

Aggressive Complaining on Social Media: The Case of #MuckyMerton

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which the speech act of complaint is realised in social media contexts. To date, little attention has been devoted to the realisation of this speech act in online settings, despite the fact that such settings provide different affordances for complaining than many of their spoken and written counterparts. In the current study, we aim to make a step towards filling this knowledge gap by demonstrating that in online settings – in particular, social media – complaining can become very intensive and aggressive. This is because social media operates with features such as complex participation and multimodality, which allow users to reflect on each other's complaints in an increasingly aggressive escalatory manner, especially when these users are united by a joint cause. We deploy the concepts of 'addressivity' and 'diachronicity' to conceptualise those features of social media that boost complaint to become aggressive. As a case study, we investigate an online protest against the waste management policy of the Borough of Merton in London

Keywords: online complaints; aggression; Twitter; addressivity; diachronicity

Highlights

This paper presents a case study showing how the discursive realisations of complaints in Twitter can become increasingly aggressive.

The concepts of ‘complex addressivity’ and ‘diachronicity’ can be used to distinguish realisations of complaints on Twitter from their face-to-face counterparts.

The potential ambiguity lurking behind complex addressivity in Tweet complaints is shown in our case study to contribute to deindividuation and the consequent escalation of aggression.

The visual component of online complaints in Twitter can increase mimetic engagement and the related escalation of complaint realisations throughout a timespan (diachronicity).

1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine how the speech act of complaint is realised in social media contexts – as well as the relationship between this speech act and aggression – by focusing on a case study drawn from Twitter. Similarly to the speech acts request and apology, complaint has received intensive academic attention in the field of pragmatics, mainly starting with the Speech Act Realization Project in the 1980s (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). As Edmondson and House (1981: 90) argue, complaint is an “attitudinal” speech act, denoting the negative feelings the complainer has towards the addressee or a third party, on account of an action that has had a negative effect on the complainer.

Complaints are very often realised in the form of exerting blame on those actors who are held accountable for the complainable (see e.g. Clyne et al., 2011). Complaints have been studied predominantly in the context of interpersonal and synchronous (verbal) interaction in pragmatics (Vollmer and Olshtain, 1989; Boxer, 2002; Tannen, 2005; Chen et al., 2011; Kurtyka, 2019). While scholars such as Archer and Jagodziński (2015) have studied complaints in non-face-to-face interactions, and others such as Marquez Reiter et al. (2015) have explored complaints in computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC), little attention has been devoted to the role played by technological affordances in the realisation of online complaints (but see e.g. Vásquez, 2014). We believe that the particular affordances of social media for realising complaints represent an important area for the pragmatician to investigate because, as shown in our analysis below, can become particularly aggressive in such media (cf. Vásquez, 2011, 2014). Furthermore, complaining on social media is interesting to explore because the online medium puts certain constraints on complaining in comparison to face-to-face interaction, e.g. the complaining person cannot raise their voice.

Note that any instance of language use associated with aggression, rudeness and impoliteness is, by default, subject to a certain sense of escalation. For instance, as Culpeper (1996: 354) argues, “a particular characteristic of impoliteness behaviour in equal relationships is its tendency to escalate.” However, what distinguishes online interaction on social media from other settings is that in the former there are unavoidably many participants who pursue a joint online cause. On social media the phenomenon of escalation comes into operation mainly due to mimesis. According to Donald (2011),

Mimesis ... produces such typically human cognitive patterns as ritual, skill, gesture, tribal identification, personal style, and public spectacle. It explains our irresistible tendency to imitate one another and conform to patterns of group behavior, especially group emotional expression. (Donald, 2011: 15)

In terms of mimetic escalation and related aggression, in social media complaints such as tweets the posters tend to react to other postings in an increasingly aggressive way. The anonymity and the fact that there are others potentially affected by the state of affairs that trigger a complaint potentially adds to the aggressive style of the complaints. Online affordances – such as ‘re-tweeting’ in the case of our corpus – facilitates the mimetic pragmatic engagement.

Social media such as Twitter trigger complex and multimodal frameworks of participation (see Goffman, 1974 on the concept of ‘participation framework’) and a related complexity of addressivity (cf. Seargeant et al., 2012). That is, complaining online may simultaneously involve a cluster of primary, secondary and other types of recipients, including fellow posters making complaints. This complexity of participation manifests itself in noteworthy pragmatic ambiguities: for instance, in online complaint ‘chains’ (Collins, 2004) one can often observe pragmatic ambiguity as regards who is to blame for the complainable. The complex participation framework and the related complex addressivity increase escalation because they deindividuate (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2015) the interaction.

The online context influences the ways in which complaint chains unfold and evolve over time. That is, the asynchronous character (e.g. Morris & Ogan, 1996; Scott, 2015) of many forms of social media such as Twitter brings a sense of ‘diachronicity’ (Kádár, 2019) into the center of language use, which accelerates the pragmatic power of complaining. The notion of diachronicity refers to the Heideggerian concept that historically situating a discourse increases its power (see more in Kádár, 2019). In the case of a complaint on social media, diachronicity operates in the form of claims that the actors who are held accountable for the issue that causes the complaint have not made any attempt to remove the complainable. This sense of diachronicity is an additional element that this paper adds to previous pragmatic research, which has already stressed the inherent importance of time in the operation of complaining. Our definition of the speech act of complaint accords with that of Edmondson and House (1981), outlined below:

