

**Food for talk:**

**Discursive identities, food choice and eating practices**

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**Petra W. J. Sneijder**

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**





# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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### 1.1 Food and identity

The relationship between food and identity has occupied social science researchers for some decades now. Traditionally, it was treated as a marker of differences in gender, class and ethnicity (for example Charles and Kerr, 1988; Douglas, 1984). More recently, the concept of lifestyle has entered the discussion, focusing on the way people formulate their identities by making particular choices about food consumption (Giddens, 1991). While anthropologists and sociologists have tried to explain food choice with the help of identity categories, or to understand food practices as building blocks for identity, social psychologists have examined identity as a predictor of food consumption. These studies for example show that consumers who perceive themselves in a particular way are more likely to buy corresponding products, such as organic foods in the case of self-identified 'green' consumers (Sparks and Shepherd, 1992).

What these various perspectives have in common is that they treat identity as a cognitive entity. In the end, identities are assumed to reflect actual and relatively fixed personalities, social categories or choices (see also McKinlay and Dunnett, 1998). However, this approach overlooks the fact that identities are first and foremost social practice. People construct, attribute and refute identities for different reasons, in different situations. This may for example explain why seemingly contradictory tendencies such as the pursuit of pleasure and the growing importance of health-related and ethical motives can be found in one and the same consumer (cf. Gabriel and Lang, 1995).

A focus on identity as a situated discursive practice seems essential if we wish to understand how people draw upon identities to account for their food choices and eating practices. This thesis proposes a discursive psychological focus in order to study how identities are embedded in the everyday lives of consumers. Rather than arguing that the path between self-reported identities and behaviour is indirect and is influenced by more than one variable, discursive psychology reformulates the problem by suggesting that identities may be just as variable as behaviour. People continuously formulate and reformulate their identity to perform different social actions, such as presenting themselves as an 'average person' in order to legitimize potentially reproachable activities (cf. Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Edwards, 1991).

Because of the wide range of social functions that people fulfil through talk, they regularly use different and sometimes conflicting identities at the same time. They may, for instance, present themselves as a vegetarian in order to express their commitment to animal welfare, while at the same time draw on the identity of a responsible human being who looks after their own health to account for meat-eating. By studying identity work in a largely naturalistic environment and using discourse analysis techniques, this study aims to add an important new dimension to prevailing explanations of food and eating practices.

### **1.2 Aim of the study**

The aim of this study is twofold:

- It provides a systematic, data-driven description of how identities are embedded in everyday discussions on food preferences and eating practices. The focus is on how identity categories are formulated, used and undermined in relation to their sequential and rhetorical environment.
- A second, related, aim is to describe the varying social activities that these types of identity categories fulfil in daily interaction. This focus

on the mundane interaction context represents a shared concern with recent developments in communication science, which stress the importance of discourse and interaction (Tracy, 2001; 2002; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995), also in relation to processes of change (Van Woerkum, 2002).

On the whole, this project is designed to study the relationship between food and identity as a participants' concern rather than an analyst's category. The focus lies on the ways in which identities are used, invoked, implied and resisted in the sequential flow of food interaction, and how descriptions and narratives deal with identity implications for both speakers and recipients. The conceptual resource of 'identity' is theorized in terms of its design for activities such as building and countering accusations about particular food choices, attributing and resisting motives for food consumption, or justifying particular eating practices and their consequences. The analysis aims to shed light on the ways in which people deal with the constraints and possibilities of food choice and eating habits in their everyday life.

### **1.3 Discursive psychology**

The focus in discursive psychological studies is on 'natural' rather than contrived data. The definition of naturally occurring data is not as straightforward as it might seem. It could be broadly defined as interaction that is not produced on demand but rather as everyday talk that would also have taken place outside the research context, such as interaction in online forums, institutional talk or casual conversations between friends. However, such a definition would rule out the possibility of investigating interviews or laboratory talk as forms of natural interaction in their own right (Potter, 2004). Several discursive studies have treated interviews as examples of conversational interaction with the same orientation to the sequential organization of talk (e.g. Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995).

The use of naturally occurring talk offers a way out of some of the problems that arise in the use of interviews in psychological research. Potter

and Hepburn (204) list a number of specific contingent and necessary problematic features of interviews as data. First, there is the fact that psychological researchers do not usually take the interviewer's talk into account, which results in the interviewee's talk being removed from its context (see also Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000). Related to this is the procedure whereby all interactionally relevant details are removed in transcriptions of the interview, while conversational phenomena such as overlap, prosody or insertion sequences, in which the interviewee requests for clarification, may be relevant for understanding the development of talk. Potter and Hepburn also identify problems that they consider as necessarily tied to the use of interviews. These include the presence of social agendas, and the potentially complex stakes and interests of interviewer and interviewee. Although none of this rules out the possibility of using interviews, it does point to the merits of exploring naturalistic materials.

Discursive psychology (DP) explores how psychological themes, such as identity, are handled and managed in discourse. Discursive psychology proceeds from the assumption that text and talk are oriented towards action (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Te Molder and Potter, 2005a). Identities and other psychological categories (for example attitudes) are studied as categories and concerns of talk rather than its causes. Instead of studying identity as based on innate mental structures and perceptual experience, DP approaches it as an actively constructed tool for performing different sorts of interactional tasks (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). Agency, intent, identity, attitudes and prejudice are built, made available and undermined in activity sequences such as those involving blame, justification and defence (Edwards and Potter, 2005).

In this thesis we develop an analytic collection of the ways identities are used, invoked and resisted in the sequential organization of food interaction. We examine how descriptions and narratives reflexively manage implications for participants' identities.

## **1.4 Data collection**

The project is spread across three research settings:

- online interaction in a Dutch Internet forum on veganism (Dutch organization for vegans)
- online interaction in a Dutch Internet forum on food pleasure (the 'Smulweb')
- online interaction in an American message board on obesity and weight management (Weight Watchers)

The main criterion for selecting these cases was their relationship to recent and dominant trends in current food choice. The assumption is not that the data are representative but rather that they provide a well-based impression of the way in which these trends are expressed in everyday talk (naturalistic materials), in this case in relation to the identity work that the participants might perform. The cases are related to the following food trends:

- ethical considerations as grounds for food choice (online forum on veganism)
- hedonic aspects as grounds for food choice (online forum on food pleasure)
- weight concerns as grounds for food choice (online forum on obesity)

Note that the assumption is not that these reasons for food choice are automatically the ones that participants will adhere to. Rather, they are likely resources for identity-related activities that participants may perform, and in this way the availability of these resources is more or less guaranteed.

The application of the criteria resulted in a data set on veganism consisting of 45 online discussions, collected between September 2001 and August 2002. The material in the food-pleasure study consists of 40 online discussions (1751 postings in total). Finally, 50 discussions on 'overeating/ failing the Weight Watchers' programme' were examined for the weight

management study. Although the initial aim was not to compare the data but to widen the scope of the study by exploring identity talk across a broader range of food domains, some interesting entries for comparison will be offered in chapter six.

The forums share a similar structure. One participant starts a discussion and labels it by introducing a title. Other participants may then choose to reply to the initiator and to each other. It is possible for participants to show who they are responding to by quoting or by explicitly addressing someone by his or her name or nickname. Additional information about participants and their contributions include an indication of the posting time, the number of contributions a participant has made to the forum and self-chosen slogans or signatures. For the sake of anonymity, all these identifying characteristics have been removed or changed in the transcripts. A more detailed account of the data can be found in the individual chapters.

Although discursive studies commonly examine face-to-face data, I have chosen online data for specific reasons. First and foremost, online interaction is a form of naturally occurring talk in its own right. As this research focuses on identity practices surrounding food choice and eating practices, data were searched that guaranteed food as a relevant topic for participants. Internet forums about food issues provide this guarantee.

The criteria for data collection as described above also appeared relevant for a range of websites. The wide availability of food talk on the Internet shows that the World Wide Web is an increasingly important place for discussing these kinds of issues. Furthermore, the materials are an extremely rich source of interesting analytical themes on food. The first study, on online discussions on veganism, was initially set up as a pilot study. However, the quality of the material in terms of analytic points of interests was promising and we decided to build a collection of online interaction. Moreover, the similarity of cases in terms of form and structure provides an opportunity for reflection and a basis for comparison.

Finally, discursive work using online interaction as data is a growing field. For instance, Lamerichs and Te Molder (2003) proposed discursive psychology as a non-cognitive alternative to early perspectives on computer-mediated interaction, and Schönfeldt and Golato (2003) demonstrated the occurrence of particular conversational practices in Internet relay chat. While not focusing on the sequential organization of Internet interaction as a topic in itself, the present thesis certainly aims to contribute a better understanding of how talk is organized in these kinds of settings, and the ways in which it can be studied.

## **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

Chapter two presents the first study about online discussions on veganism. The analysis reveals a set of discursive practices that participants use to 'normalize' their food choice. This analysis is extended in chapter three, which explores how participants deal with accountability issues in relation to possible health problems. Chapter four presents the analysis of an Internet forum on food pleasure. The focus is on the various ways in which participants build the identity of a gourmet. The next chapter examines online talk on weight management. Here, the identity implications of particular failure-and-blame discourses are investigated. Finally, the main conclusions, points for discussion and recommendations are formulated in chapter six.









## **CHAPTER 2**

### **NORMALIZING IDEOLOGICAL FOOD CHOICE: IDENTITY WORK IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS ON VEGANISM**

This chapter is based on the following article:

Sneijder, P. and Te Molder, H. F. M. Normalizing ideological food choice: Identity work in online discussions on veganism. *Submitted for publication*.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Normalizing ideological food choice: Identity work in online discussions on veganism**

---

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter we examine how people's identities are used as part of their accounts of particular food choices and eating habits. As an empirical case, we draw upon online discussions on veganism that we explore for participants' situated categorization work. In general, we demonstrate how members of a group associated with ideological food choice construct identities for specific interactional tasks, like undermining some of the potential negative inferences about their eating practices. This focus on mundane identity work is in contrast to other approaches that are frequently used for studying food and identity.

#### **2.2 Food choice and identity**

Traditionally, food choice has been examined as a marker of distinction and as a symbolic means of formulating membership of specific social groups. In social scientific disciplines like anthropology and sociology, food consumption is viewed as a social marker to construct social identities and lifestyles (Lupton, 1996; Caplan, 1997; Mintz and Dubois, 2002; Southerton, 2001; Tivadar and Luthar, 2005). Although emphasizing the importance of identity matters in relation to food, most studies restrict themselves to classical socio-demographic variables such as gender, class

and ethnicity (for examples see Charles and Kerr, 1988; Murcott, 1995; Lockie, 2001). In doing so, they tend to position these identity structures as consistent and omni-relevant, while others treat identity as fragmented (see also Caplan, 1997; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Southerton, 2001).

Beck (1992) suggests that the relevance and meaning of sociological variables like gender, class and ethnicity have shifted in the last decade. People are confronted with a complex diversity of choices in all areas of life. As a consequence, self-identity is determined more by lifestyle or people's actual practices than by the classical distinctions, although consumers' socio-demographic characteristics may still have an impact in particular areas (for an example of social class and gender, see Tivadar and Luthar, 2005). The routines people put into practice are reflexively open to change, making self-identity open to change as well (Giddens, 1991). Thus food consumption can be regarded as a choice that is part of the lifestyle decisions people make in late modernity.

Adapting a cultural rather than a structural pattern, the concept of (consumer) lifestyle partly solves the problem of the strictness of more traditional divisions. However, it does not capture the way in which identities are formulated, reformulated and managed in daily life by social members *themselves*. The latter seems essential, for example if we want to understand the many apparent inconsistencies in consumer behaviour (cf. Gabriel and Lang, 1995). It would appear that identities are much more fluidly drawn upon in daily practice than the current theories suggest.

Psychological theories on identity may provide us with a more fruitful basis for understanding the flexibility of identities. The dominant social psychological perspectives on identity have been developed by Tajfel (1982) and Turner (1987). Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) focuses on the way in which individuals identify themselves in terms of group membership. An extension of social identity theory, self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987) is more concerned with how people categorize *themselves*. According to this

theory, the self changes in the sense that different social categories may come to be seen as more or less important. Features of the context determine which of these social categories are perceived as relevant. However, there is a remarkable lack of research on social categorization theory in relation to food choice. Adding the concept of self-identity to the well-known theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), several studies have focused on the way in which self-perception influences food choice (Sparks and Sheperd, 1992; Armitage and Conner, 1999). For example, Sparks and Sheperd (1992) found that people who self-identified as 'green consumers' were more likely to consume organic vegetables. As explanations for the predictive quality of self-identity, social psychologists argue that self-perception may be developed by repeated behaviour such as choosing the same food over a period of time (Charng et al, 1988), and that people are driven to communicate their self-identity to others (Shavitt, 1990), for example by choosing certain foods over others (Conner and Armitage, 2002: 36).

Current social-psychological theories start from the assumption that identity is a cognitive state, objectively grounded in reality. Consequently, they tend to rule out the possibility that people may work up multiple and even inconsistent identities as part of the activities of everyday life. The variability of identities becomes apparent if we examine the ways in which people present themselves in conversations major focus for discursive psychology. Instead of treating identity as an isolated mental concept, discursive psychology recasts it as a members' concern.

### **2.3 Discursive identities**

An important analytic principle of discursive psychology (and conversation analysis) is the action orientation of language. Psychological concepts like attitudes and identity are studied as social practice or, in other words, as participants' resources for performing interactional business. Identities are designed to perform all kinds of context-relevant interactional

tasks, like displaying neutrality, discounting blame or building credibility (cf. Edwards and Potter, 1992; 2001). For instance, one may present oneself as a gourmet to counter accusations of being an unhealthy eater.

In discourse, identities are made relevant by constructing or ascribing membership of a broad range of possible categories that make particular inferences available and are associated with particular kinds of activities and features (Sacks, 1992). Depending on the context, one and the same person can be described as a 'family member', 'doctor' or 'ordinary person' or, in relation to food, as a 'consumer', 'vegan' or 'gourmet'. All these categories suggest different actions and aspects as being relevant for that person. In Sacks's terms, each category has certain category-bound features. Describing someone as a gourmet evokes what is 'conventionally known' about this category, for example that gourmets enjoy food and take an interest in cooking and eating out. Conversely, describing a person as having particular characteristics can also suggest and build their membership of a particular category (Sacks, 1992; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Edwards, 1998).

Furthermore, identities may be associated with certain rights or entitlements to claiming particular knowledge or experience (Sacks, 1992; Potter, 1996). For instance, a doctor is treated as being entitled to perform a diagnosis, and someone who identifies him- or herself with veganism can be expected to know whether or not particular nutrients are plant-based.

Note however that categories, category-bound features and knowledge entitlements are worked up rather than fixed, and are put into practice rather than just being there. Assigning a person to a particular category makes the identity relevant to the interactional business at hand (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998:3). For instance, selecting one category over others may work to undermine particular inferences about the other available categories, as we shall demonstrate in this chapter. The criterion the analyst



uses to treat categories as relevant is that they should be made relevant and be oriented to by the participants themselves and have a visible outcome in the interaction (Schegloff, 1991).

## **2.4 Veganism and identity**

In this chapter we will illustrate a discursive psychological perspective on food and identity by presenting an analysis of online interaction on veganism. Veganism refers to a particular dietary style that entails eating only plant-based foods and abstaining from all animal products. Existing social scientific research related to this type of diet mainly focuses on the motives and values that supposedly underlie becoming a vegetarian or vegan. Vegetarians and vegans describe their motives as 'ideological', and mention mainly environmental concerns, animal welfare and other ethical considerations as the reasons for their choice of a vegetarian or vegan diet. (Beardsworth and Keil, 1992). Furthermore, in a study amongst young Swedish vegans, participants reported reasons such as health, distaste for meat and a preference for vegetarian food (Larsson et al, 2003).

