-going discussion on a more general level. We referred to these turns as *topic-progressing comments*, adopting the CA notion of progressivity as a departure point (see also Kääntä 2016). By using TIS, we further analysed the overall structure of the comments and provided evidence that progressivity may be displayed by re-using



the genre of the previous posting. We suggest that digital CA would benefit from considering genre-related matters more seriously.

In addition to these genre-based comments, we identified *free-form comments*, which exhibited a list-like overall structure. These comments progressed multiple sub-topics that originated in the previous turns in the thread. In this turn type, the progression of topics was displayed by framing assessments as personal opinions and by treating a topic as already established by commenting on it immediately (as opposed to introducing and motivating it). The internal structure of the free-form comments was analysed by adopting the concept of *discourse pattern* from TIS.

During the past 20 years, asynchronous written online conversations have become increasingly the focus of interest in CA, particularly in digital CA, as well as in TIS. The main objective of our paper was to demonstrate that combining methods from both fields has its benefits. Indeed, this combination is rather natural: both frameworks incorporate dialogical premises and share a contextual sensitivity to language use (see Makkonen-Craig 2014). Furthermore, concepts such as sequentiality and adjacency pair (from CA) and discourse pattern (from TIS) are closely related to each other, as are recipient design (CA) and reader-orientation (TIS). Our position is that building common ground between (digital) CA and TIS helps to develop umbrella terms and refine the theoretical understanding of the differences and similarities between textual and conversational interaction.

Finally, it is important to note that the focus of this article was on the analysis of public end-products of asynchronous interaction: postings and threads. This approach could be complemented by collecting screen-capture videos to examine the non-public processes of writing (e.g. Meredith & Stokoe 2014). This would allow the researcher to delve deeper into the platform-specific affordances of turn-construction. To our knowledge, this has not thus far been examined in highly asynchronous settings such as blogs which, as we have demonstrated, favour complex turns. The analytic scope could be widened even further by analysing how interaction in one specific platform is connected to other social activities, both in online worlds and those offline. For this type of research, methods of online ethnography could be applied (e.g. Hine 2015).

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