A Complain is ... a verbal communication whereby a speaker expresses his negative view of a past action by the hearer (i.e. for which he holds the reader responsible), in view of the negative effects of consequences of that action vis a vis himself. (Edmondson and House, 1981: 144)

This paper draws upon previous work by House and Kádár (2021) and Kádár and House (2021). This research has studied the pragmatic effect of media on speech act realisation by groups of people.. It has revealed that in complex participatory settings the realisation of speech act types such as request and complaint often become gradually more aggressive, provided that interactants are united in a cause. Needless to say that this finding is also relevant to the present paper investigating complaint realisations in Tweets. As Collins (2004) points out, communal settings tend to trigger a sense of escalation – usually the participants goad one another through a chain of similar moves – and escalatory aggression creates a feeling of collectivity and unitedness. In joint physical spaces, escalatory aggression brings people together, as Townsley and Grimshaw (2013) have pointed out. Yet, such collectivity and unitedness may not be ‘communal’ when it comes to online settings because the participants are situated in different individual spaces and the escalation of the conflict does not necessarily create long-term personal relationships.

Our analysis will focus on the above-discussed two features of online complaints, namely, complex addressivity (cf. Kádár and House, 2021) and diachronicity, which we believe characterise many other instances of online complaints on social media (see more in Section 5). As part of analysing our data through these concepts, we will focus on both the discursive realisation of complaints and other aspects, such as their punctuation and multimodal features. Thus, we study a variety of pragmatic and other discursual features embedded in discourse, such as affective lexis, punctuation, irony, self-correction, hyperbole, repetition, ellipsis and visuals. In the course of analysing individual realisations of a complaint, we consider its realisation features, while we will also approach these realisations as part of a broader interactional event. In this paper, we will analyse a corpus of tweets centering on a recent London-based case study (cf. Section 3.1).

The present investigation of escalatory mimetic aggression aims to contribute to research on language aggression rather than explorations of ‘mainstream’ impoliteness (cf. Tracy, 2008). Our simple working definition of aggression is the following: aggression refers to outbursts of anger directed at the addressee or another person (see Kádár, 2017). We capture aggression by focusing on the way in which complaints, which often turn out to be aggressive, are realised. In Section 5 we will systematise the outcome of our analysis of how escalatory mimetic aggression operates in our data, but it is worth noting here that previous pragmatic research has devoted little attention to the concept of the ‘communal’ escalation of aggression beyond the individual level, in particular in scenarios in which escalation is anchored in moral aggression (see an overview in Kádár and House, 2021). In previous pragmatic research, scholars such as Jay (2000) and Culpeper (2011) approached escalation as a reactive form of behaviour in the context of offence, stating that being offended “produces a state of emotional arousal” which increases “the likelihood that they will retaliate in kind” (Culpeper, 2011: 205-206). Indeed, escalation very often includes such a reactive emotional arousal (cf. Kádár and House, 2021); however, online escalation as we approach it in this study refers to instances when users proactively align with each other’s behavior (Spencer-Oatey and Kádár, 2020) and interactionally co-construct aggressive behavior. Note that this definition of escalation is different from how this notion is understood in conversation analysis, where it is more commonly used (see e.g. Drew and Walker, 2009). Here we are not so much focusing on how things escalate within a particular synchronous verbal interaction but rather we approach escalation as sequences of asynchronous postings on social media where the posters jointly build up the aggression. As such, our interpretation of ‘interaction’ in the study of escalation is diachronic. The process of escalation often manifests itself in a concatenation of individual speech acts (see House and Kádár, 2021), including repetitions of complaints or complaints followed by other speech acts such as requests and suggests.

2. Previous research relating to complaints on social media

While social media complaints studied in this paper have not received sufficient attention in the field, it is worth here to look at various areas of research on CMC to contextualise the key concepts used in the current investigation.

This paper contributes to a body of research on politeness, impoliteness, aggression and conflict on social media. These studies cover an eclectic range of topics, including the following:

- Rude expressions and manifestations of abuse on Twitter and other social media (e.g. Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; Dynel, 2012); ‘Communal’ aggressive behaviour on social media (see e.g. Vladimirov and House, 2018; Perelmutter, 2013);
- Multimodal impoliteness in social media settings (e.g. Mak and Chui, 2014; e.g. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Kádár et al., 2013).

We believe that all these areas are relevant to the current investigation as aggression is prevalent in our data. However, when it comes to the speech act of complaint specifically, it is the second and third areas outlined above which are of specific relevance, considering that the ‘complex’ participation framework and multimodality of social media can trigger complex addressivity. Such addressivity alters the dynamics of the way in which the speech act of complaint is realised. One of Goffman’s (1981) key concepts is the distinction between ‘ratified’ and ‘non-ratified’ participation in an interaction. As observed by Dynel (2014; 2017), this distinction may become obsolete in certain social media contexts, such as Twitter, where the reception format allows the potentially endless transmission of messages. Ratification clearly diminishes when we move beyond directly addressed and clearly ratified addressees, along the chain of potential recipients of a message. Social media users tend to be aware of the presence of multiple addressees, due to the public nature of the medium. As the present investigation will illustrate, this phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of escalatory aggression on Twitter complaint chains, i.e. repeated realisations of complaints, because this social medium triggers active participation beyond the direct addressee(s) of a message.