Lindeman and Stark (1999, 2000) point out that ideological reasons for food choice may be linked to the expression of one's personal identity. In line with this notion, dietary styles like vegetarianism and veganism are also described as part of a chosen life project (cf. Giddens, 1991; Larsson et al, 2003).

While current literature underlines the relationship between food choice and identity, there is little interest in the way food choice is dealt with in everyday life. From a nutritional perspective, veganism is often described as an unhealthy lifestyle. In a diet without meat, fish, poultry and eggs, key nutrients such as zinc, vitamin B12 and protein would need to be obtained from alternative sources (Davies and Lightowler, 1997). However, it is not known if participants themselves make this issue relevant, and if so, for what purposes. Moreover, other concerns may be pervasive without being noticed

and taken into account by researchers. In this chapter we will show how participants construct the identities of ordinary people in order to normalize vegan food practices and undermine their potentially complicated character.

## **2.5 Method and material**

Discursive psychology examines naturally occurring discourse. This means that a broad range of written or verbal discourse can be treated as data. In the present study, the data consist of online discussions on veganism (for a discussion on online data, see Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003). The fragments have been copied from the site of the Dutch Association for Veganism, an independent organization that aims to provide independent information about veganism. The site contains a forum where people can interact with each other about topics related to veganism. Participants can start a 'thread' on a specific topic, which may vary from animal activism and criticism of the food industry to food products and eating practices. Sometimes a thread consists of two messages, but threads with up to twenty messages or more occur as well. A thread stays online for a year, which makes it possible to reply to older threads.

We collected a corpus of 37 threads addressing food or health issues like meal preparation and vitamin supplements. These threads contained a total of 379 emails at the time of documentation. The shortest thread contains two emails (fries) and the longest 65 (calcium). Through a discursive analysis of their conversation (for comprehensive methodological considerations, see Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998), we will show how participants in this forum negotiate about the kind of activities and features potentially connected with the category of vegans.

Two analytical principles are important. The first is the next-turn proof-procedure. By examining the understandings of first turns displayed by participants in second turns, we ensure that observations are not merely imposed by the researcher (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). The second

important analytic principle concerns the rhetorical features of descriptions (Edwards and Potter, 1992; 2001). People construct their own version of reality by simultaneously countering alternative versions. For instance, they describe reality in such a way as to protect themselves against potential accusations of having an interest or stake in their version of reality (Potter, 1996). Inspecting these counter-versions helps the analyst to make sense of the action-orientedness of the present description.

All names and dates have been changed in the data extracts for the sake of anonymity. Lines in the extract that did not generate a visible outcome in the interaction have been omitted (see the Analysis for details). A native speaker of English has carefully translated the Dutch threads in cooperation with the researchers. The analysis, which was performed on the Dutch materials, informed the translation to the extent that it was designed to capture the social actions found by the researchers in the data.

## **2.6 Analysis**

The materials presented here serve to illustrate the kind of analytic observations analysts are able to make when proceeding from the discursive psychological perspective described above. Our goal is to reveal some limitations of prevailing assumptions and to illustrate an alternative approach. We show how particular descriptions contribute to the construction of an alternative identity, and how this identity is used to resist negative inferences about the vegan lifestyle. The first part of the analysis focuses on descriptions that depict vegan meals as ordinary, while the second part presents accounts that normalize methods for preventing vitamin deficiencies, in particular the intake of food supplements and vitamin pills.

### 2.6.1 Preparing meals and varying ingredients as simple practices

In the first fragment, participant Anne, who categorizes herself as a novice by the activity of introducing herself, poses several questions about vegan practices. More specifically, she asks what a vegan breakfast looks like.

#### extract 1

breakfast

29/08/2001, 17:00

Anne

1 Hi, first I will introduce  
2 myself, I'm Anne and I've  
3 been eating vegetarian  
4 food for one year now. I  
5 want to reduce my use of  
6 dairy products and eggs  
7 etc. but now I have a  
8 small question, what  
9 exactly can you eat?  
10 Because you are talking  
11 about E-numbers and stuff  
12 on this site, but how do  
13 I know exactly what I  
14 (preferably) cannot eat,  
15 just to name an example,  
16 What does a vegan have  
17 for breakfast? To be  
18 honest, I haven't got a  
19 clue! And what can you do  
20 about the nutrients you  
21 miss out on by not eating

ontbijt

29/08/2001, 17:00

Anne

1 Hoi, ik zal me eerst even  
2 voorstellen, ik ben Anne  
3 en ben nu een jaar  
4 vegetarisch aan het eten.  
5 Ik wil ook gaan minderen in  
6 het eten van zuivel en  
7 eieren etc.  
8 maar nu heb ik een vraagje,  
9 wat mag je precies wel en  
10 niet eten eigenlijk? Want  
11 jullie hebben het op deze  
12 site wel over E stoffen  
13 enzo maar hoe weet ik nu  
14 precies wat ik (liever)  
15 niet kan eten, om maar een  
16 voorbeeld te noemen, hoe  
17 ziet het ontbijt van een  
18 veganist eruit? Ik heb  
19 eerlijk gezegd geen  
20 idee! En hoe zit het  
21 verder met de

22 certain things?! Can	22 voedingsstoffen die
23 anyone help me?! Thanks	23 je door bepaalde dingen
24 in advance,	24 niet te eten niet
25 best wishes, Anne.	25 binnenkrijgt?! Kan iemand
	26 mij helpen? Erg bedankt
	27 alvast,
	28 groetjes Anne

In her introduction Anne constructs members of the category 'vegans' as strict rule-followers based on a specific corpus of 'expert' knowledge. This construction is accomplished in different ways. For example, Anne explicitly presents herself as a help seeker. She makes her identity as an ignorant person relevant and credible by means of different conversational tools. First, she refers to the other visitors of the site as 'you' (line 10), thereby placing herself outside the group. She then refers to the use of "E-numbers and stuff" (line 11), by which she distances herself from the specific vocabulary of vegans. Anne thus creates a contrast between her ignorance and the technical knowledge of the vegans. This technical knowledge is presented as crucial for her transition to veganism. Finally, the word "exactly" (lines 9 and 13) formulates the information needed for practicing veganism as very precise and clear-cut.

By thus increasing the distance between her lack of knowledge and the technical knowledge of 'full-blown' vegans, Anne portrays veganism as an eating pattern that is bound to very specific rules and insights. We will see that this is precisely what the respondents subsequently select as the relevant item. They describe their breakfasts as 'simple', thereby undermining the rule-governed and difficult nature of veganism implied by Anne.

Let us take a look at Brian's reply, in which he undermines Anne's inferential implication that vegan meals are difficult to prepare.

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### extract 2

breakfast

01/09/2001, 09:15

Brian

reply

26 (5 lines omitted) I  
27 myself eat only fruit  
28 in the morning. I start  
29 with some squeezed  
30 oranges and at work I  
31 eat a big banana. The  
32 rest of the morning I  
33 eat even more fruit,  
34 like kiwis, grapefruit,  
35 grapes, peaches, you  
36 name it. You can take  
37 muesli for breakfast  
38 both with soy or rice  
39 milk or just  
40 sandwiches,  
41 because there are  
42 enough vegetable  
43 products to spread on a  
44 sandwich. All  
45 nutrients, vitamins  
46 and minerals are  
47 present in vegetable  
48 products in a very  
49 useful form, often  
50 much better than those  
51 in animal products. By  
52 mixing vegetables,  
53 fruit, pulses, cereals

ontbijt

01/09/2001, 09:15

Brian

reply

29 (5 lines omitted) Zelf  
30 eet ik 's morgens alleen  
31 maar fruit. Ik begin met  
32 wat geperste sinaasappelen  
33 en op m'n werk  
34 eet ik een flinke banaan.  
35 In de loop van de morgen  
36 eet ik dan nog meer fruit  
37 zoals kiwi's, grapefruit,  
38 druiven, perzikken, noem  
39 maar op. Je kunt ook muesli  
40 als ontbijt nemen met soja-  
41 of rijstemelk of gewoon  
42 boterhammen, want  
43 plantaardig broodbeleg is  
44 er genoeg.  
45 Alle voedingsstoffen,  
46 vitaminen en mineralen  
47 komen in heel bruikbare  
48 vorm voor in plantaardige  
49 voedingsstoffen, vaak veel  
50 beter als in dierlijke.  
51 Door te variëren met  
52 groenten, fruit,  
53 peulvruchten, granen en  
54 noten, kun je zonder er  
55 speciaal op te letten haast  
56 geen tekort oplopen van wat

54 and nuts, it's almost	57 dan ook. (41 lines
55 impossible to lack	58 omitted)
56 anything, and you don't	
57 have to pay special	
58 attention., (41	
59 lines omitted)	

Brian presents his breakfast as very simple and straightforward: he eats "only fruit" (line 27). However, he prevents this from being associated with an unbalanced meal, by referring to all kinds of fruits: "squeezed oranges", "a big banana", "more fruit like kiwis, grapefruit, grapes, peaches, you name it". Brian emphasizes the variety of his breakfast by adding adjectives like "squeezed" and "big", indicating the preparation and size of the fruits. "Like" (line 34) and the expression "you name it" (lines 35-36) at the end of his list, suggest that he 'can go on for hours'. In this way, Brian not only constructs his vegan breakfast as uncomplicated but also underlines the simplicity of bringing variety into such a breakfast.

In addition to this description of his own breakfast, Brian names alternatives: "muesli for breakfast both with soy or rice milk or just sandwiches" (lines 37-40). Note how Brian defines sandwiches as products that are mostly part of 'ordinary' breakfasts by using "just". This downplays the noteworthiness of sandwiches as meal composers (cf. Lee, 1987). Again, by indicating that 'normal' products can just as well be part of a vegan breakfast, he emphasizes the ease with which such a meal can be prepared. In lines 51-59, Brian confirms the image of a vegan as an uncomplicated eater who does not have to do anything out of the ordinary to prevent a shortage of nutrients. By presenting his breakfast in this particular way, Brian is simultaneously rebutting versions that can be contrasted with his description (Potter, 1996; Edwards, 1997). In other words, the categorization of his breakfast as mundane and easy to prepare counters Anne's description of the vegan breakfast as a complicated event. The second reply

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to Anne's question also constructs the vegan breakfast as simple to prepare but with an emphasis on different discursive means:

### extract 3

breakfast	ontbijt
02/10/2001, 13:25	02/10/2001, 13:25
Janet	Janet
reply 2	reply 2
60 Hi Anne, I'm eating	59 Hoi Anne, ik ben nu aan het
61 breakfast now:	60 ontbijten: 1/2
62 1/2 frozen banana and a	61 bevroren banaan en een hele
63 whole banana, a dash of	62 banaan, scheut sojamelk,
64 soy milk, (I add linseed,	63 (ik doe er dan ook
65 wheat germs and bran as	64 nog lijnzaad, tarwekiemen
66 well) and then through	65 en zemelen doorheen) en dan
67 the mixer!	66 de staafmixer erdoorheen!
68 Oatmeal goes very well	67 Havermout kun je heel
69 with water, a little	68 goed met water maken,
70 maple syrup or something	69 beetje ahornsiroop ofzo
71 in it, tasty as well	70 erdoor, ook lekker.

Describing a breakfast that is eaten and thus physically experienced at the moment of writing enhances the authenticity of that description (cf. Wiggins, 2002). In summing up the parts of her breakfast, Janet displays a particular arbitrariness: neither order nor exact quantities are important. Note how the potentially more 'complicated', relatively unknown ingredients are placed between brackets (lines 64-66). At the end of her description it becomes clear that the ingredients have to be blended: you have to use a mixer (lines 66-67). This procedure is constructed as a routine one, which is reflected in the simple syntactical sentence in the absence of an agent. The 'ungrammatical' description of the procedure suggests swiftness and constructs the procedure as a simple and brief action.

The addition "or something" after mentioning maple



syrup in line 70 suggests that this idea is not so strict in its application but more of a spontaneous thought: it is not difficult to come up with all kinds of ingredients to make a nice meal. Janet thus subtly manages the dilemma of how to provide a description without invoking the impression that it is artificially worked up as an argument (cf. Edwards, 2003). Finally, by using the phrase “tasty as well” (line 71), Janet makes available the inference that there are many ways of preparing oatmeal, all of them tasty. Like Brian, Janet constructs the vegan breakfast as a straightforward meal, containing more or less routine ingredients, without being tasteless.

In the final reply to Anne’s message, we see how the author Rick designs his message as an immediate response to Brian and Janet.

extract 4

breakfast	ontbijt
04/10/2001, 21:32	04/10/2001, 21:32
Rick	Rick
reply 3	reply 3
72 my breakfast looks	71 mijn ontbijt ziet er toch
73 somewhat simpler	72 wat simpeler uit: Broodje
74 still: peanut butter	73 pindakaas met vlokken en
75 sandwich with	74 een glaasje limonade.
76 sprinkles and a glass of	
77 lemonade.	

Rick assesses his own breakfast as simpler than those of Brian and Janet. The sequential relationship to the responses of Brian and Janet is clear through the use of the words ‘still’ (line 74 and the comparative ‘simpler’, line 73), which mark a relationship to the previous utterances. By using the comparative ‘simpler’, Rick shows that he treats Brian and Janet’s contributions as descriptions of *simple* breakfasts and he upgrades the simplicity of the described vegan breakfasts by presenting his own breakfast as even simpler. In doing so, John both underlines the potentially

undemanding character of a vegan, or vegan meal, and his own autonomy in this respect.

Rick's response is constructed as if it were a direct response in a face-to-face conversation. He accomplishes this directness by leaving out a greeting and starting his message without a capital letter, unlike Brian and Janet. This construction counters the idea that Rick carefully prepared his contribution (see also Edwards, 2003). He makes available the inference that the description of his breakfast has been formulated on the spot without any ulterior motives. As was the case with Janet's message, the immediate character of the response works as a 'stake inoculation' (Potter, 1996), protecting the authenticity of the displayed ordinariness.

In lines 74-77 Rick constructs the routine nature of his breakfast by naming commonly known and used products. The combination of products that he proposes, peanut butter and lemonade, is of an 'extremely' ordinary nature: it is the kind of combination that a child also could or would make. Rick presents himself as an 'extraordinarily' ordinary person, thereby refuting the notion of vegans as complicated eaters. Furthermore, unlike for instance soy milk, lemonade is not a drink that common sense would associate with veganism or health. It is 'designed to be uncomplicated' and suggests that Rick refers to a product he enjoys for its taste or its practicality. This counters the idea that every product in a vegan meal should be 'note worthily healthy'.

### **2.6.2 Describing the avoidance of monotony as easy**

In fragments taken from a second thread, we see a similar cluster of versions of 'simple' eating practices. As in extract 1-4, these versions are provided in response to a question of a novice regarding a specific food item.

**extract 5**

From vegetarian to vegan	van vegetariër naar veganist
05/02/2003, 23:06	05/02/2003, 23:06
Dick	Dick
1 (8 lines omitted) How do	1 (8 regels weggelaten)
2 you solve what to put on	2 Hoe lossen jullie het
3 your sandwich? I know	3 broodbeleg op? Ik weet dat
4 there is Tartex, it tastes	4 er Tartex bestaat, het is
5 good (and is expensive),	5 lekker (en duur) maar komt
6 but eventually it bores	6 op een gegeven moment ook
7 you very much (6 lines	7 je neus uit. (6 regels
8 omitted)	8 weggelaten)

Dick describes Tartex, a typical vegan product, as tasty, expensive and ultimately boring. The declarative statement 'it bores you', put together in a list with other properties such as taste and price (lines 4-5), presents boredom as an objective feature of the product rather than being Dick's problem. This externalizing device downplays Dick's own accountability for problems with sandwich fillings.