Along with previous research on aggression and impoliteness, another particularly useful area for the present paper is academic work dedicated to the notion of ‘context design’. The work of Tagg et al. (2017) deserves special mentioning here. In Tagg et al.’s interpretation, ‘context design’ draws attention to the active role of users in shaping their communicative practices based on how they position themselves vis-à-vis an audience. This active allocation of roles is facilitated by the affordances of social media platforms; for example, Twitter enables the analyst (and also language users) to distinguish between a) direct addressees (@-name) b) ratified active participants brought together by hashtagging, and c) ratified inactive participants who visit the social media but do not actively take part in the ongoing interaction. As our analysis will illustrate, in the context of complex addressivity on Twitter, context design is practically always relevant.

In the context of aggression on Twitter, yet another strand of relevant research to be acknowledged is work on anonymity and physical detachment, in the context of complex participation framework facilitated by such social media. Among others, Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011) and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2015) have discussed the implications of the lack of physical presence to (im)politeness behavior in online settings; as such research has pointed out, the complete or partial anonymity and pseudonymity typical of social media platforms can potentially lead to the weakening of personal responsibility (see also Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016). The lack of self-awareness and inhibition lurking in social media have been conceptualised through the ‘de-individuation effect’ (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2015): de-individuation means that many users feel licensed to aggressively voice opinions or complaints that they would be less willing to express in face-to-face contexts. This notion of de-individuation is fundamental to analyse online complaints because it gives account of

why such settings give rise to the above-discussed phenomenon of the escalation of aggressive behaviour vis-à-vis complaint chains.

Finally, explorations of the relationship between history/time and the Internet also bear relevance to our investigation of complaints. Pragmaticians have looked at the role of time and place on CMC (see e.g. Georgakopoulou, 2015)¹. Recently, research on CMC has started to explore the interface between Internet pragmatics and diachronic pragmatics (cf. Section 3.2). An edited volume by Tagg and Evans (2020) has provided an in-depth overview of this area. The present paper's investigation of diachronicity fits into this strand of research. We believe that it is rewarding to cross-fertilise CMC with diachronic pragmatics because various phenomena such as the escalation of aggression in online complaints can be neatly captured through the lenses of time and the related trajectory of a thread representing aggressive interaction. Note that along with the particular case of escalation, diachronic pragmatics is in our view relevant to a variety of other online phenomena, such as retrospective reflections and speculative assessment of the online behaviours of others (see Kádár and Haugh, 2013), the contrastive historical-modern theorisation of online phenomena such as 'flaming' (see Kádár, 2019).

3. Data and methodology

3.1. Data

Twitter is a publicly accessible microblogging site that allows both the synchronous and asynchronous sharing of 240-character updates, known as 'tweets'. Twitter's design allows those who use this site not only to post comments, i.e. to 'tweet' things, but also to send 're-tweets', i.e. share both their own and other's messages again, and also to reply to 'tweets'. Thus, Twitter enables the emergence of 'personal publics' (Schmidt, 2011). Contrary to mass media 'traditional publics', tweets, albeit potentially viewable by wider audiences, are displayed to a number of networked connections, referred to as 'followers'. Twitter is mainly organised around @handles and hashtags. @handles are used to address other Twitter accounts, functioning similarly to vocatives in face-to-face interaction. As markers of addressivity they were found to contribute to the coherence of interactional exchanges taking place in the polylocal environment of Twitter (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). The most characteristic affordance of Twitter is its searchability achieved by the practice of hashtagging. Simply put, hashtags bring together tweets about the same topic, drawn from otherwise unconnected networks. In doing so, they bring together audiences forging new networks and 'light', ephemeral communities (Blommaert, 2018) which align around common interests, feelings and values a process aptly described as 'ambient affiliation' (Zappavigna, 2011; 2015).

This study takes as a starting point the hashtag #MuckyMerton. Merton is located in South West London, and it merges together the Municipal Boroughs of Mitcham and Wimbledon and the Merton and Morden Urban Districts. Although it counts as a relatively well-off area by London standards, the Borough has faced serious waste management issues, which have led residents to protest against the local Council. On the 19th of March 2019, Merton residents protested against the 8-year contract that was signed with VeoliaUK, a private company which has been disreputed in Merton for its poor services. The residents set up a website 'Muckymerton' where they stated the following:

We are protesting about both Veolia and Merton Council as despite multiple reports of rubbish and litter problems from residents, neither party has taken these concerns seriously. Various parts of the borough have not been swept for over six months or more. Street sweepers have been made redundant – there has been a reduction of 44% in the last year alone. Communal bins have also been reduced by a similar number from well over 1,000 bins to just over 600. (Merton website: <http://muckymerton.co.uk/residents-protest/>)

The hashtag ‘Muckymerton’ emerged on Twitter as a means of bringing together residents who initially wished to express their discontent of the waste disposal situation in Merton Council. #Muckymerton first started circulating in 2014 and it gained particular popularity in 2018, after the introduction of a new and highly unpopular waste management policy linked with VeoliaUK.

The corpus of the current study comprises all the 19 ‘tweet events’ (Giaxoglou, 2018) – altogether 98 tweets – that the hashtag ‘#MuckyMerton’ resulted for the period spanning August 2018 to February 2020. By ‘tweet event’ we refer to what Giaxoglou (2018: 15) describes as ‘multiauthored sequences; which appear on the text box below each tweet. When it comes to complaints, the concept of tweet events was particularly helpful for data collection because it serves as a guiding principle for collecting and scrutinising interrelated tweets.

The presentation of data complies with ethical guidelines for online research (Spilioti and Tagg, 2016) and was informed by recent calls for attention to ethical considerations in pragmatics (Locher and Bolander, 2019) and social media research (Bolander and Locher, 2019; D’Arcy and Young, 2012). The dataset collected was intended for public display in a publically accessed platform suggesting that no consent was required from contributors. All identifying information including the users’ names and pseudo-names was removed with the exception of public figures (MPs and the Council Leader) whose names were retained.

3.2. Methodology

Our methodology is anchored in diachronic pragmatics and linguistically anchored discourse analysis. As regards the former, it is worth noting that in the field this area is more frequently referred to as ‘historical pragmatics’, but since we use various historically-embedded concepts to analyse data drawn from CMC, we decided to refer to our investigation as ‘diachronic pragmatics’. As to the latter, we deploy discourse analysis to explore the Bakhtinian concept of ‘complex addressivity’ (see e.g. Thesen, 2006; Seargeant et al., 2012; Vladimirou, 2014), i.e. the phenomenon when an utterance has various very different addressees, including direct and indirect ones. Complex addressivity is enabled by the online medium, which empowers those who make the complaints. Even more importantly, complex addressivity is a concomitant feature of complex participation (cf. Kádár and House, 2020), which deindividuates the aggression and as such triggers escalation. More specifically,

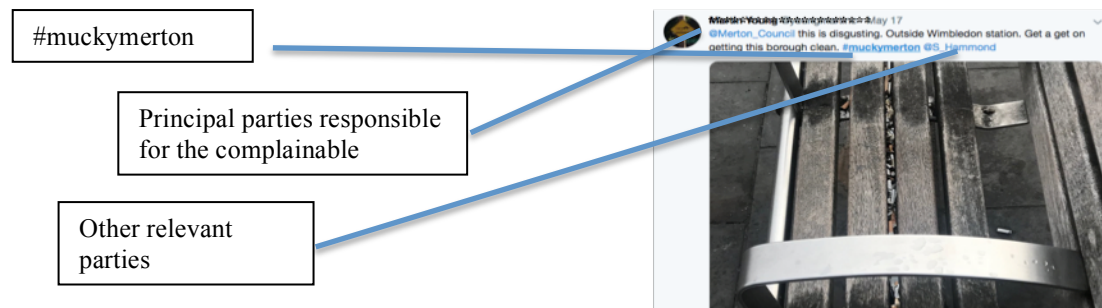
- a) the complaining person is able to address not only a single recipient – including the perpetrator or the person who represents the perpetrator – but rather a cluster of actors who are somehow negatively connected with the complainable that triggered the complaint;
- b) the complaining person is also able to make connections and form (usually ephemeral) relationships with others who are also negatively affected by the state of affairs that causes the complaint.

Our research will also show that addressivity in online complaining on social media can become ambiguous, i.e. it can be unclear who the complaint is actually addressed to.

Let us here illustrate the complexity of addressivity and the related escalation of aggression in our data by using the following example:

(1)

@Martin_Council this is disgusting. Outside Wimbledon station. Get a get on getting this borough clean. #muckymerton @S_Hammond



As this example illustrates, the person who tweets the comment addresses Merton Council as he posts the upgraded complaint “It’s disgusting”. However, ‘S_Hammond’ – a political stakeholder involved in the management of the Council – is also co-addressed in the tweet. In addition, the poster can assume that the message will reach all the followers of the Twitter storm featured at ‘#muckymerton’, i.e. there is a cluster of secondary participants simultaneously involved in the already complex addressivity here. The complex participation structure manifests itself in aggression (which triggers other forms of aggressive complaints leading to an escalatory process) because the presence of other complainers imply that there is a common justified cause behind the complaint. What makes the pragmatic dynamics of such tweets even more complicated in terms of participation is that any number of unnamed and unknown participants may read such messages.

Complex participation is on a par with the complexity of complaining itself. As we have argued in Section 1, complaint as a speech act is often realised by blaming those who are held responsible for the occurrence of the complainable (see also Pomerantz, 1978; Laforest, 2002; Bing and Ruhl, 2008; Márquez Reiter et al., 2015). As our analysis in Section 4 will illustrate, it is not only Merton Council or its leader that gets blamed, but also a) other actors with the power to resolve the complainable may be addressed, and b) the persons who complaint may exert some form of blame also on fellow residents such as fly tippers.

The notion of diachronicity in our analysis is anchored in diachronic pragmatic takes on the role of time in the analysis of present-day data (see also Section 3). As Kádár (2019) argues, diachronic pragmatics is as much focused on the study of modern data as that of diachronic language use; however, unlike synchronic pragmatics, diachronic pragmatic research investigates issues that are related to time and history. A key area of inquiry in the diachronic pragmatic field has been the previously mentioned Heideggerian notion of diachronicity, which has two interrelated implications for our data analysis, namely

1. Online complaints in social media evolve over time because they are available for others to view and reflect on at later points in time (see also Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014);
2. A temporal progression of a sequence of social media complaints such as re-tweets substantially increases the pragmatic power of such complaints, provided that the complainer can argue at a later point of time that the reason for the complaint has not been resolved by the actors who are responsible for it.

4. Analysis

In the present analysis, we follow the analytic procedure described in the previous section, focusing on mimetic escalatory aggression in online social media complaints through the lenses of addressivity interrelating with complex participation and diachronicity. Escalatory aggression comes into existence through a range of pragmatic features embedded in discourse, such as affective lexis, punctuation, irony, self-correction, hyperbole, repetition, ellipsis and visuals. The analysis is divided in two sections: In Section 4.1 we examine layers of addressivity and related complex participation, and in Section 4.2 we focus on our data through the concept of diachronicity.