**extract 6**

from vegetarian to vegan	van vegetarier naar veganist
16/06/2001, 21:01	16/06/2001, 21:01
Emma	Emma
reply	reply
9 It's certainly true that	9 Het is inderdaad zo dat je
10 you can get temporarily	10 na een paar boterhammen
11 tired of Tartex after a	11 Tartex je er even genoeg
12 few sandwiches. Have you	12 van hebt. Heb je al eens
13 ever tried fried onions	13 gebakken ui met tomaat met
14 and tomatoes with	14 daarop Herbermare van
15 Herbermare from Dr Vogel	15 Dokter Vogel met een
16 fried in a bit of olive	16 beetje olijfolie gebakken

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17 oil on top on your bread?	17 op je brood geprobeerd? (
18 (5 lines omitted)	18 5 lines omitted)
19 A broccoli sandwich can	19 Ook aan te bevelen is een
20 also be recommended. Cook	20 broodje broccoli. Kook wat
21 some broccoli and make	21 broccoli en maak wat
22 some garlic butter (16	22 knoflookboter (16 lines
23 lines omitted) If you try	23 omitted) Als je van alles
24 all kinds of things you	24 gaat proberen kom je er na
25 will discover after a	25 een tijdje wel achter dat
26 while that vegan	26 veganistische boterhammen
27 sandwiches are	27 lekker zijn!
28 tasty!	

Emma replies to Dick by displaying agreement with his assessment of Tartex (lines 9-12). However, she softens the general implications by referring to *the possibility* of becoming tired of Tartex, using the modal 'can' and qualifying the tiredness with temporariness. 'You can get tired' also places responsibility for not liking the product on the person instead of the product. Emma thus counters the suggestion that a vegan product like Tartex is in fact a product that bores people after a while.

Note how Emma offers examples of vegan sandwich fillings in the form of 'casual noticings' (see also Edwards, 2003). It is not projected in any way how many examples will be mentioned and no reasons for naming these particular examples are given. In doing so, Emma undermines the suggestion that she prepared her message carefully. She makes available the inference that she does not have to think at all about what to put on her sandwich every day.

In lines 20-23, Emma constructs her directions as to how to prepare this filling as a recipe, using the imperative mode that is frequently used in recipe descriptions in cookery books. This recipe-like formulation evokes the impression that the described sandwich topping is common and scripted. Furthermore, instructions (like those in a recipe) are designed as 'doable'.

They suggest not only that many people have done it before, but also that it is easy to do or to learn.

In lines 23-28 Emma claims that trying all kinds of things will lead to the conclusion that vegan sandwiches are tasty (note that she does not use the phrase '*can* be tasty'). The formulation 'if (X) then (Y)' is a so-called script formulation (Edwards, 1994; 1995), which presents events as having a predictable, sequential pattern. This specific type of script formulation is especially useful in ascribing 'logical' accountability to the respondent (see also Sneijder and Te Molder, 2004). Here, Dick is implicitly allocated the responsibility of trying 'all kinds of things', which will then automatically lead him to discover that vegan sandwiches are tasty. The suggestion is that Dick, the recipient, has the responsibility of changing his attitude towards vegan sandwich toppings. A potential inherent relationship between tastelessness and vegan food products is thereby undermined. The notion of vegan products, or tasty vegan products, being difficult to prepare is resisted at the same time – being able to try 'all kinds of things' defines the matter of sandwich fillings as a choice from a broad range of options.

In the message following Dick's and Emma's, John implicitly categorizes Emma's tips as taking quite a lot of time. He refers to the tendency of vegans to come up with time-consuming tips, and defines 'frying vegetables' as not practical. An enumeration of possibilities without an explicit ending is used to suggest that there are many solutions to Dick's problem. Note again how this reply is constructed as an immediate response without a greeting or a capital letter, thereby bringing it off as spontaneous.

**extract 7**

from vegetarian to vegan	van vegetarier naar veganist
17/06/2003, 10:51	17/06/2003, 10:51
John	John
reply 2	reply 2
29 what I think is a shame is	28 wat ik altijd erg jammer

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30 that vegans tend to	29 vindt, is de neiging van
31 suggest all kinds of	30 veganisten om bij tips
32 things which are rather	31 voor op brood met allerlei
33 time-consuming when it	32 zaken aan te komen die
34 comes to tips for	33 nogal omslachtig zijn.
35 sandwiches.	34 ik bedoel groenten bakken
36 I mean to say, frying	35 en koken enzo voor op brood
37 vegetables and cooking	36 is leuk, maar niet
38 stuff for sandwich	37 praktisch als je bv. tussen
39 fillings is all very well,	38 de middag op je werk moet
40 but not very practical	39 lunchen. daarom van mijn
41 when you have to lunch at	40 kant wat meer praktische
42 work. Therefore, here	41 belegtips naast tartex:
43 are some more practical	42 vegan creamcheese (lekker,
44 sandwich tips besides	43 wel duur)
45 tartex from me:	44 houmous (ook bij ah
46 vegan cream cheese (tasty,	45 verkrijgbaar)
47 but expensive)	46 kabouterpate
48 humus (also available at	47 pindakaas met sambal
49 AH)	48 veganaise als boter en daar
50 leprechaun pate)	49 dan bv. komkommer op met
51 peanut butter with sambal	50 wat peper (al iets
52 veganaise as butter and	51 uitgebreider, maar okee)
53 then, for example,	52 ziet u, het kan ook
54 cucumber on top with some	53 makkelijker.
55 pepper (somewhat more	
56 elaborate, but never	
57 mind)	
58 You see, easier is an	
59 option.	

John constructs the tendency to provide time-consuming tips as a category-bound activity of vegans (lines 29-35). Note, however, that he counters the notion that vegan sandwich fillings are indeed time-consuming

by restricting the evaluation to the tips rather than to actual practices. He also restricts this tendency to the product category 'bread' (lines 33-35), thus undermining the possible inference that vegans give time-consuming tips when it comes to eating practices in general. Subsequently, the impracticality of Emma's 'frying vegetables' tip is limited to mealtimes such as lunchtime at work (lines 41-42).

John goes on to provide tips that he upgrades as 'more' practical in comparison with Emma's tips. The last tip (line 52: veganaise as butter) is evaluated as somewhat more elaborate, but still listed in the enumeration following the announcement of practical tips. He ends his message with 'easier is an option', thereby explicitly countering the notion that vegan sandwiches are difficult to prepare.

The next reply again shows the discursive devices of constructed immediacy and the device of enumeration. Furthermore, the author explicitly refers to mundane, non-vegan products as solutions to the sandwich problem.

#### extract 8

from vegetarian to vegan	van vegetarier naar veganist
18/06/2003, 17:43	18/06/2003, 17:43
Billy	Billy
reply 3	reply 3
60 ordinary peanut butter,	54 gewone pindakaas,
61 apple syrup, chocolate	55 appelstroop,
62 sprinkles, nut paste,	56 hagelslag, notenpasta,
63 hazelnut paste...I'm never	57 hazelnootpasta... Ik heb
64 bothered by monotony or	58 geen last van eentonigheid
65 the like. :)	59 of zo hoor. :)

By referring to products that are even more mundane than the ones John described, Billy presents himself as an 'extremely' ordinary person, thus dealing with and refuting the image of vegans as complicated eaters.

By using the category 'ordinary' right at the beginning (line 60), Billy underlines the relevance of this attribute of the product for his message.

The response is offered 'casually', suggesting that Billy did not have to think about it. This impression is invoked by the presentation of sandwich fillings in a list (lines 60-63) without an explicit ending, which suggests that there are many more ordinary products that are not mentioned here. The simple grammatical device of a list instead of full grammatical sentences further enhances the spontaneous character of the response. Also note the smiling face (line 65), which works to construct the response as informal and as something that the speaker himself would not worry about.

To summarize, extracts 1 - 8 have shown a number of discursive devices that worked to build vegan eating practices as simple and ordinary, thereby rebutting the rhetorical alternative of veganism as a complicated lifestyle, i.e. difficult or time-consuming to put into practice. For example, participants used listings of products, descriptions of preparation procedures without an agent, and suggestions of spontaneity and immediacy to establish the ease of coming up with simple options for a vegan meal. Characterizations of the meals were treated as also making available particular implications about speakers' identities. 'Boring' vegan products were redefined into a person-related problem (complicated products suggest difficult people), and the ease with which simple alternatives were mentioned also suggested that the participants were uncomplicated.

Note that these devices often co-occur and accomplish the mundane character of vegan eating. Furthermore, devices like the construction of an immediate response or simple grammatical constructions may perform different functions in other contexts.

In the next part of the analysis, we will shed light on the normalizing practices used in threads that focus on preventing health problems such as vitamin deficiencies.



In the first part of the analysis, we focused on the discursive devices participants use to present their vegan meals as being simple to prepare. In the second part, we focus on the issue of health control. In their emails, participants present their methods for preventing and solving health problems like vitamin deficiency as normal and routine activities. In this way, they undermine the potential inference that it is difficult to remain healthy as a vegan. The extracts presented in the following section are exemplary for our material.

### **2.6.3 Normalizing ‘artificial’ methods for health control**

In extract 9, a new participant poses questions about veganism and the implications of that lifestyle for health.

#### **extract 9**

healthy?

20/03/2003, 13:27

Laura

1 [...10 lines omitted...]  
2 Okay, here is my real  
3 question. Do you miss out  
4 on nutrients that you  
5 need structurally? A  
6 friend of mine  
7 got a B12 deficiency  
8 (not by eating vegetarian  
9 food or something) and  
10 has had troubles with  
11 that for years. I cannot  
12 have that kind of  
13 problems with my job and  
14 in the rest of my life.  
15 Are there vegans among  
16 you who have been vegan

gezond?

20/03/2003, 13:27

Laura

1 [...10 regels weggelaten...]  
2 Okee, nu mijn echte vraag  
3 dan maar. Kom je  
4 structureel stoffen te kort  
5 die je nodig hebt? Een  
6 vriendin van me kreeg  
7 (niet door vegetarisch eten  
8 ofzo) een vit b12 gebrek,  
9 en heeft daar jaren  
10 mee rondgesukkeld  
11 (darmproblemen,  
12 moeheid, haaruitval). Dat  
13 zou ik met mijn baan en  
14 verdere leven er echt  
15 niet bij kunnen hebben! Zijn  
16 er onder jullie veganisten

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17 for years now?	17 die het al jaren zijn? En
18 And how do you feel? How	18 hoe voelen jullie je erbij?
19 do you ensure that you	19 Hoe zorg je ervoor dat je
20 stay healthy? (5 lines	20 gezond blijft? (5 regels
21 omitted)	21 weggelaten)

First note that the question on missing out on nutrients is termed the 'real' question (lines 2-3), which formulates it as a difficult one to pose. At the same time, Laura entitles herself to ask that question by providing serious grounds for it (lines 5-11). By undermining a potential relation between food practices and the B12 deficiency of her friend in lines 8-9, she reflexively marks this relation as a plausible cause. She invites the other participants to inform her about how they feel just after having asked if there are participants who have been vegan for a long time. Hereby Laura implicitly connects feeling a certain way to being vegan. Furthermore, the question 'how do you ensure that you stay healthy?' (line 18-21) suggests that vegans have to do extraordinary things to stay healthy.

Now look at how Roy treats Laura's displayed worry about health and how he normalizes the procedure to solve vitamin deficiencies.

### extract 10

healthy?	gezond?
18/03/2003, 14:24	18/03/2003, 14:24
Roy	Roy
reply	reply
22 (12 lines omitted)	22 (12 lines omitted)
23 I can be brief about	23 Over voeding kan ik kort
24 food, good varied	24 zijn, goede gevarieerde
25 (vegan) food	25 (veganistische) voeding
26 supplemented	26 aangevuld met een B12-
27 with a little B12 tablet	27 tabletje zal in de meeste

28 won't cause any health	28 gevallen geen
29 problems in most cases.	29 gezondheidsproblemen
30 However, I think that I	30 opleveren. Ik denk echter
31 (a student) live less	31 dat ik (student) minder
32 healthily than you do	32 gezond leef dan jou en
33 and that's why I use	33 zodoende gebruik ik nog wat
34 some more food	34 meer voedingssupplementen
35 supplements (multi/	35 (multi/calcium-magnesium
36 calcium-magnesium / vit.	36 / vit. c).
37 C)	

It is not until the last paragraph of his message (the first part is not reproduced here) that Roy answers Laura's question about missing out on nutrients. This position underlines the 'insignificant' status of the question and treats vitamin deficiency as an inconvenience rather than a serious problem. It presents the speaker as not being pre-occupied with health in a special way.

The way in which Roy formulates his answer is salient in this respect. By claiming that he can be brief about food (lines 23-24), he makes available the inference that there is nothing remarkable to say about this topic. He first refers to the benefits of eating good varied food, placing 'vegan' between brackets (line 25). By underlining the relevance of eating a variety of foods, which is common advice with respect to healthy eating, and not incorporating the adjective 'vegan', Roy foregrounds the ordinary features of vegan eating practices.

Secondly, Roy adds 'supplemented with a little B12 tablet' (line 27). By formulating this as an attributive construction, embedded in the sentence, he underlines the suggestion that the tablet is a supplement rather than a full food item. The construction also suggests that the tablet is a routine rather than noteworthy part of the vegan meal.

Another device for ‘normalizing’ the B12 tablet is the procedure of minimization. In our corpus, tablets or pills were usually presented as minimal items, by means of the Dutch diminutive (*tablet-je* – *little* tablet; see also table 1). These minimizations in supplement descriptions appear in response to descriptions of or questions about health control.

By normalizing the practice of taking pills for health protection, participants play down the unusual character of this procedure and at the same time the reasons that may underlie the procedure, such as veganism being an unhealthy lifestyle (see also Sneijder and Te Molder, 2004). By presenting B12 tablets as extras, they are implicitly contrasted with other, more difficult and time-consuming ways of protecting your health.

Finally, Roy claims that he uses more food supplements than would normally be necessary. He ascribes this to his membership of the category ‘students’ (line 31). This category is conventionally associated with predicates like eating unhealthily, going out a lot and so on. Roy uses this membership to account for his extensive use of supplements, thereby countering the suggestion that taking all sorts of supplements is an activity that is exclusively linked to the category ‘vegans’. Moreover, by linking his frequent use of supplements to the category of ‘students’ rather than ‘vegans’, he leaves it to Laura to decide if she has the kind of lifestyle that requires this amount of supplements as well.

### 2.6.4 Constructing taking pills as routine procedure

In extracts 11 / 12, ‘artificial’ methods for preventing B12 deficiency are again presented as routine and common practices.

#### extract 11

vitamin pills

03/10/2003, 18:45

Brittany

vitamine pillen

03/10/2003, 18:45

Brittany

1	There is always talk	1	Er wordt altijd gezegd hoe
2	about how important it is	2	belangrijk het is voor een
3	for vegans to supplement	3	veganist om de voeding aan
4	the food with extra	4	te vullen met extra
5	vitamin B12 tablets. I am	5	vitamine B12 tabletten. Ik
6	curious if most vegans	6	ben nu benieuwd of deze
7	take up this advice.	7	raad door de meeste
		8	veganisten ook opgevolgd
		9	wordt.

In lines 1-5, Brittany constructs herself as an ‘animator’ (Goffman, 1981) who is merely reporting the talk and views of others. This role enables her to broach the topic while avoiding potentially problematic attributions of responsibility for the truth of the claim. By displaying ‘mere’ curiosity (lines 5-7), Brittany also downgrades the personal interest she might take in the topic. Her ‘disinterested’ mental state carefully avoids confirming the status of the problem as a problem and neutralizes it into a possible issue.

In the reply to this message, the problematic status of taking supplements is resisted by using an idiomatic expression:

**extract 12**

vitamin pills	vitamine pillen
04/10/2003, 13:51	04/10/2003, 13:51
Gordon	Gordon
reply	reply
8 a little pill a day (if	10 iedere dag (mits deze niet
9 this isn't forgotten...)	11 wordt vergeten.....) een
	12 pilletje

First note how Gordon’s response is formulated as a direct, immediate response, as we have seen before. By formulating the procedure of taking a

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pill as a rule, Gordon 'scripts up' the intake of these pills (see also Edwards, 1994; 1995) as a routine procedure. The type of formulation is typical of procedures that have been incorporated into everyday practices, such as 'an apple a day'. Note that the activities of actually swallowing or taking the pill have been left out. The absence of agent and action enhances the inference that taking a pill is just a routine procedure: it can be carried out 'without thinking'. The passive construction 'if this isn't forgotten' (line 9) further emphasizes this procedural nature, as does the reference to 'a little pill' rather than 'a pill'.

Idiomatic expressions such as '... a day' are impervious to undermining because of their formulaic character. They are useful when the speaker is at risk of lacking support or agreement (Drew and Holt, 1988; Potter, 1996). Generally, by defining an action as commonplace or routine, the speaker minimizes his or her accountability for that action (Edwards, 1994, 1995).

The next exchange shows yet another device for normalizing the methods used for health protection, namely by referring to products and procedures that are mundane rather than typically 'vegan'.

### extract 13

apprentice vegan

06/06/2002, 14:38:01

Jesse

1 (9 lines omitted)  
2 But..., who can give me  
3 tips, recipes etc. to  
4 avoid the risk of  
5 vitamin deficiency or  
6 the like. I've already  
7 read about vit. B12 and  
8 different sorts of  
9 supplements, you  
10 name it, but I want

veganist in wording

06/06/2002, 14:38:01

Jesse

1 (9 lines omitted)  
2 Maarrrrrrrr, wie kan mij  
3 helpen aan tips,  
4 recepten en wat dan ook om  
5 geen vitaminegebrek e.d.  
6 te riskeren. Ik lees al  
7 over vit. B12 en  
8 verschillende soorten  
9 supplementen, noem  
10 maar op, maar wil weten

11 to know which brands are	11 welke merken ik het beste
12 best and where I can	12 kan nemen en waar ik deze
13 buy/order them. [...13	13 kan kopen/bestellen. [...13
14 lines omitted...]	14 lines omitted...]

In this post Jesse requests information about the vegan lifestyle. She explicitly mentions the risk of vitamin deficiency. The reply from Paul (see below) is again constructed as an immediate response.

**extract 14**

apprentice vegan	veganist in wording
06/06/2002, 21:30	06/06/2002, 21:30
Paul	Paul
reply	reply
15 You can buy vegan B12	15 Veganistische B12 pillen
16 pills under the Solgar	16 kan je kopen van Solgar, er
17 brand, but check that	17 moet wel op het potje
18 'suitable for vegans' is	18 suitable for vegans
19 written on the jar. I use	19 staan. Ik gebruik die van
20 the 100 mg. tablets	20 100 mg. (deze pillen koop
21 which I buy from the	21 ik de reformwinkel)
22 health food store. You	22 D3 kan je tot je krijgen
23 can get D3 by being	23 door regelmatig buiten te
24 outside regularly	24 zijn. (zonlicht) Door
25 (sunlight). By	25 gewoon gevarieerd te
26 simply ensuring you have	26 eten zal je aan andere
27 varied diet, it's	27 vitamines niet snel te kort
28 unlikely that you	28 komen.
29 would run the risk of any	
30 vitamin deficiency.	

The immediacy of this response is accomplished, for example, by omitting any form of greeting. A construction of immediacy serves to infer

that the knowledge provided in the message is easy to retrieve from memory (see also the previous extract). Moreover, in this case the construction of immediacy underlines the notion of buying tablets as routine-based.

Paul presents mundane, not typically vegan, practices, such as being outside regularly (line 22-25) and eating a varied diet (lines 25-27) as ways to prevent vitamin deficiencies. In this way, Paul formulates the action vegans have to take in order to avoid deficiencies as not requiring much effort at all.

To sum up, the second part of the analysis has focused on the ways in which participants 'normalize' particular health protection methods. We identified a number of interrelated discursive devices (constructed immediacy, minimization, reference to mundane products or procedures, and the use of scripting), all of which work to present methods of preventing vitamin deficiencies as a routine and unremarkable activity. These constructions systematically undermined displayed assumptions about the 'extraordinary' measures that vegans have to take in order to stay healthy.

## **2.7 Discussion and conclusion**

This chapter has proposed discursive psychology (DP) as an alternative perspective for studying the topic of food and identity. Everyday talk about food is typically ignored in other approaches to food choice and eating practices although it seems central to the construction of food practices in everyday life (cf. Wiggins, 2004). Rather than treating food as a marker of distinction or treating identity as a predictor of food behaviour, discourse analysis focuses on the way identities are flexibly constructed and handled as part of accounting practices. This chapter demonstrates that 'being ordinary' is an important and relevant alternative identity for rebutting the notion of veganism as a difficult lifestyle.

Previous discourse studies have shown 'ordinariness' to be a recurrent feature of participants' methods in defensive environments (cf. Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995; Lawrence, 1996; Wooffitt, 2005). By



invoking the identity of an ordinary person involved in everyday actions and routines, participants may portray themselves as having escaped from the rigid divisions of mere collective group membership. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) showed how people who looked like punks or gothics, i.e. members of youth subcultures, displayed ordinariness in order to resist that perception. In response to the question 'how would you describe yourself and your appearance?', interviewees would ask for clarification in order to establish their ordinary kind of person-ness and deny the automatic relevance of their looks (see also Widdicombe, 1998).

The normalizing procedures used by participants in the vegan forum are also part of a defensive interactional context. They are embedded in blaming sequences, in that recipients *treat* descriptions of boring vegan products or vitamin deficiencies as blaming the vegan lifestyle for having a particular flaw, and resist it accordingly. The complicated character of veganism is thus made relevant (and countered) by participants *themselves* as a category-bound feature of the vegan identity. As pointed out earlier, a person's actions may be understood by virtue of what is known and expected about a particular category. Regardless of whether these inferences are true, they address wider cultural beliefs about what membership of a certain category involves. At the same time, these features and their relevance are negotiable phenomena. This study underlines the importance of looking at identity as something practically managed in talk rather than a mental state that precedes or results from it. Such an approach reveals identities, such as ordinariness in the case of veganism, that are unlikely to be discovered through analysts' definitions, and it shows how they are deployed for a particular *use*, such as protecting the vegan lifestyle as a whole.

In a broader sense, 'being ordinary' is a possible way of building factuality and credibility. Participants usually display themselves as seeing the world as other people do rather than being the kind of person that makes deviant observations (Sacks, 1984; Edwards, 1997:71). Formulations for

reporting unusual experiences such as 'At first I thought...and then I realized...' (Jefferson, 1984; cf. Wooffitt, 1992; 2005) simultaneously warrant the factuality of the report and the ordinariness and credibility of the reporter.

While 'ordinariness' in the case of the vegan forum has 'complicatedness' as its rhetorical alternative rather than 'abnormality', deviance and normality are also at stake. Participants' reports of simple eating practices and preparation procedures indexically display these participants as normal: the meals are no more complicated than any 'normal' meal would require, or any 'normal' person would be willing to prepare.

The relevance of ordinariness in this study seems in conflict with the notion that ideological food choices like veganism are ways of expressing personal identity (see for example Lindeman and Stark, 1999; 2000). When a dietary style like veganism is considered to do precisely that, ordinariness is not the first thing that comes to mind as worth 'striving for'. Note however, that such a perspective ignores the action-orientedness of identities. Participants do not deny their vegan identity but draw on the alternative identity of an ordinary person to counter negative inferential implications from the first one. In this sense, their claimed ordinariness underlines the relevance and importance of their vegan-ness.

In the second part of the analysis, it was shown how the prevention of (future) health problems was presented as a routine practice involving mundane and simple actions. Responses designed as 'immediate', descriptions of mundane ways to ensure good vegan health, references to simple rules of life and minimization of certain health protection matters were used by participants to routinize and normalize their practices. The notion that vegans have to put more effort into health control than any other human being with 'normal' eating practices was thus undermined.

Moreover, by defining an action as routine or normal, speakers also counter the suggestion that they are in any special way accountable for it, which reduces the relevance of describing their motives or the causes of their actions, for instance 'lacking vitamins' or 'preventing health problems'

(cf. Edwards, 1994; 1995). In this case, the intake of, for example, supplements is presented as a 'taken-for-granted' action that does not need explanation. The protection of health is not treated as a problem or a noteworthy activity for vegans, but rather as an insignificant inconvenience that can easily be corrected (see also Sneijder and Te Molder, 2004, 2005). In other words, participants treat the intake of supplements as an integral part of their vegan food choice and an easy solution. Normalizing this procedure is part of their everyday reasoning processes and helps to construct and protect veganism as an ideology.

Another interesting aspect of the findings presented here is the fact that participants counter a number of assumed prejudices against veganism in response to participants who claim to be vegans themselves. This observation is in line with results of a discursive psychological study of online discussions on depression in which the participants continuously countered potentially negative inferences of their identity as a depressive person (Lamerichs and Te Molder, 2003). There may or may not be a certain awareness of the public accessibility of the Internet site which entails the possibility of a critical 'overhearing audience' (cf. Goffman, 1981). However, it is also likely that participants use the forum as a test case in order to find out how a robust identity can be achieved in the outside world (cf. Lamerichs and Te Molder, 2003).

This study brings up several questions that require further attention. First we need to establish how specific the reported normalizing procedures are for this context. It would be worthwhile to investigate identity construction in other contexts related to food, such as talk about taste, in which the protection of an ideology is not at stake. Another interesting context would be interaction related to obesity, in which one might expect participants to normalize their (excessive) eating practices as well.

Although discursive psychology in relation to food research has yet to be applied broadly, we consider it a promising approach that ties in well with the trend of combining multiple disciplines. It offers an opportunity of

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studying the relationship between food and identity in practice, as a participants' concern, without ignoring the variable and flexible nature of that relationship.





## **CHAPTER 3**

### **MORAL LOGIC AND LOGICAL MORALITY: ATTRIBUTIONS OF BLAME AND RESPONSIBILITY IN ONLINE DISCOURSE ON VEGANISM**

This chapter is based on the following articles:

Sneijder, P. and Te Molder, H. F. M. (2004). Health should not have to be a problem. Talking health and accountability in an Internet forum on veganism. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 9: 599-616

Sneijder, P. and Te Molder, H. F. M. (2005). Moral logic and logical morality: Attributions of responsibility and blame in online discourse on veganism. *Discourse and Society*, 16: 647-675





## **Chapter 3**

### **Moral logic and logical morality: Attributions of blame and responsibility in online discourse on veganism**

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#### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter we draw upon insights from discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) to examine issues of blame and accountability in a specific ideological environment. In particular, we focus on the performative and rhetorical dimensions of a conditional formulation that is frequently used in email discussions on veganism (e.g. 'if you eat a varied diet, you shouldn't have problems').

It will be shown how speakers draw upon this construction to implicitly attribute responsibility for health to the recipient and her individual practices, thereby countering the suggestion of any causal relationship between the ideology of veganism and health problems. Furthermore, we argue that the rhetorical design of the formulation under scrutiny allows speakers to protect their attributional work from being discounted as invested or motivated (cf. Edwards and Potter, 1993).

Overall, this study aims to shed light on the ways in which ideological food choice is handled as a participants' concern. In particular, it addresses the issue of how participants handle blame and responsibility in relation to possible ideological 'errors'. As will be pointed out, vegans are (re)casted as self responsible human beings so as to protect the ideology as a whole.

### 3.2 Veganism and the 'problem' of health

From a nutritional perspective, it has been argued that health is a weak point in the ideology of veganism and a specific food guide for vegans should be developed. In order to stay healthy, vegans would have to choose a variety of foods from the groups 'cereals', 'fruit and vegetables', 'vegan dairy foods' and 'pulses, nuts and seeds' on a daily basis. In a diet without meat, fish, poultry and eggs, key nutrients such as zinc, vitamin B12 and protein would need to be obtained from alternative sources (Davies and Lightowler, 1997; Lightowler et al, 1998). Diversity in food choice and the consumption of wholegrains and soya drinks could help the vegan diet to meet crucial nutritional criteria (Mutch, 1988).

While, from a nutritional point of view, veganism and health are treated as a delicate pair, vegans themselves present 'health' as a reason for choosing a vegan diet. A survey of vegetarians and vegans (Macnair, 2001), for example, presented health as a major motivation. However, this type of study obscures the rhetorical and interactive embeddedness of these accounts. Accounting for motives may be part of very different social practices. Rather than simply reflecting the psychology of participants, motives are constructed to perform all manner of interactional tasks (cf. Edwards, 1997). The present study will therefore focus on the ways in which health is treated and deployed by participants in a natural conversational context.

Although current theorizing on food and health underlines the impact of ideological food-choice criteria, there is little interest in how these criteria are drawn upon in conversation, for example, in order to handle sensitive issues raised by possible ideological flaws. This chapter is concerned with how participants in a vegan forum actively use the notion of individual or self-responsibility in relation to health, so as to undermine a potential causal relationship between veganism as a food ideology, on the one hand, and health problems, on the other hand.

### **3.3. Managing blame and responsibility in (ideological) discourse**

Discursive psychology (DP) is concerned with the rhetorical and interactional features of discourse (Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). Discursive psychologists analyse discourse as the social practice of everyday life, rather than treating it as a result of mental processes (for a detailed discussion on talk and cognition, see te Molder and Potter, 2005a). Following conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), DP highlights the action orientation of language.

Participants in conversation often routinely perform a range of interactional tasks such as complaining, attributing responsibility, and displaying neutrality (Edwards and Potter, 1992, 2001; te Molder, 1999). The accomplishment of these actions is tied to the sequential environment in which the utterances are produced, and which they at the same time help to produce (see also Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). A related analytical focus of DP is the rhetorical nature of descriptions or versions of reality. Participants' reports are designed in such a way that they are protected from being undermined through possible alternative or counter versions. It is this 'could-have-been-otherwise' quality of discourse (Edwards, 1997) that helps the analyst to understand what kind of conversational business is being implicated and attended to in participants' stories and descriptions.

A pervasive feature of participants' discourse, and therefore a core concern of DP, is the construction of reports in such a way that they avoid appearing like invested, biased or somehow motivated accounts of reality. Issues of blame and accountability are typically performed not by overt attributions, but through apparently straightforward descriptions of the 'world-as-it-is' (Abell and Stokoe, 1999; Edwards and Potter, 1993; MacMillan and Edwards, 1999). As Edwards and Potter (1992: 103) point out, 'people do descriptions and thereby do attributions'. Speakers may use a whole range of discursive devices to objectify their reports, including corroboration by

independent witnesses (Potter, 1996) and extreme case formulations (Edwards, 2000; Pomerantz, 1986).

In this chapter, we consider how these matters are dealt with in the particular ideological context of an online forum on veganism. More specifically, we focus on how speakers negotiate causal explanations and potential blaming for particular health problems that may or may not be connected to veganism as a lifestyle and ideology. Ideological explanations, which typically emphasize a shared ideal, may raise critical questions in cases where 'reality' (or what is described as such) stands in the way of accomplishing the ideal. For an ideology to work and provide a 'natural' and 'inevitable' explanation of society or a part of society, a satisfactory form of 'error accounting' is essential.

More specifically, what is at stake is how to account for possible failure without degrading or undermining the ideal itself (Billig et al. (1988; see also Wetherell and Potter, 1992) argue that ideologies are not consistent but dilemmatic by nature. Ideologies always contain or invoke counter-ideologies, for example, when the demands of intellectual theory clash with the routines of everyday life. Participants shift alignment flexibly from one theme to another and back ('that's all very well in theory, but in practice . . .'), tailoring their ideological repertoire to the interactional business at stake (see also Wetherell and Potter, 1992). The notion of individual freedom may be drawn upon to make up for the flaws of social responsibility and collective ideals, and vice versa. In this sense, contrary themes within or between ideologies function as suitable error accounts. Rather than belonging to some ideological periphery, they are mutually implicative and therefore an essential part of how ideologies work (see also Edwards, 1997). They are not brought in just to repair the weak spots, but a basic feature of how (a part of) the world is explained.