4.1 Layers of addressivity and related complex participation

Addressivity in online complaints can be ‘straightforward’, in that by default the persons or institutions responsible for causing the complainable – in our case, Merton Council – are the primary targets of the complaint. The following examples elucidate this point:

(2)

@Merton_Council this is disgusting. Outside Wimbledon station. Get on getting this borough clean. #muckymerton @S_Hammond

Seriously, you think we are stupid enough to think you are actually seeking views of others before you do what's already decided??? #Keepitreal #MuckyMerton

(3)

Replying to @Merton_Council @LdnPeregrines
Great to see @Merton_Council focusing on what's important for residents
Education, housing, waste management, etc Oh, hold on... #muckymerton
#rubbishcouncil

While blaming in complaints may be straightforward and emotively loaded, as example (2) shows, it can also be performed in a playfully ironic way, i.e. in the form

of overt untruthfulness (see e.g. Dynel, 2013), as we can see in the case of example (3). In example (2) the pointed criticism (Culpeper, 2011) ‘this is disgusting’ is directly addressed at the target of the blame, i.e. ‘@Merton_Council’. The intensification of the complaint is anchored in the abrupt tenor conveyed by the short elliptical and imperative clauses, followed by an aggressive interrogative. Of particular interest is the use of multiple punctuation, which further contributes to the intensification of the complaint (see also Vandergriff, 2013).

It is relevant to note that, as example (3) also shows, when irony occurs in social media comments, the posters often make self-corrections to avoid being misunderstood by others who may believe that they mean what they say or they engage in ‘trolling’ (cf. Dynel, 2016), and also to make the complainable pragmatically more salient. This salience is reinforced by the evaluative hashtag ‘#rubbishcouncil’ which disambiguates the message and guides the reader towards the intended interpretation of the tweet (cf. Scott, 2015). Importantly, simple addressivity does not mean that the participation framework itself is simple: in both examples (2) and (3) we can observe a sense of aggression, which indicates that these tweets are parts of an escalatory process.

Along with the most obvious addressee, that is the Council, posts in our corpus also often address the contractor company VeoliaUK. What is noteworthy in various of such tweets is that the complainers – or at least some of them – seem to have familiarised themselves with the legal and financial relationship between the Council and the contractor company responsible for waste disposal, and simultaneously direct their blaming at the Council, the company (or both the Council and the company), and even other actors with power to resolve the complainable. The followings examples illustrate this point:

(4)

Dear @VeoliaUK once again litter cleaned on Canterbury Road on Thursday, bag not collected on Friday, foxes had a field day by Sunday, litter everywhere again by Monday. Just like Craig Davids lyrics, your litter arrangements are rubbish. @Merton_Council @Siobhain_MP #muckymerton

(5)

Oh dear!@VeoliaUK have forgotten their Wednesday morning Kenley Road collection for the second week in a row #shambles@ Merton_Council @EdwardFoley @S_Hammond #MuckyMerton

In both examples (4) and (5) the primary addressee of the complaint is the contractor company VeoliaUK. However, the complexity of addressivity on social media becomes immediately visible here in that also Merton Council and several MPs responsible for the management of Merton are mentioned in the tweets as secondary addressees. The fact that there are various addressees involved implies that complaint and aggression here are deindividuated (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2015). This sense of deindividuation gives a green light to the escalation of the aggression because anonymity and the lack of individual responsibility for offending others boost aggressive behaviour.

In the above examples, there is a sense of ‘primary’ versus ‘secondary’ addressivity (see e.g. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997); however, in some other cases, there is an explicit double primary addressivity and consequent deindividuation, as the following examples show:

- (6) Nobody can be surprised at @Merton_Council and @VeoliaUK incompetence by now People need sacking #muckymerton
- (7) Undoubtedly, @VeoliaUK will not receive any deductions as @Merton_Council isn't competent enough to govern the contract #muckymerton

In example (6) we can see a sense of escalating aggression conveyed by the extreme case formulation (ECF) 'nobody', a pattern previously encountered in complaint sequences (Pomerantz, 1986; Norrick, 2004). The poster not only refers to the disqualifying and affectively loaded noun "incompetence" of the responsible actors but also demands the employees of VeoliaUK to be dismissed, which represent the speech act of request embedded in the complaint. In example (7), on the other hand, the complainer, in using the adverb 'undoubtedly', adds a strong sense of certainty to her/his prediction that employees at VeoliaUK will not have any salary deductions because the Council is incompetent even to manage its contracts with the contractor company. Note that reflections on the 'incompetence', 'sacking' and/or salary deductions of the responsible actors tend to recur in our data, that is, these pragmatic tropes are of a mimetic nature (see Marsden and Kádár, 2017).

The following example provides insight into another layer of addressivity, namely, personalised attacks in the context of escalatory complaints on social media – in our case, aggressive criticisms of the leader of Merton Council:

- (8) Replying to @cllr_alambritis
Any chance of doing something about the appalling state of OUR borough Stephen? You know, the mess you receive numerous Tweets and messages about, but never, ever have the decency to acknowledge? Are you not ashamed that your borough is known as #MuckyMerton?