As our study will show, practitioners of the vegan lifestyle also orient to the relationship between health and veganism as a controversial and accountable matter. Participants draw on the contrary themes of individual

responsibility and a shared ideal, using the former to account for potential failure of the latter. We focus, in particular, on how the combination of an if–then formulation and a modal expression permits them to handle blame and accountability without creating the impression that what they are saying is serving a particular stake or interest.

### **3.3.1 Script formulations as interactional resource for managing blame and responsibility**

If–then structures can be understood as general scripting devices. Edwards (1994, 1995) introduced the term ‘script formulations’ for descriptions or reports that categorize events as routine or exceptional. A script formulation provides for inferences ‘in which temporal sequence, causality, and rational accountability are mutually implicative’ (Edwards, 1997: 288). The formulation works to suggest that one cannot but do or believe ‘the logical thing’, thereby attributing accountability for doing so to recipients. Any denial of, or withdrawal from, the proposed events or actions is presented as requiring substantial explanation.

Using conditional formulations rather than references to actual events allows the speaker to present consequences that may not be in harmony with ‘reality’ (Potter, 1996; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). Furthermore, as a hypothetical formulation does not refer to specific events, the chance that a speaker will be asked to legitimize his or her version is significantly reduced (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). In other words, the construction enables speakers to protect themselves from being treated as directly and personally accountable for their version of events.

### **3.3.2 Modality as a linguistic phenomenon**

A related feature of the formulation under scrutiny (e.g. if you eat a varied diet, then there shouldn’t be any problems) is the occurrence of a modal auxiliary in the ‘then’ part of the structure. Using a modal (like should)

rather than a declarative formulation (if you eat a varied diet, then you don't have any problems) or the simple future tense (if you eat a varied diet, then you won't have any problems), presents the inference as less robust. An interesting feature of modals like *can*, *must*, *should* or *ought to*, is their capacity to refer simultaneously to the necessity of the event being performed by morally responsible actors, and to the speaker's assessment of the probability of the event occurring. In other words, the semantic properties of a number of modals allow speakers to blur the epistemic and moral implications of their claims.

To clarify this, we describe some of the linguistic features of modals. Modality has been described as a system by which the speaker can express a certain degree of commitment to a proposition's believability, necessity, desirability or truth. For the analysis that follows, two different categories of modality are relevant.

The first is epistemic modality. This type of modality is mostly defined as an explicit qualification by the speaker of his or her commitment to the truth or believability of the proposition of an utterance (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1986). Epistemic modality can be expressed using grammatical devices such as modal adjectives (*probable*, *possible*, etc.), modal adverbs (*maybe*, *probably*, etc.) and modal auxiliaries (*can*, *may*, *must*, *shall*, *will*). Halliday (1970) defines epistemic modality as the speaker's assessment of probability and predictability.

The second main category is deontic or 'root' modality. Deontic modality refers to the degree to which the performance of actions by morally responsible actors is necessary, permitted or allowed (Lyons, 1977). This type of modality can also be expressed by modal auxiliaries (*may* as in 'be allowed to', *must* and *ought to* as in 'be obliged to'). The deontic modal *may* in 'John may go now' indicates that John is permitted to go, whereas the epistemic version of *may* indicates that the speaker evaluates John's leaving as possible. In other words, deontic modality binds the subject to performing the activity expressed in the proposition to a certain degree. The realization

of the activity depends on an external factor (sometimes the speaker) that allows, commands or forbids the realization of an event.

As Halliday (1970) points out, it is sometimes difficult to establish to which of the categories of modality speakers refer. In particular, this ambiguity can be found in hypothetical environments. For example, in the sentence 'He could have escaped, if he'd tried', the speaker's evaluation of the probability of escape and the actor's ability to escape are equally relevant, especially when no context is provided. It is precisely this type of hypothetical environment in which modal auxiliaries are used in our extracts.

### **3.3.3 Discursive modality**

Discursive psychologists and conversation analysts are interested in the interactional organization of social activities. The structure of language and the semantics of words are of interest as long as they visibly contribute to the accomplishment of practical social activities being negotiated in the talk (cf. Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). The semantic ambiguity of modals in conditional structures is especially suitable for delicate actions like blaming or attributing responsibility. By blurring whether the realization of an event – such as not having health problems – depends on (i) external factors or (ii) the ability of the individual actor, the speaker is able to perform complex interactional business.

In the analysis presented in this chapter, we focus on the interactional tasks performed by speakers using a script formulation in combination with a modal construction. The ambiguity of modals, which is often considered a bone of contention in linguistic literature, turns out to be a useful discursive resource in daily interaction.

## **3.4 Method and material**

### *Data*

The data in this study have been copied from the site of the Dutch Association for Veganism, a national organization that aims to provide

independent information about veganism<sup>1</sup>. The site has a forum where people can communicate with each other on a range of topics. Anyone can start a 'thread' by introducing a particular topic, to which others may respond. The number of participants in a thread usually varies between two and ten. Between September 2001 and August 2002, we collected a corpus of 45 threads from the forum. Some of the threads were taken from the archive and are thus dated earlier. The selection criteria for the material were that they involved interactions about food and health and, in order to provide a certain richness of conversation, that participants treated these issues as controversial in one way or another.

#### *Analytic procedure*

We found 13 threads in our corpus on the topic of vitamin deficiency. In ten of the threads, participants (different persons each time) used formulations such as 'if you eat a varied diet, you shouldn't have problems', in response to recurrent questions about the relationship between health and veganism. We became interested in the role of this construction in the management of blame and accountability.

In our analysis we illustrate our findings by showing and analysing fragments from four threads in which the formulation is used. All names and dates in the examples have been changed. In some cases, parts of the fragments that did not have implications for the outcome of the interaction have been omitted. Combining insights from discursive psychology and conversation analysis, we focus on the sequential and rhetorical qualities of the formulation under scrutiny. Instead of using researchers' informed guesses, the focus is first on the kind of understanding that co-participants display in subsequent turns (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998).

Another methodological procedure is to inspect a piece of discourse for its rhetorical quality, that is, to assess what other plausible counter-

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<sup>1</sup> The use of data from this website is authorized on condition that the source is given as explicitly mentioned on each page.



description is at issue (Edwards, 1997; see also the analytic section of this chapter). It is important to emphasize that this study is not intended to be a full-scale analysis, but seeks to focus on a theoretically and empirically interesting phenomenon that may inform further analysis of a larger and different data corpus. One of the relevant questions for future research is the extent to which the discursive practice goes beyond this particular domain.

Thus far, discursive psychology has predominantly been applied to face-to-face conversations. In this chapter, however, we present an analysis of online data. To a large extent, theories on computer-mediated communication (CMC) still proceed from an individualistic and cognitivistic framework, thereby disregarding the profoundly social nature of CMC (for an overview and critique, see Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003). In this study we analyse online conversation as everyday talk-in-interaction (for an example of a rhetorical analysis of Internet discussions about health and vegetarianism see Wilson et al., 2004). However, it is also acknowledged that more in-depth research is required into the methodological consequences of studying written, delayed internet communications, in contrast to transcribed and taped dialogue on which discursive psychological research tends to be based.

### *Translation*

The data were analysed in Dutch and subsequently translated from Dutch into English with the help of a native speaker and professional translator. Translation is not simply a technical process; it is also an analytical one. This means that translation is necessarily designed to reveal those features of the dialogue that, consciously or otherwise, are perceived as significant by both researchers and translators.

## **3.5 Analysis**

We consider five typical extracts in which participants talk about health problems in relation to veganism. The analytical focus is on the

sequential and rhetorical aspects of if–then structures in combination with particular modal auxiliaries.

### 3.5.1 The sequential organization of responsibility attributions

In the first extract, Anne presents herself as a novice who requires information. She asks questions about the vegan diet (more specifically: what a vegan should eat for breakfast) and about veganism in relation to nutritional deficiencies.

#### extract 1

breakfast	ontbijt
29/08/2001, 17:00	29/08/2001, 17:00
Anne	Anne
1 (11 lines omitted)	1 (11 lines omitted)
2 What does a vegan have	2 Hoe ziet het ontbijt van
3 for breakfast? To be	3 een veganist eruit? Ik heb
4 honest, I haven't got a	4 eerlijk gezegd geen idee!
5 clue! And what can you do	5 En hoe zit het verder met
6 about the nutrients you	6 de voedingsstoffen
7 miss out on by not eating	7 die je door bepaalde
8 certain things?! Can	8 dingen niet te eten niet
9 anyone help me?!	9 binnenkrijgt?! Kan
	10 iemand mij helpen?!

For the purpose of the analysis, we focus on Anne's question in lines 5–8, in which she asks what you can do about the nutrients you miss out on by not eating certain things. Note how Anne defines the issue as a general problem for which she carries no specific individual responsibility. The formulation of her question (And what can you do about. . .) presupposes a factual problem which is known to other vegan participants. She also uses the definite article 'the' when referring to the nutrients you miss out on (line 6), as if recipients are already aware of the existence of these nutrients.

Anne thereby packages the issue as a recognizable problem that requires no further elaboration, and to which she does not contribute on an individual basis.

Furthermore, Anne describes missing out on nutrients as something that may happen to her rather than a process that she is or may be actively involved in. Pomerantz (1978) shows that the absence of an actor-agent is a recurrent feature of sequences in which participants attribute responsibility for 'unhappy events'. As Pomerantz points out, these initial reports are often oriented to by recipients as unfinished by eliciting more information about the event, which subsequently allows for transforming it to a position of 'acted upon', or 'consequence'. Although 'only' a possible future event is involved here, Brian's reply to Anne's message indeed reformulates the 'standard problem for vegans' into a 'matter of bad, individual practice'. In doing so, he implicitly attributes responsibility for missing out, or potentially missing out, on nutrients to individual rule-followers like Anne:

**extract 2**

breakfast	ontbijt
01/09/2001, 09:15	01/09/2001, 09:15
Brian	Brian
reply	reply
10 (23 lines omitted)	11 (23 lines omitted)
11 All nutrients, vitamins	13 Alle voedingsstoffen,
12 and minerals are present	14 vitaminen en mineralen
13 in vegetable products in	15 komen in heel bruikbare
14 a very useful form, often	16 vorm voor in plantaardige
15 much better than those in	17 voedingsstoffen, vaak veel
16 animal products.	18 beter als in dierlijke.
17 By mixing vegetables,	19 Door te variëren met
18 fruit, pulses, cereals	20 groenten, fruit,
19 and nuts, it's almost	21 peulvruchten, granen en
20 impossible to lack	22 noten, kun je zonder er

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21 anything, and you don't	23 speciaal op te letten
22 have to pay special	24 haast geen tekort
23 attention. (41 lines	25 oplopen van wat dan ook.
24 omitted)	26 (41 lines omitted)

In lines 17-21, Brian suggests that nutritional deficiencies are virtually impossible<sup>2</sup>, as long as vegetables, fruit, pulses, cereals and nuts are combined. The formulation by doing X, it's almost impossible to get Y is comparable with an if X, then Y construction. Conditional structures such as these can be used to describe circumstances or activities as having particular consequences. Y – here: not lacking anything – is offered as a rational inference (cf. Edwards, 1997). Formulations of events as having a predictable pattern, or so-called script formulations, construct the event as factually robust and as knowable in advance, which reduces the need to 'prove' their occurrence (Edwards, 1994, 1995, 2003). By contrast, the failure to perform the activity (i.e. eating a variety of vegetables) logically suggests the possibility of deficiencies. In other words, this construction allows the speaker to imply that the recipient is accountable for the predictable consequences. In this sense, logic is drawn upon to present a normative orientation as well: when things routinely happen in a particular way, they also should be happening that way.

One feature of attributions of responsibility is the transformation of negative events (or future negative events) to products or consequences of a prior, neglected activity (cf. Pomerantz, 1978). In his response, Brian treats missing out on nutrients as a consequence of not performing the activity of combining vegetables and other food items, rather than something that just

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<sup>2</sup> In the original Dutch fragment, the participant uses a modal auxiliary (kunnen/can) instead of the phrase 'it's almost impossible. . .'. However, since a literal translation would not connect with our analysis and also result in awkward English, we have opted for the current formulation.

exists. He thereby undermines the status of missing out on nutrients as a problem 'out there', as proposed by Anne in her message.

To reiterate, the formulation By mixing vegetables. . . , it's almost impossible to lack anything predicts the absence of deficiencies as the result of a varied diet. Formulating the impossibility of deficiencies as a sequential and logical outcome of the activity of combining vegetables and other food items implies that this activity routinely means that deficiencies cannot possibly occur. Logical and moral responsibility for not missing out on nutrients is thereby indirectly attributed to the recipient.

At the same time, the scripted nature of the attribution protects Brian from being accused of having a stake in his version of events: by presenting a logical, recognizable pattern, he is merely offering the present or future world-as-it-is. If the activity of combining vegetables has been performed and deficiencies still occur, Brian may be held accountable for performing the attribution and for presenting his epistemic inference. In this respect, it should be noted that the expression 'almost impossible' reduces both the attributed responsibility and the accountability of the speaker for the generalized character of the claim. The term almost suggests that there can be exceptions to the rule: with a varied diet it is almost, but not completely impossible to suffer from deficiencies. At the same time, the guaranteed kind of scripted consequence is carefully preserved.

The combination of almost with impossible is particularly relevant here: although maintaining most of the automatic nature of the script, it allows for some untypical actor to get it wrong (compare it for example with unlikely, which makes the outcome far less certain, and which also cannot be modified with almost).

### **3.5.2 Turning responsibility into blame**

In extracts 3-4, a script formulation is again used for ascribing responsibility to the recipient for staying healthy.

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#### extract 3

osteoporosis

17/03/2002, 16:30

Melanie

1 Does anyone know where I  
2 can find info about a  
3 possible link between  
4 veganism and osteoporosis.  
5 I've been a vegetarian for  
6 twenty years, six of them  
7 as a vegan. I now have  
8 symptoms which might  
9 possibly indicate  
10 osteoporosis (but that  
11 hasn't been established  
12 with certainty yet). I am  
13 wondering if my eating  
14 pattern may have something  
15 to do with it.  
16 (5 lines omitted)

botontkalking

17/03/2002, 16:30

Melanie

1 Wie weet waar ik info kan  
2 vinden over of er verband  
3 is tussen veganisme en  
4 botontkalking. Ik ben ong  
5 20 jaar vegetarier  
6 waarvan 6 jaar  
7 veganistisch. Ik heb op dit  
8 moment klachten die  
9 mogelijk op botontkalking  
10 wijzen (maar dat is nog  
11 niet met zekerheid  
12 vastgesteld). Ik vraag  
13 mij nu dus af of mijn  
14 eetwijze daar misschien  
15 iets mee te maken kan  
16 hebben.  
17 (5 regels weggelaten)

Whereas Anne (extract 1) did not put forward a 'real' health problem, Melanie reports having symptoms that might indicate osteoporosis, and suggests a possible relationship between this fact and her vegan eating patterns (lines 12-16). Again, note the absence of an actor-agent in the report of the 'unhappy incident' of having symptoms (cf. Pomerantz, 1978). By suggesting a relationship between her eating habits and symptoms, Melanie is identifying veganism as a possible cause of osteoporosis (see also lines 12-16). Let us consider Sandra's reply to Melanie:

**extract 4**

osteoporosis	botontkalking
18/03/2002, 17:15	18/03/2002, 17:15
Sandra	Sandra
reply	reply
17 If you ensure that you	18 ls je in je voeding
18 get enough calcium in	19 zorgt voor goede
19 your food (sesame paste,	20 bronnen van calcium
20 for example), it's	21 (sesampasta
21 impossible for a problem	22 bijvoorbeeld), kan
22 to occur, in my opinion...	23 er volgens mij
	24 geen probleem zijn...