In this post, the Council leader Stephen Alambritis is addressed by his first name, which indicates a sense of aggressive familiarity (see e.g. Magnusson, 2007). In addition, the poster deploys a chain of rhetorical questions, i.e. the person who poses the questions is never looking for an answer but simply challenges the councillor's competence. Note that this barrage of rhetorical questions increases the escalatory aggression of the posting as it 'bombards' Alambritis with questions. While this 'bombardment' is symbolic in that the mode of communication on Twitter is asynchronous, this instance of language use indicates a strong sense of aggression (see Eades, 2008; and Sidnell, 2010 on asking rhetorical questions as a form of interactional control). In our corpus, in many of such personalised attacks the complainer deploys reference to the 'collective', like the capitalised first person plural possessive personal pronoun 'OUR' in example (8). Here, the capitalisation arguably contributes to the verbalisation of emotion (Langlotz & Locher, 2012). This pragmatic claim for 'collective' (cf. Agha, 1997) entails that while the addressee of the complaint is an individual, the Tweeting person deindividuates the complaining side.

Note that the exploitation of multimodal resources provided by Twitter allows the users to deploy creative deprecatory drawings as forms of aggression against an individual target, in this case the Council leader:

(9)

London Borough of Merton's highest-paid, self-loving 'Binfluencer'. everything he says about Veolia's refuse contract is 100% rubbish. Guaranteed!
Welcome to #Muckymerton



In example (9) the Council leader becomes the target of a series of personal insults. The post playfully depicts the leader as a person 'talking rubbish' and deploys the third party personalised negative reference "Merton's highest paid, self-loving, binfluencer". Here, the target is not addressed directly but is rather depicted as a 'public spectacle'. The deployment of humour in complaints increases their shareability and the possibility that they will reach a wider audience (see also Orthaber, 2019).

As we have already noted, blaming is not always directed at those who are invested with the authority to resolve the complainable. The following example illustrates instances when residents blame each other for the abysmal state of affairs on their streets:

(10)

People are just disgusting #muckymerton #mertoncouncil

Along with a major shift in addressivity, this example also illustrates the previous claim that blaming in our Twitter corpus very often operates with the involvement of primary and secondary addressees (cf. examples 6 and 7 above). Note that blaming other residents does not imply that the complainers align themselves with the Council. As the following example (11) illustrates, many tweets admonish the Council, the contractor company VeoliaUK and other stakeholders for failing to take action against fly tippers as culprits. Thus, while the blame in these postings is shifted to a certain degree, this shift does not trigger any decrease of the Council's, VeoliaUK's or other relevant parties' responsibility:

(11)

Replying to @VeoliaUK @Merton_Council

Well then the owners should receive a hefty fine for creating and maintaining a rat infested health hazard in our neighbourhood! #justsaying #muckymerton

As a final point in our analysis of addressivity and related participation, it is important to note that addressivity in our corpus is not always clear-cut. In some cases, as shown by the following example, it is not exactly clear whom the posters blame for the situation:

(12)

I travel and work all over London and I swear #MuckyMerton has to to [sic.] be the filthiest Some parts are vomit inducing.

As example (12) shows, while the poster does not single out a responsible target here, this lack of addressivity does not correlate with a lack of emotive escalation, and also it does not transform complaint into another speech act such as Opine (see Edmondson & House, 1981). Affect is displayed through the use of a series of hyperbolic tropes, including the superlative “filthiest” and lexis that carries a strong affective meaning, all contributing to message intensity (cf. Leech, 1976; Culpeper, 2011). Interestingly, the qualifier ‘some’ does not reduce the force of the complaint (Norrick, 2004: 1729) and indeed the tweet is not interpreted as violating the Maxim of Quality.

4.2. Diachronicity

The fact that Twitter provides an asynchronous mode of communication does not by itself have a particular implication for online aggression. However, if tweets are triggered by a major controversy, the asynchronous mode of communication facilitates escalatory mimesis (cf. Marsden and Kádár, 2017), as the following example illustrates:

(13)

@user 1 May 11

I spoke to recurrent fly tippers at flats on the Broadway. Young tenants said they don’t want smelly bags in flat or hallway so will keep dumping them outside. Sadly, unless @Merton_Council threaten they’ll continue.

@user 2 May 12

Thanks for trying, Julie. Someone @Merton_Council has to take responsibility for Wimbledon’s streets What are the odds they’ll suddenly find the resources for @Wimbledon tennis fortnight?

@user 3 May 12

Disgusting mess yesterday and this morning on the bend where Latimer Rd joins The Broadway ... more overnight fly tippers ...

In this thread, there is a day’s difference between the Tweets. That is, the second and the third comments reflect on the first one posted a day before, and they engage in an escalatory narrative: while the first posting is not particularly aggressive, in that it only describes the negative state of affairs in the Council, the second commenter deploys irony – a playful reference for the council’s corruptness – which makes the discussion more hostile towards the Council (cf. Gal, 2019). Building upon the previous ongoing exchange, the third commenter also places the blame on ‘overnight fly tippers’. This tweet further simply describes the state of affairs mentioned in the first posting, but this tweet uses a much stronger language than the first one, hence upgrading the complaint by referring to the state of affairs as a ‘disgusting mess’.

The escalatory nature of such threads implies that there may be discrepancies between the comments in terms of addressivity. When people engage in an escalatory ‘letting the steam off’ conversation in a temporally (and physically) separated way, their comments may be detached from one another as individual outbursts of

aggression with different targets. This does not mean that rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) may not be enhanced between the commenters – considering that the commenters are brought together by a common cause – but this sense of rapport may not manifest itself in the form of jointly organised complaints. For instance, in example (13), the three commenters who enhance rapport with each other by realising complaining appear to have very different targets.

It is relevant to note that on Twitter and supposedly other social media platforms (see Section 5) diachronicity very often manifests itself in visual forms, due to the multimodal nature of tweets. When it comes to postings that deploy both text and photos to exert blame on different addressees, it is important to consider that such postings may use various photos to visualise that the state of affairs constituting the core of the complaint has not changed over time. The following example illustrates this point:

(14)

Day 24 of the @VeoliaUK incompetence challenge

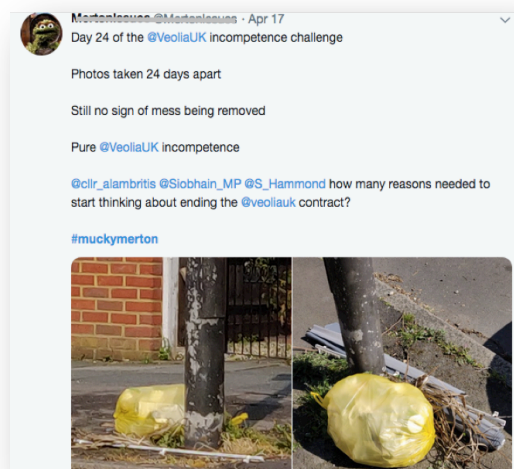
Photos taken 24 days apart

Still no sign of mess being removed

Pure @VeoliaUK incompetence

@clir_alambritis @Siobhain_MP @S_Hammond how many reasons needed to start thinking about ending the @veoliauk contract?

#muckymerton



In example (14), we can observe a sense of discrepancy regarding addressivity, in that some of the lines in the tweet are addressed to MPs whilst some others to VeoliaUK. However, unlike the thread featured in example (13) above, this is a single Tweet, that is, the discrepancy here reflects the fact that the poster considers multiple actors responsible for the problematic state of affairs. The two images in the posting are juxtaposed to one another, which constitutes a powerful evidence for the failure of the responsible parties to act.

In some other postings, such as the one featured in example (15) below, there is a single image and diachronicity is evoked with the aid of a verbal message attached to the image rather than the use of multiple images:

(15)

This is still here after 6 days. Maybe @VeoliaUK will collect it tomorrow like they should have done last Wednesday #MuckyMerton



The tweet in example (15) mocks VeoliaUK for being inapt with time-management, hence upgrading the complaint. Time is a key issue in the tweet, which again showcases the importance of diachronicity in complaints on social media.

The visualisation of time can be particularly powerful in the case of images which somehow depict a longer phase of ‘development’.

(16)

This is now on its 8th day. Re-reported to @Merton_Council yesterday as #flytipping and also to Environmental Health due to the rat infestation. I bet you it's still there tomorrow #MuckyMerton



In example (16), the poster targets three different actors (although he only addresses the tweet to two out of these three actors) and expresses aggression by stating his conviction that no action will be taken by the parties who could resolve the problem. The tweet features three different photos depicting an increasing amount of rubbish at the very same spot, thus ‘proving’ for other participants in the thread – and observers of the thread – that over time no action by the responsible parties has occurred. Note that while ‘proving’ the truth of the complaintable may seem to be redundant in a context in which language users are brought together by a joint cause, justifying the cause of aggression is a very frequent form of behaviour in mimetic aggression (see Kádár, 2017).

In the realisation of aggression, a particularly important pragmatic device in our corpus is unconventional punctuation alongside ellipsis. In various tweets in

which diachronicity becomes important, the posters deploy such an aggressive punctuation to indicate frustration and anger (cf. Khazraie & Talebzadeh, 2020). In example (17), full stops are used to divide the tweet into three single-word elliptical segments, i.e. ‘Every.’, ‘Single.’ and ‘Time.’; the capitalisation used further indicates the expression of frustration and anger. The popularity of this pragmatic device clearly compensates for the fact that it is not possible to shout out the anger felt in online media.² The following example (17) illustrates the use of this pragmatic device:

(17)

Thanks @VeoliaUK
 Neighbours nappies by my front door since Monday evening. It's now Friday evening. Still not collected.
 Every. Single. Time. Reported to the council.
 No action. @MertonBinBot
 @WimbledonMerton @MertonIssues
 @MertonLibDems @sw19com
 @KeepMertonTidy @south_Wimbledon



Another relevant pragmatic tool which is particularly important when diachronicity kicks in is the playful exaggeration of the delay of VeoliaUK and other actors. For instance, in the following example (18) the poster ironically mentions her entire “lifetime” in which the rubbish will not be cleared:

(18)

#MuckyMerton
 This rubbish has been here for such a long time. Wimbledon Dumsford road sw 19. I would love to see this cleared up, in my lifetime. Ha ha



Instances of playful exaggeration in this context are centred on the claimed ‘ongoingness’ of the state of affairs. The following example (19) also illustrates the operation of irony supported by a sense of diachronicity reflected in the use of repetition:

(19)

Replying to @Merton_Council

Happy Merton, where streets are filthy day, every day.