In her message, Sandra orients to the absence of an actor-agent in Melanie's report of having symptoms. Her response (if you ensure that you get enough calcium in your food, it's impossible for a problem to occur, lines 17–22) <sup>3</sup> presents the impossibility of a problem as a sequential and logical outcome of ensuring a sufficiently high calcium intake. In comparison with the construction 'by mixing vegetables. . . , it's almost impossible to lack anything' (extract 2), the use of an if–then structure suggests more strongly that the recipient must perform a particular action in order to avoid problems. The if–then formulation transforms the event into a consequence of a prior neglected action (ensuring that you get enough calcium in your food), but it also constructs Melanie as the one who neglected this action.

The script formulations in extracts 2 and 4 not only allow Brian and Sandra to attribute responsibility in an indirect way, they also enable them to reduce the risk of being treated as having a stake or interest in presenting their version of events. It is difficult to discount an apparently logical reasoning pattern as interested or biased in a particular way (cf. Edwards and Potter, 1993). By presenting a factual relationship between health

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<sup>3</sup> As with previous extract 2 - note 2, the modal auxiliary (kunnen/can) is used in Dutch.

problems and eating habits, Brian and Sandra avoid talking as vegans (who obviously have a possible stake in fudging the relationship between health problems and veganism). Note how the ambiguity of the modal description *it's impossible* (lines 20-21) is used by participants to protect their attribution from being undermined. *It's impossible* not only allows Sandra to talk about the probability of having problems (or not) but also to refer indirectly to the recipient's ability (that is, to not have these problems) to avoid them. The construction invites the recipient to conclude that she could have avoided her symptoms by ensuring that she had enough calcium in her food. *It's impossible* thus suggests that problems will not occur but also, and more implicitly, that they should not occur.

In this sense, modality works together with the script formulation as a device for indirectly attributing both logical and moral accountability to the recipient (see for a similar combination, extract 2). In doing so, Sandra undermines Melanie's suggestion of a direct relationship between veganism as a doctrine, on the one hand, and health problems (i.e. osteoporosis), on the other hand.

Notice how Sandra limits the scope of what she is saying to her own individual point of view by adding the subjective restriction *in my opinion* (line 22) (cf. Pomerantz, 1984a). Sandra's formulation leaves the door open to problems, however unexpected, caused by veganism as a doctrine, and in that sense she places a limit on her accountability for the claim as an irrefutable statement. The subjectivity of the modal description (*it's impossible* for a problem to occur rather than *there is no problem*) strengthens this effect. However, it is by reducing the general validity of her advice that Sandra enhances the credibility of what she is saying. Having just produced a rather technical and factually grounded advice about particular sources of calcium in food, Sandra suggests that she knows what she is talking about without wanting to make excessive claims. In doing so, she fends off the impression that she is being dogmatic about her advice, or willing to say more than she knows.



### **3.5.3 Blurring future events with agency**

The construction in the reply to the next extract is comparable with those used in extracts 2 and 4, but it draws on a modal with an explicit future orientation.

#### **extract 5**

apprentice vegan	veganist in wording
06/06/2002, 14:38:01	06/06/2002, 14:38:01
Jesse	Jesse
1 (9 lines omitted)	1 (9 lines omitted)
2 But..., who can give me	2 Maarrrrrrrr, wie kan mij
3 tips, recipes etc. to	3 helpen aan tips, recepten
4 avoid risking any vitamin	4 en wat dan ook om geen
5 deficiency or the like.	5 vitaminegebrek e.d. te
6 I've already read about	6 riskeren.
7 vit. B12 and different	7 Ik lees al over vit. B12 en
8 sorts of supplements, you	8 verschillende soorten
9 name it, but I want to	9 supplementen, noem maar op,
10 know which brands are	10 maar wil weten welke merken
11 best and where I can	11 ik het beste kan nemen en
12 buy/order them.	12 waar ik deze kan
13 (13 lines omitted)	13 kopen/bestellen. (13 lines
	14 omitted)

Jesse presents vitamin deficiency as a feature of veganism by asking who can give her tips to avoid it. Vitamin deficiency is thus presented as a problem that is recognizable to vegans.

#### **extract 6**

apprentice vegan	veganist in wording
06/06/2002, 21:30	06/06/2002, 21:30
Paul	Paul
reply	reply

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14 you can buy vegan B12 pills	15 veganistische B12 pillen
15 under the Solgar brand, but	16 kan je kopen van Solgar,
16 check that suitable for	17 er moet wel op het potje
17 vegans is written on	18 suitable for vegans op
18 the jar. I use the 100 mg.	19 staan. Ik gebruik die van
19 Tablets which I buy from	20 100 mg. (deze pillen koop
20 the healthfood store. You	21 ik bij de reformwinkel) D3
21 can get D3 by being outside	22 kan je tot je krijgen door
22 regularly. (sunlight). By	23 regelmatig buiten te
23 just ensuring you have a	24 zijn. (zonlicht). Door
24 varied diet you won't	25 gewoon gevarieerd te eten
25 easily run the risk of any	26 zal je aan andere
26 other vitamin deficiency.	27 vitamines niet snel te
	28 kort komen.

In lines 22–24, Paul presents a varied diet as a condition for not risking vitamin deficiency, using the script formulation. Again, the negative event of ‘risking vitamin deficiency’ is reformulated into a consequence of neglecting certain behaviour, rather than something that is inherent in veganism. Instead of offering tips or recipes that contain specific instructions, eating a common, varied diet is constructed as predictive for the absence of vitamin deficiency. This construction not only opposes a relationship between vitamin deficiency and veganism but also undermines the notion that it is difficult to prevent vitamin deficiency. Notice how the future orientation of *won't easily* (lines 24–25) is difficult to distinguish from its reference to the recipient's ability to perform the required action.

Paul suggests that not running the risk of vitamin deficiency will (almost) logically follow from ensuring a varied diet. This expectation, however, also attends to the ability and therefore the rational ‘obligation’ of the recipient to prevent deficiencies by following the proposed guidelines. In this respect, the formulation *won't easily* permits speakers to conflate future events with acts of agency (cf. Edwards, 2002).

As in extracts 2 and 4, the construction restricts the speaker's accountability for any general implications regarding the claim. Won't easily presents the absence of a risk of vitamin deficiency as a matter of likelihood rather than certainty (cf. Sweetser, 1990). It is the adverb 'easily' that allows for a deviation from the general rule (compare extract 2 'it's almost impossible' and extract 4: 'impossible, in my opinion'). However, rather than reducing speaker-credibility, the formulation increases it by avoiding unwarranted claims and being precise about what can be expected from varying one's meals. Other than in extracts 3-4, there is no concrete example of a health problem to which the construction responds. This reinforces its character as a generalized prediction and reduces its direct blame orientation.

### **3.5.4 Modality and varying the interplay between facts and norms**

In the next extract, an if-then structure is used in combination with the modal should, which projects slightly different implications for the issue of responsibility.

#### **extract 7**

almost a vegan	bijna veganiste
02/06/2002, 13:22	02/06/2002, 13:22
Grace	Grace
1 About a week ago I	1 Ruim een week geleden heb
2 announced the fact that I	2 ik een berichtje geplaatst
3 was 'almost a vegan.'	3 over het feit, dat ik
4 [...13 lines omitted...]	4 'bijna veganiste'
5 The more information I	5 was. [...13 regels
6 collect about veganism and	6 weggelaten...] Hoe
7 the more I look around in	7 meer informatie ik verzamel
8 green/biological stores,	8 over veganisme en hoe meer

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9	the more veganism I'm	9	ik rondkijk in
10	able to incorporate into	10	bv.groene/biologische
11	my life.	11	winkels, hoe meer veganisme
		12	ik leer toepassen in mijn
		13	leven.

In this extract, Grace does not discuss any problem relating to vitamin deficiency or health. However, in his subsequent reply Victor formulates a script (lines 20-26) that is comparable to the previous constructions.

#### extract 8

almost a vegan	bijna veganiste
03/06/2002, 15:12	03/06/2002, 15:12
Victor	Victor
reply	reply
12 Hi,	14 Hoi,
13 I do hope you found good	15 Ik hoop wel dat je ook
14 info About a healthy diet	16 goede info over een goede
15 as well.	17 samenstelling van je
16 Veganism and a healthy	18 voeding hebt gevonden.
17 diet are certainly not	19 Veganisme en een
18 mutually exclusive.	20 volwaardige voeding zijn
19 (20 lines omitted)	21 zeker niet aan elkaar
20 And if you have a glass of	22 tegengesteld.
21 fruit syrup(without added	23 (20 regels weggelaten)
22 sugar) with every meal, or	24 En als je dan elke maaltijd
23 another source of vitamin	25 vergezeld laat gaan van een
24 C, then there shouldn't be	26 glas roosvicé (zonder
25 any problems, certainly	27 toegevoegde suiker) of een
26 not with iron 21 or zinc.	28 andere vitamine C- bron,
	29 dan zou er zeker wat ijzer
	30 en zink betreft geen
	31 probleem hoeven te zijn.

By making the topic of vitamin deficiency relevant without being asked for advice on it, Victor orients to the assumption that vitamin deficiency is a problem for vegans. While doing so, he also provides a pre-emptive account (cf. Buttny, 1993). In lines 20–26, Victor mentions drinking a glass of fruit syrup as a condition for avoiding problems. Again, the absence of problems is presented as a logical consequence of following particular individual eating habits, and the recipient is therefore constructed as accountable for her own health. Victor constructs problems as both unnecessary and unlikely by using the script formulation in combination with the modal auxiliary *should*. However, *should* projects a different emphasis in accountability than the modal descriptions ‘it’s almost impossible’ (see extracts 2 and 4) and ‘won’t easily’ (extract 6). In comparison with these latter descriptions, *should* focuses more on a lack of necessity than of likelihood. This emphasis implies that it is possible to prevent problems.

The nature of Victor’s attribution may well be explained by the fact that it was not occasioned by a reported negative event or reference to a potential problem as in the previous extracts. The risk of it being understood as a blaming may be reduced in that case (for a contrast, see extract 11 later), which permits usage of a construction with a more obvious normative focus. Note that Victor – in the same way that Brian did with ‘it’s almost impossible’ (extract 2), Sandra with ‘impossible, in my opinion’ (extract 4), and Paul with ‘won’t easily’ (extract 6) – reduces (the accountability for) the general character of his assertion by restricting the claim to the substances iron and zinc (certainly not with iron or zinc, lines 25–26). Again, the writer’s displayed concern for being very specific about what he can be sure of, that is, an orientation to saying as much and no more than is properly warranted, makes the generalized advice all the more credible.

As in the previous extracts, eating practices are constructed as means of *avoiding* health problems, rather than a means of improving one’s health. Participants in this forum, including those who claim expertise by selecting themselves as ‘advisers’, *construct* themselves as ‘prevention-

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focused', i.e. oriented to health as a 'lack of problems', rather than 'promotion-focused', i.e. treating health as an ideal to be realised (see for a cognitive account Higgins, 1997, 1998).

Interestingly, by presenting common rules for healthy food choices (a varied diet, for example) combined with vegan eating practices as *sufficient* for the *prevention* of health problems (as opposed to additional ways of improving one's health), it is suggested that those same practices may also *cause* problems. As Pomerantz (1984a) suggests, people orient to a difference between the grounds for knowing a positive case and a negative one. Arguing for the absence of something, in this case problems, may not be sufficient to plausibly suggest that there are no problems at all.

In extracts 9-10, the focus lies again on the 'if...then...' formulation, this time in combination with the modal ought to.

#### extract 9

eating

06/04/2003, 14:00

Mariah

1 I am a girl of nearly 18  
2 who will soon be leaving  
3 home. I then want to  
4 become a strict vegan (1  
5 line omitted) and would  
6 like to know what I can  
7 and cannot eat/use.  
8 (4 lines omitted)

eten

06/04/2003, 14:00

Mariah

1 Ik ben een meisje van bijna  
2 18 en binnenkort ga ik op  
3 mezelf wonen. Ik wil vanaf  
4 dan compleet veganistisch  
5 gaan leven (1 regel  
6 weggelaten) en nou vraag  
7 ik me af wat ik allemaal  
8 wel en niet mag/kan  
9 eten/gebruiken.  
10 (4 regels weggelaten)

Mariah introduces herself as a novice and asks what she can and cannot eat or use. She does not specify her question but it is obvious that she is referring to products that are compatible with a vegan lifestyle.

**extract 10**

eating	eten
07/04/2003, 14:30	07/04/2003, 14:30
Buck	Buck
reply	reply
9 (5 lines omitted)	11 (5 regels weggelaten)
10 If you eat a varied diet of	12 Als je gevarieerd eet en
11 vegetables, fruit, nuts and	13 je voedsel bestaat uit
12 seeds, and something like	14 o.a. groente, fruit, noten
13 tahoe or tempe, that ought	15 en zaden, en iets van
14 to be sufficient.	16 tahoe of tempe, moet dit
13 (7 lines omitted)	17 voldoende zijn.
	18 (7 regels weggelaten)

Buck responds by naming products that ought to be sufficient (lines 10-14). Like Victor in extract 8, he implicitly displays an awareness of a potential health issue and resolves it before Mariah has reported or referred to existing or potential health problems. Referring to products as sufficient suggests some minimum goal to be accomplished. Although this goal could be 'living like a strict vegan', the reference to food products rather than cosmetics or clothes invokes the idea that Buck is referring to the goal of staying healthy. In doing so, Buck treats the matter of 'what to eat' as inextricably linked to potential deficiency problems. By using the if-then formulation, Buck presents the sufficiency of certain food items to prevent problems as a logical and sequential result of eating a varied diet.

A difference from the other extracts is that Buck does not transform an actual or potential unhappy event – getting or having health problems – into a consequent event. The presented consequence of eating a varied diet is the sufficiency of this activity to prevent health problems rather than its sufficiency for the actual absence of problems. However, as in the previous extracts, the presentation of this highly plausible scenario indirectly allocates responsibility for preventing deficiencies to the recipient. Like should, the

modal auxiliary ought to potentially leaves more scope for the co-participant than the modal expressions 'it's almost impossible' or 'won't easily'. 'That ought to be sufficient' (lines 13-14) suggests that 'external factors' should and will make it happen. However, there is no guarantee: this ought to be true (and is highly likely) but might prove impossible.

This formulation not only reduces the speaker's own accountability for the statement and its potential general implications, but also that of the recipient for realizing the script. If Mariah meets the condition (i.e. a varied diet), then Buck evaluates it as probable, but not certain, that she will not suffer from health problems. By contrast, the construction is hearable as advice, and more so than in the previous extracts, by telling the recipient how to prevent deficiencies. Again, its 'obvious' moral rather than epistemic inferential nature may have to do with the absence of concrete health problems being referred to and therefore the reduced risk of a response being attended to as managing a particular stake for the speaker. The next series of extracts provides some evidence for this explanation.

### 3.5.5 Towards a more direct form of attribution

In the last part of the analysis, we demonstrate how a script formulation is used to perform a more direct attribution of self-responsibility. This attribution is the only example in our corpus to which the initial participant replies by refuting the attribution, which may be explained by the direct character of the attribution and the explicit undermining of a relationship between a health problem and veganism. Let us return to extract 3 on osteoporosis. Melanie describes having symptoms of osteoporosis and suggests that these may be related to her vegan eating patterns.