#MuckyMerton



In this example, the tweeter engages in parodising the situation on the streets of Merton.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In our study we have examined how the speech act of complaint operates on Twitter, with a particular focus on some of the pragmatic and discursive features which, in our view, distinguish interactive complaints on social media from their face-to-face or written counterparts. These features centre on the concepts of complex addressivity and related complex participation, and diachronicity. We have investigated a cluster of phenomena in our study of these concepts, such as punctuation, irony, self-correction, etc.

As regards the concept of addressivity, on Twitter – and arguably other forms of social media such as Instagram, WhatsApp and WeChat – addressivity and participation tend to be complex for two reasons. Firstly, there are primary and secondary addressees of a complaint. Secondly, addressivity cannot always be defined in the dichotomy of ‘primary’ *versus* ‘secondary’ but rather it operates in terms of multiple addressee-ship. Furthermore, in escalating social media complaint ‘chains’ (Collins, 2004), one can often observe pragmatic ambiguity as regards who is to blame for the reason that triggers the complaint. The complexity of addressivity in social media complaints implies that while people enhance rapport and deindividuate the complaint by jointly engaging in mimetic complaining threads, this deindividuation does not mean that they agree as a ‘community’ about who is responsible for the occurrence of the complainable. At the same time, this potential ambiguity which always lurks behind addressivity in social media complaints further contributes to the above-discussed process of deindividuation and the consequent escalation of the aggressive load of the complaints.

We have explored the concept of diachronicity, by focusing on the asynchronous nature of tweets in our corpus. Asynchronicity is a characteristic of various social media, which very often triggers escalatory mimesis and aggression. As the analysis has shown, diachronicity interrelates with a cluster of phenomena such as playful exaggeration in the context of complaining. Our research has illustrated that

the visual component of online complaints on Twitter becomes particularly relevant whenever diachronicity is in operation: it increases mimetic engagement and the related escalation process in online complaining.

The present study is more relevant for research on aggression than for ‘mainstream’ impoliteness studies. While we agree with the claim that it is often difficult to disentangle aggression and impoliteness (cf. Culpeper, 2011; see also a discussion in Kádár and House, 2021), we believe that mimetic escalation in complaints is more relevant to aggression than impoliteness (cf. Kádár, 2017), at least if one defines impoliteness (just as politeness) as a) a phenomenon that comes into existence through evaluation (Eelen, 2001) and b) which can be captured through the (un)intentional offence it causes (Culpeper, 2011: 51). While mimetic escalatory complaints on social media may be impolite in that they are offensive to various addressees – in particular, if an addressee as an individual is singled out – such data does neither provide detailed insight into the reflective evaluations (cf. Eelen, 2001) of such actors, nor it is necessarily offensive. It is important to emphasise here that escalatory aggression is realised in social media complaints by a group of people brought together by a joint cause. There is a difference between instances when aggression occurs between two individuals and when it takes place between groups of people and various actors in a deindividuated manner. Individual ‘one-off’ complaints and other complaints made by many people over a longer period of time are two ends of a pragmatic scale (Leech, 1989) of (de)individuation. While in the former case escalation cannot happen and extensive aggression triggers negative evaluation valence, in the latter case the fact that there is a group of people brought together by a common cause – and that the complainable has affected these people for a longer period of time – make escalated aggression more acceptable and justified. Deindividuated social media complaints studied in this paper fall under what sociologists describe as ‘moral aggression’:

The term moral aggression has been used to refer to the intense negative reactions individuals sometimes experience when they have been treated in an unjust, unfair, or untrustworthy fashion ... The notion of moral aggression reflects a basic intuition about the phenomenology of injustice: People often have very limited tolerance for other people or groups who are perceived to be dishonest or untrustworthy, especially when they believe that they themselves or the group to which they belong are engaging in more cooperative, trustworthy behaviour. (Kramer and Messick, 1998: 248)

The sense of justification (see also Archer, 2008) apparent in complaints made by groups of people over a longer period of time decreases the relevance of impoliteness to the study of such complaints because the primary target of various manifestations of offence in this context is not supposed to take offence, or at least their feelings are meant to be disregarded, considering that the reason that triggers the offence is clearly their responsibility. Having thus argued, it is also important to note that, as Kádár and House (2021) argue, escalation operates with a certain ‘moral order’, and as such it is not completely *ad hoc*. Putting it differently, aggression in such scenarios may not tolerate certain forms of behaviour such as racism or sexism, and such forms of behaviour could deratify the morally justified aggression.

Importantly, this train of thought is not valid to social media in which an individual gets criticised or abused only for the sake of entertainment – which is a regrettably frequent phenomenon on social media – and in which escalatory

aggression also plays an important role (see Kádár, 2013). Complaining as we have studied it in the current paper represents a phenomenon in the realisation of which escalatory aggression is inherently anchored in rights and obligations (House 1989), that is the complainable that triggers the complaint provides a definite right to the complainers to speak out against the ‘guilty’ party, and the latter has an obligation to remove the complainable.

The present investigation is limited in that it is based on a case study. While we believe that the results are replicable to other instances of complaints made on social media in general, future research will have to attest the validity of this claim. It would also be important to replicate the present inquiry in other linguacultural settings. As previous research has shown (see e.g. Boxer, 2002; Yuan, 2009; Meinel, 2013), the inventory of the realization of complaints is subject to significant linguacultural variation. It would be an important task for future research to show whether this linguacultural variation is valid for the realm of social media as well.

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Notes

¹ Please also note previous work anchored in Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotopes (see Lyons & Tagg 2019)

² Note, however, that this claim is not valid for forms of social media that allows voice recording.