#### extract 3

osteoporosis

17/03/2002, 16:30

Melanie

botontkalking

17/03/2002, 16:30

Melanie



1	Does anyone know where I	1	Wie weet waar ik info kan
2	can find info about a	2	vinden over of er verband
3	possible link between	3	is tussen veganisme en
4	veganism and osteoporosis.	4	botontkalking.
5	I've been a vegetarian for	5	Ik ben ong 20 jaar
6	twenty years, six of them	6	vegetarier Waarvan 6 jaar
7	as a vegan. I now have	7	veganistisch. Ik heb op dit
8	symptoms which might	8	moment klachten die
9	possibly indicate	9	mogelijk op botontkalking
10	osteoporosis	10	wijzen (maar dat is nog
11	(but that hasn't been	11	niet met zekerheid
12	established with certainty	12	vastgesteld). Ik vraag
13	yet). I am wondering if my	13	mij nu dus af of mijn
14	eating pattern may have	14	eetwijze daar misschien
15	something to do with it.	15	iets mee te maken kan
		16	hebben.

In his reply to Melanie (extract 11), posted after Sandra's reply (see previous analysis of extract 4), Ronald performs a direct attribution of responsibility.

**extract 11**

osteoporosis	botontkalking
18/03/2002, 22:30	18/03/2002, 22:30
Ronald	Ronald
reply 2	reply 2
16 As far as we know there is	17 Voor zover bekend is er geen
17 no link between veganism	18 verband tussen veganisme en
18 and osteoporosis.	19 botontkalking. Botontkalking
19 Osteoporosis occurs mainly	20 komt het meest voor in de
20 in western countries,	21 westerse landen waar men
21 where a lot of dairy	22 veel zuivel en eiwitrijke

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22 products and protein-rich	23 voeding gebruikt. Bij
23 foods are consumed. With a	24 een goede veganistische
24 good vegan lifestyle you	25 leefstijl zal je geen last
25 won't get osteoporosis.	26 van botontkalking krijgen.
26 Osteoporosis is thus a	27 Botontkalking is dus een
27 luxury "disease"; if you	28 welvaarts"ziekte", als jij
28 have symptoms, I'd say	29 daar last van hebt, zou ik
29 they were probably	30 zeggen dat dat veroorzaakt
30 caused by your vegetarian	31 is door je vegetarische
31 lifestyle. Vegetarians eat	32 eetwijze. Vegetariërs
32 far too many dairy	33 gebruiken overmatig veel
33 products, like cheese.	34 zuivel en kaas.

In this second reply to Melanie, Ronald suggests that there is no link between veganism and osteoporosis, but he limits the general implications of this claim by using footing (As far as we know in line 16). He then provides external evidence (lines 19–23) for the suggestion that there is no link between osteoporosis and veganism. Again, the writer is presenting himself as a knowledgeable person while being careful to say no more than he really knows.

In lines 23–25, he uses a formulation that is largely comparable with those used in the other extracts: 'With a good vegan lifestyle, you won't get osteoporosis'. The absence of osteoporosis is presented as a future consequence of living a good vegan lifestyle. Won't suggests that this inference is highly probable. However, the attribution of responsibility and potential blame is done in a much more direct manner. By presenting osteoporosis as impossible when leading a good vegan lifestyle, Ronald almost directly accuses Melanie of not having followed the rules.

Note that Ronald refers to leading a good vegan lifestyle rather than to more general or neutral actions like eating a varied diet or ensuring enough calcium, as was the case in the previous extracts. In response to

Melanie's suggestion of possibly having osteoporosis, Ronald suggests that Melanie has not behaved as a satisfactory member of the category 'vegans'. In a much more direct sense than other participants, Ronald is undermining a causal relationship between veganism and health problems.

It is interesting to see that in lines 27-28, Ronald presents Melanie's symptoms as hypothetical, using *if*. This conditional formulation allows him to accuse Melanie of suffering from a luxury 'disease' (line 27) and at the same time to give her the chance to rephrase her diagnosis. Also note how Ronald attributes Melanie's problem to her vegetarianism (lines 28–31). Melanie describes herself as having been a vegetarian for 20 years, 6 of them as a vegan. By selecting the category vegetarian, offered by Melanie herself (ll. 5–6) as the cause of her problem, Ronald enables Melanie to externalize the responsibility for osteoporosis to a former lifestyle rather than constructing the disease as something she is presently and actively involved in. Note how blaming vegetarianism for causing osteoporosis seems to construct vegetarianism rather than meat-eating as the most relevant rhetorical opposition, i.e. rival lifestyle. Interestingly, in this case Melanie, the initiator of the thread, replies to Ronald's message and treats his contribution as an attribution of responsibility.

#### extract 12

osteoporosis	botontkalking
19/03/2002, 11:15	19/03/2002, 11:15
Melanie	Melanie
reply to Ronald	reply op Ronald
34 Hello Ronald,	35 Hallo Ronald,
35 Thanks for your reaction.	36 Bedankt voor je reactie.
36 The point is that I have	37 Het punt is dat ik voor het
37 eaten hardly any dairy	38 grootste deel van mijn
38 products most of my life,	39 leven zuivelarm heb
39 and the last six years have	40 gegeten waarvan de laatste
40 been virtually dairy-free.	41 6 jr zo goed als

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41 I know the alternative	42 zuivelloos. Ik ken de
42 attitude to osteoporosis	43 alternatieve kijk op
43 and I support it - that's	44 botontkalking en ik
44 why I'm a vegan. However,	45 onderschrijf die. Daarom
45 my complaints have forced	46 eet ik ook veganistisch.
46 me to take everything into	47 Door mijn klachten echter
47 account. The attitude that	48 voel ik mij genoodzaakt
48 you can't get osteoporosis	49 overal rekening mee te
49 from a vegan diet, well, at	50 houden. De opvatting dat je
50 this moment I'd like to	51 juist geen botontkalking
51 know how and on whom that	52 krijgt van een
52 actually has been tested.	53 veganistische voeding, wel,
	54 ik zou op dit moment bijv.
	55 wel willen weten op welke
	56 wijze en bij wie dat
	58 daadwerkelijk onderzocht
	59 is.

In lines 45–47, Melanie foregrounds her complaints as the agents that forced her to take everything into account, thereby downplaying her will or agency in suggesting a link between veganism and osteoporosis. Also note the extreme case formulation everything (Pomerantz, 1986), which suggests that even the most unlikely option has been considered before she allowed herself to reach the conclusion that veganism and osteoporosis might be connected.

As well as externalizing her reasons for looking into this delicate matter, her account also draws attention away from a particular motive that she might be suspected of, and that may disturb her objective view of the matter. By attributing her inquiries into the possible link between veganism and health problems to a need and right 'to know the facts' (lines 50–52), Melanie counters the alternative explanation of being biased now that she has complaints herself.

**extract 13**

osteoporosis	botontkalking
25/03/2002, 12:06	25/03/2002, 12:06
Ronald	Ronald
reply to Melanie	reply op Melanie
53 (URL)	60 URL: (link)
54 For more information (in	61 Meer informatie kun je
55 English)	62 vinden (engelstalig) als je
48 just click on the link.	63 op de link klikt.

In his last reply (extract 13), Ronald refers to a URL. By constructing his message as a direct response, he makes it hearable as not having had to put any effort into coming up with this link and thus with information that supports his claim. By only providing the external link, rather than replying to Melanie's defence, he also makes available the inference that the facts speak for themselves.

### **3.6 Discussion and conclusion**

In this chapter we have examined how participants manage issues of causation and blame in a specific ideological domain. More particularly, we have shown how participants in an online forum on veganism present possible health problems as sequentially and logically connected to particular individual practices, thus leaving recipients to conclude that the problems can only be caused by their own actions and not by the shortcomings of veganism as such. This 'repair work' is performed through a formulation that uses both scripting and modality as interactional resources. As we have seen, it is precisely its design as a factual prediction, and the hidden normativity of the modal construction therein, that permits speakers to do their attributional work in an unmotivated manner.

If-then formulations, and script formulations, more generally, offer predictable and recognizable patterns that reduce the need to provide an

explanation. They not only provide an account of certain events, they also work as an account for those events (Garfinkel, 1967). By predicting that a varied diet routinely produces the absence of health problems, participants also show a normative orientation as to how health problems should be prevented. The rationality of the construction allows the speaker to project himself as 'doing description' rather than managing self-interest. It can be heard as an attribution of responsibility or blame, while avoiding associations with the need to disguise ideological weakness or to protect one's lifestyle against threats from outside.

The modal construction used in the then-part of these script formulations not only predicts that a varied diet will result in 'not having problems' but also formulates the recipient as being able and thus with the obligation to prevent these problems. It is precisely the blurring of the epistemic implications, on the one hand, and the recipient-related moral implications, on the other hand, that enables speakers to do their attributional work while softening its blame-implicative nature. We also showed how participants, as a part of these modal constructions, systematically avoid fashioning their claims about the prevention of health problems as having a general validity. They do so by inserting qualifications such as 'certainly not (with iron or zinc)', '(won't) easily', or '(it's impossible) in my opinion', or through the subjective scope brought in by the modal itself ('that ought to be sufficient'). In demarcating their 'certain' knowledge and being very specific about what they can be sure of, they depict themselves as speakers who do not make unwarranted or excessive claims. This makes their (generalized) advice all the more credible.

It is interesting that these modal constructions are used in a rhetorical environment that is already oriented to denying something (cf. Edwards, 2002), i.e. the assumption that veganism is ideologically flawed. Normative expectations (you should [be able to] solve these problems yourself) are contrasted with the current state of affairs, thus turning the hypothesis of veganism as the cause for ill health into a disputable or

doubtful claim. The fact/norm ambiguity of modal constructions perfectly suits a counterfactual context in which claims have to be defended against undermining. Also note that the forum participants talk about preventing problems. Individual practices either serve to protect health against possible risks or to solve problems such as vitamin deficiency, but they are never referred to as a means of 'upgrading' one's health. Being healthy is 'negatively' constructed as being free from problems or risks.

In line with previous observations on perceptions of health (Billig *et al.*, 1988), the participants in this forum thus construct health as a 'default state'. Generally speaking, 'health' and 'illness' are opposites. Illness is often constructed as a discontinuity in the 'unmarked' state of health (*ibid.*). In this forum, the interaction is dominated by 'health risk' as a potential sign of the problematic nature of a vegan lifestyle. Rather than talking about strategies for improving one's health, participants discuss ways of preventing and solving health risks or problems. Being healthy is 'negatively' constructed as being free from problems or risks. Individual practices either serve to protect health against possible risks or to solve problems such as vitamin deficiency, but they are never referred to as a means of 'upgrading' one's health. Interestingly, in orienting to health in terms of possible problems rather than ideals, participants demonstrate that health is a delicate issue for them.

The current literature on food and health tends to treat health as an aim in itself, and often depicts people as striving for it or preserving it in order to maintain the image of a responsible person. In contrast, we have shown how participants draw upon this notion of self-responsibility in daily life, and how they deploy it in a flexible way for a specific interactional goal. The identity of a self-responsible human being is thus used so as to divert attention away from potential negative health effects connected to veganism as a doctrine.

Interestingly, in orienting to health in terms of possible problems rather than ideals, participants demonstrate that health is a sensitive issue for them. By allocating blame and responsibility for health problems in an

indirect way, participants also mark this act as potentially delicate (cf. Silverman, 1997). It can be seen from the one case in which the formulation attributes blame in a more explicit manner, and evokes a defensive uptake, that the descriptive and therefore largely implicit character of the construction is of importance in terms of interactional effect. Although it can be taken as blame, it is not directly available as such, thus protecting the speaker from the need to elaborate on the motives for his action.

The combination of script formulations and modality may be a useful way of managing issues of accountability in a more general sense, too. An interesting avenue for future research would be to establish to what extent these devices have validity beyond the domain of the study. This also applies to the way in which veganism is defended as a matter of principle. The analysis shows how potential discrepancies between ideological ideas and 'lived' reality are explained by referring to practical and individual factors. Similar 'contingent' accounts can be found, for example, in science and gender issues (cf. Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Wetherell et al., 1987). The similarities and differences between these sets of error accounts are worth exploring more systematically.

By establishing its problem-free status, and doing so in a way that emphasizes its factual and therefore taken-for-granted nature, participants also construct veganism as an ideology. Referring to individual practices as an explanation for (future) negative events defines veganism as unproblematic when carefully practised. The suggested practice, a common varied diet, underlines this natural character by showing its integration in the mundane life of participants.

More generally, this study illustrates that managing and handling 'major' themes in society, such as protecting and sustaining (food) ideologies without coming across as overtly defensive, is often done through fine-grained discursive constructions that are hardly recognizable as doing the important business that they do.







## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DISPUTING TASTE: FOOD PLEASURE AS AN ACHIEVEMENT IN INTERACTION**

This chapter is based on the following article:

Sneijder, P. and Te Molder, H. F. M. (2006). Disputing taste: Food pleasure as an achievement in interaction. *Appetite*, 46: 107-116.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Disputing taste: Food pleasure as an achievement in interaction**

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#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, we draw on insights from discursive psychology and conversation analysis to develop an analysis of natural online interactions of self-declared ‘food-lovers’. Our aim is to shed light on the discursive procedures used by participants in an online forum on food pleasure to achieve ownership of taste. They do so by claiming the right to know what good food entails rather than constructing their enjoyment of food as a subjective experience. Within and through these interactional practices, participants construct their identity as ‘gourmets’.

We focus on how participants negotiate their relative rights to evaluate food items or practices (cf. Heritage and Raymond, 2005). For this purpose, we examine interaction sequences in which an evaluative assessment of a particular food item is being offered, to which other participants subsequently respond. We will demonstrate that participants in the ‘second assessment position’ make an effort to construct their evaluations as being independently arrived at, where they otherwise could simply agree with previous speakers. Before presenting the results of our analysis, we will provide some background to the topic of food and identity and suggest how discursive psychology can shed new light on this relationship.

## 4.2 Food and identity

The relationship between identity formation and food consumption is a firmly established one in the social sciences. At the same time, however, the concept of 'social identity' has lost much of its clarity. In the post-modern world in which our daily decisions regarding what to eat are determined by a wealth of options and by rapid economic and technological change, consumer identities seem fragmented and relatively unpredictable (cf. Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Furthermore, food products are less recognizable in terms of taste, smell or texture than they used to be. Food technology makes it possible for producers to imitate natural or traditional foods and average consumers seem less aware of production methods and the origin of food items in the stores (Fischler, 1988). Decisions about what to eat and the corresponding identity work seem more rooted in product imagery than in actual food ingredients. With 'healthy products' being promoted through reference to their taste and 'convenience foods' being marketed as healthy, it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of a one-to-one relationship between food consumption and identity. Traditional approaches to food and identity no longer seem adequate to capture this kind of complexity.

Food consumption has long been treated as a symbol of membership of specific social identity groups. A range of studies have emphasized its role as a marker of differences in gender, class and ethnicity (for example, Charles and Kerr, 1988; Douglas, 1984). Mennell, Murcott, and Van Otterloo (1992: 54) define the categories of social class, age and sex as 'the pre-sociological baseline for explanations of social and cultural bases for the social distribution of 'choice', 'habit' or 'taste' (.). In the past decade, however, researchers from different social scientific disciplines have come to acknowledge the decreasing value of socio-demographic factors as predictors of present consumption patterns (cf. Caplan, 1997; Crouch and O'Neill, 2000; Fischler, 1988; Lindeman and Sirelius, 2001; Lindeman and Stark, 1999). Both the a priori relevance and the consistency of these identity factors have been overestimated.

As a response to such considerations, social theorists (for example, Giddens, 1991) have introduced the concept of lifestyle, referring to the choices that people constantly make in their everyday lives. Consumers actively create their identity by choosing certain products over others, rather than conforming to food practices prescribed by particular social groups. Indicating a cultural rather than a structural pattern, the concept of lifestyle – or consumer lifestyle – partly resolves the rigidity of more traditional divisions. However (see also Murcott, 2000), the lifestyle approach is not concerned with the way in which identities are formulated, reformulated and managed in everyday life for particular interactional purposes, by social members themselves.

In recent years, consumer researchers have begun to examine new consumer communities on the Internet, focusing on identities, values and motives, mainly using ethnographic research methods. 'Nethnography' (Kozinets, 2002) takes into account the interaction dynamics between members of consumption-orientated communities and focuses on the communicative acts performed by participants (for instance 'sharing knowledge'). However, analytical observations are frequently based on the content of what is said rather than the way in which talk is constructed and especially how it is used. In this chapter we analyse online interaction by drawing on a perspective that focuses on the fine-grained detail of interaction sequence (see also Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003). We examine discourse as being constructed and action-oriented. This perspective allows us to study the discursive procedures by which members of an online community on food pleasure manage their relative rights and responsibilities to evaluate food.

#### **4.3 Discursive psychology: discursive identities and evaluative practices**

As mentioned, a specific concern of discursive psychology is the action orientation of naturally occurring discourse (Edwards, 1997; Edwards

and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; te Molder, 1999; te Molder and Potter, 2005a). Rather than treating discourse as the result of underlying cognitive processes, it is analysed as social practice. Applied to the study of everyday discourse on eating practices, it has revealed how people hold each other accountable for taste preferences in mealtime interaction (Wiggins, 2004) and how participants in online discussions on veganism resist the potentially health-threatening and complicated nature of the vegan lifestyle, for instance by presenting themselves as ordinary people (Sneijder and te Molder, 2004).

From a discursive psychological perspective, identity is looked at as an achievement and a tool. Identities are part of everyday routine and as such are used for a range of interactional purposes. They become visible as a demonstration of or an ascription to membership of a whole range of possible categories, such as 'man', 'student' or 'ordinary person', which are inference-rich and therefore associated with particular kinds of activities. These kinds of activities are labeled 'category-bound activities' by Sacks (1992).

However, the connection between identity and activity is not simply there; instead, it is part of participants' interactional achievements. Success is not guaranteed: membership needs to be worked up and people can fail to be treated as a member of a certain category (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Potter, 1996). An important feature of identity work is the kind of 'entitlement' that identities may provide for. A witness to a car accident may have a specific entitlement to feel awful (Sacks, 1992), and a friend may be entitled to have intimate knowledge about the person he or she is friendly with. Again, these are negotiable rather than fixed or mechanical features of identity. In analytical terms, only those categories and category entitlements count which are made relevant and oriented to by participants themselves and which have a visible outcome in the interaction (Schegloff, 1991).



#### 4.3.1 The role of evaluative practices in identity work

This chapter deals with the ways in which participants manage their relative rights to evaluate taste in online discussions on food pleasure. Evaluative assessments implicate the speaker's knowledge of or access to the referent he or she is assessing and thereby indicate the speaker's right to perform an evaluation (Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Heritage, 2005). However, being the first to evaluate a referent implies having independent rights to perform the evaluation, whereas evaluations of the same referent in second positions imply 'secondary' or relative rights (Heritage and Raymond, 2005). Producers of second assessments may work at undermining the suggestion that their right to evaluate an event, object or person is secondary to the first speaker's, especially when they are members of a category that is associated with knowledge of or access to the evaluated item (for example, parents with their children).

Speakers can use several discursive procedures to present their second assessments as 'independently arrived at'. Heritage and Raymond (2005) identified four devices used to claim the socio-epistemic rights that are bound to specific identities. These devices construct second assessments as independent of first assessments:

1. *producing a confirmation before an agreement*, which constructs the action of agreeing as a matter of lower priority (e.g. 'how beautiful' – 'that is beautiful, yes')
2. *oh-prefacing*, which presents the second assessment as previously held and recollected ('how beautiful' – 'oh, that is beautiful')
3. *statement + tag*, which invites agreement and positions the second assessment as a first one ('how beautiful' – 'beautiful, isn't it?')
4. *negative interrogative*, which also serves to reclaim the first position and its epistemic rights ('how beautiful' – 'isn't that beautiful?').

In this chapter, we examine three other devices for constructing superior or independent access that emerged as dominant in our online data: (1) objective second evaluations, (2) gustatory expressions and (3) the construction of explicit agreements. 'Objective evaluations' describe a feature of the referent ('That sandwich is very tasty'), whereas subjective evaluations index a privileged preference for or dislike of the referent ('I like that sandwich') (Wiggins and Potter, 2003).

In attitudinal models the distinction between internal and external separates taste as an individual experience from measurable features of the food which refer to its texture, colour or shape (cf. Wiggins, 2004). In discursive terms, the distinction is understood rhetorically, allowing speakers to construct or suggest the source of a taste evaluation themselves (Wiggins, 2004). Wiggins and Potter (2003) showed different functions of subjective and objective evaluations in everyday mealtime interaction. For instance, subjective evaluations were shown to limit the need for other speakers to agree with or respond to the assessment, or they were used as resources to make food refusals accountable.

Objective evaluations, on the other hand, make good compliments because they present the judgment as based on facts rather than personal experience. Furthermore, objective evaluations are used persuasively, especially when countering subjective evaluations. In our data, the objective evaluations are used in response to subjective evaluations and suggest access to 'knowledge of good food'. The analysis will show how they are used to claim ownership of taste.

The second device we distinguish in the analysis is the use of 'gustatory expressions'. These are broadly defined as assessments of taste that are not embedded in syntactical structures ('hmmm' or 'delicious') and suggest an immediate on-the-spot taste experience. Gustatory expressions are constructed as immediate and spontaneous, that is, as directly triggered by a bodily experience with the food referent (cf. Wiggins, 2002).

Finally, we focus on the construction of explicit agreements. In producing an agreement, people show that their assessment is in agreement with the prior speaker's assessment (Pomerantz, 1984b). Pomerantz showed that agreements are generally produced with a minimization of gap between the end of the turn containing the first assessment and the start of the agreement turn. Agreements are usually constructed as spontaneous and immediate and shaped as 'upgrades' of the prior assessments, as 'same evaluations' (I like it too) or as 'downgrades'. However, the practice of designing an agreement as agreement (I agree with you) is less well known. We examine the role of explicit agreements in constructing opinions as 'previously held' (cf. Heritage and Raymond, 2005).

#### **4.4 Method and material**

##### *Material*

The material consists of online discussions, or threads, downloaded from a Dutch Internet site on food pleasure. There are three forums on this site that are specifically related to various food themes (a culinary forum, a wine forum and a slimming forum). For our research, we examined threads from the forum on culinary topics. Those we selected are archived and stored on the website. With respect to copyright, the site states that all content may be used for non-commercial purposes. Names have been altered and date or time indications have been deleted to minimize the possibility of identification. The data corpus consists of 40 threads containing 1751 emails in total. The criteria for thread selection were:

- the relevance of 'taste' as a topic
- the presence of first–second assessment sequences

##### *Transcription and translation*

The selected online discussions were copied to Word files. We removed all text that was not part of the actual discourse and then saved the

files as text files. In the results section, extracts from the raw data are reproduced to allow the reader to validate the analytical observations. The extracts were first analysed in Dutch and subsequently translated into English with the help of a professional translator who is also a native speaker of English (see the Appendix for the original Dutch extracts). Translation is an analytically informed process, not a neutral one. In this sense, the translations should be considered 'free' translations.

### *Analytical procedure*

A discursive psychological approach is participant-centred, i.e. in the first instance it is not the researcher who makes inferences about what is going on in a conversation. Rather, the interactional meaning of utterances is determined by the 'next-turn-proof procedure' (Edwards, 1997; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). The aim is to examine how participants themselves respond to turns and thereby show an interpretation. Another analytical procedure is to examine utterances for their rhetorical quality. By selecting a specific description, other possible descriptions are ruled out or undermined. The principle is that language is a 'system of differences', in which words have meanings because there are alternatives. Imagining plausible alternatives helps the analyst to see what alternative descriptions may actually be in play, and for what purposes the present selections are being used.

More generally, large representative and pivotal sections of the 'raw' materials are reproduced in publications so that readers can themselves check the conclusions drawn. The analysis shows how participants in online discussions on food pleasure manage their relative 'rights' to assess taste. For this purpose, we have considered sequences in which participants evaluate food items. In the process of examining the data, a recurring phenomenon emerged. When providing 'second evaluations' (evaluations following previous evaluations of the same referent), participants constructed

these evaluations as their own, independent of or superior to what others had said before. In everyday conversation, the preferential action following a first assessment is to agree with the previous speaker (Pomerantz, 1984b). In our data, however, participants often constructed their second evaluations in a way that suggested superior or unmediated access to the referent (usually a food item), or the existence of an opinion about the referent prior to the first assessment. We distinguished three dominant constructions of 'independent access':

- objective evaluations ('it is delicious' rather than the subjective 'I love it') (see also Wiggins and Potter, 2003)
- gustatory expressions ('mmm, delicious!') (see also Wiggins, 2002)
- explicit agreements ('I agree with you')

We began the analysis by searching and counting first assessment-second assessment sequences in order to establish the frequency of constructions of independent access in comparison to 'simple' agreements.

## **4.5 Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, Heritage and Raymond (2005) identified four devices that are used to index independent access in a corpus of tape-recorded conversations (the production of a confirmation prior to an agreement, oh-prefacing, tag questions and negative interrogatives). In our corpus, we only found three examples of oh-prefacing and two tag questions in second evaluations. Two examples are reproduced below:

### **extract 1**

simplicity	eenvoud
08/04/2004, 14:00	08/04/2004, 14:00
Jim	Jim
1 (1 line omitted) I totally	1 volledig eens met je
2 agree with what you said	2 uitspraak dat er meer kunst
3 about there being more art	3 zit in het goed klaarmaken

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4 to preparing simple  
5 things well and ensuring  
6 that they taste good.

4 en correct doen smaken  
5 van de simpele dingen.

08/04/2004, 16:20

Joan

reply

7 Oh yes, the art of good  
8 preparation seems more  
9 important to me than  
10 complicated recipes. (1  
11 line omitted)

08/04/2004, 16:20

Joan

reply

6 Oh ja, de kunst van het goed  
7 bereiden lijkt me veel  
8 belangrijker dan  
9 ingewikkelde receptuur.

The oh-prefacing in line 7 suggests a change of state (Heritage, 1984; Heritage and Raymond, 2005). By producing it prior to providing her second assessment, Joan suggests that she was already of the view that the art of good preparation is more important than complexity, and that she has reviewed or recollected it on the basis of the previous assessment. Thereby she undermines the potential inference that her assessment is merely elicited by the first one.

### extract 2

favourite menu

22/04/2004, 15:12

Carry

1 I would make a salad with  
2 fresh snow peas and baked  
3 uncooked ham as a starter  
4 (1 line omitted)

lievelingsmenu

22/04/2004, 15:12

Carry

1 Ik zou als vooraf Salade van  
2 verse peultjes en gebakken  
3 rauwe ham maken (1 line  
4 omitted)

22/04/2004, 18:50

22/04/2004, 18:50

John	John
reply	reply
5 good aren't they, those	5 lekker he die salades van
6 salads with fresh snow	6 verse peultjes en ook van
7 peas? And princess beans	7 prinsessebonen trouwens ! (1
8 too of course!	8 line omitted).
9 (1 line omitted)	

In extract 2, the tag format in line 5 invites agreement. John hereby positions his evaluation as a first assessment and claims primary rights to assess (Heritage and Raymond, 2005).

There were no examples of repeat/confirmation + agreement or negative interrogatives in our corpus. However, we identified three other devices that are more frequently used by participants in the online forum to index different types of independent access to the taste of culinary foods: objective second evaluations, gustatory expressions and explicit agreements.

Of the 1715 emails, we found 209 in which a 'second assessment' was provided. These 209 consisted of 150 positive second evaluations and 59 disagreements. The 150 positive second evaluations were made up of 77 'simple' agreements and 73 constructions of independent access (objective evaluations, gustatory expressions, direct agreements and oh-prefaces/tags). Table 1 provides an overview of the different types of positive second evaluations. We will reproduce examples in which the different constructions of independent access occur and describe our analytical observations in more detail.

Table 1

Second assessments in food interaction

Types of second assessments	Frequency	Percentage
Simple agreements (‘I like it too’)	77	51
Gustatory expressions (‘mmm’, ‘delicious’)	28	19
Objective evaluations (‘it is delicious’)	25	17
Explicit agreements (‘I agree with you’)	15	10
Other	5	3
Total	150	100

#### 4.5.1 Constructing superior access to taste by using objective evaluations

In our corpus, we found 25 sequences in which a second evaluation was formulated as an objective evaluation. They are not used here to counter subjective evaluations (cf. Wiggins and Potter, 2003), but to display superior access to the referent. Participants using an objective second evaluation suggest basing their evaluation on facts and display access to the specific qualities of the food. They suggest epistemic authority in the matter of evaluating the food referent and show their entitlement to having specific



and factual knowledge about the taste of enjoyable foods. In the following three extracts a subjective assessment is followed by an objective assessment.

**extract 3**

canned food

10/05/2004, 17:20

Lynn

1 (1 line omitted) I don't  
2 like it but I see it in the  
3 stores and it sells well.  
4 What I really hate is  
5 mixed vegetables, which is  
6 even served in many  
7 restaurants.

10/05/2004, 17:45

Frank

reply

8 (3 lines omitted) Like Mark  
9 I've eaten various canned  
10 foods in the past, but now  
11 I think I could only eat  
12 them if I had a bad cold.  
13  
14 And those mixed vegetables  
15 are indeed one of the  
16 worst.

conserven

10/05/2004, 17:20

Lynn

1 (1 line omitted) Ik ben geen  
2 liefhebber ervan, maar zie ze  
3 toch gewoon in de rekken  
4 staan en vlot verkopen. Waar  
5 ik echt een hekel  
6 aan heb is bv  
7 groentemacedoine, die ze in  
8 vele eetgelegenheden ook  
9 nog op je bord doen.

10/05/2004, 17:45

Frank

reply

10 (3 lines omitted) Net als  
11 Matthieu heb ik vroeger wel  
12 allerlei dingen gegeten uit  
13 blik, maar ik denk dat ik  
14 dat nu alleen nog maar zou  
15 kunnen als ik heel erg  
16 verkouden ben.  
17  
18 En die macedoine is  
19 inderdaad 1 van ergste.

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In lines 4–5 Lynn constructs her evaluation of canned mixed vegetables as subjective. She upgrades this assessment using the extreme case formulation ‘really’ (Pomerantz, 1986). Before producing his second evaluative assessment of canned, mixed vegetables in lines 14–16, Frank conveys his experience with canned food generally. He hereby treats the assessment as a matter of lower priority, which contributes to its construction as independent of Lynn’s evaluation. The second assessment is an objective evaluation that constructs the bad status of canned mixed vegetables as a quality of the food rather than a matter of individual taste. Frank thus indexes superior access to the referent. Note also the succinctness of his assessment and the addition of ‘indeed’ (line 15). All these features work to suggest that Frank has superior access to the product and held this opinion before Lynn displayed hers.

In 10 of the 25 constructions of objectivity, producers used constructions like ‘Exactly!’ or ‘That’s right’ rather than full objective evaluations. By suggesting that the previous speaker is ‘right’, speakers index their knowledge of the referent and suggest that they are in a position to judge whether other participants’ assessments correspond to reality or not. In other words, participants construct superior expertise. Extract 4 shows an example of this phenomenon.

### extract 4

pasta	pasta
23/03/2004, 17:35	23/03/2004, 17:35
Catherine	Catherine
1 I feel that it doesn’t go	1 Voor mijn gevoel gaat dat
2 together. It gives me the	2 niet samen. Dan heb ik het
3 idea that health freaks go	3 idee dat de
4 too far, like with light	4 gezondheidsfanaten een
5 chips. Chips are supposed	5 beetje doorslaan, net zoals
6 to be greasy (and salty)	6 light-chips. Chips horen
7 and pasta is supposed to	7 gewoon vet (en zout)

8 be white.

8 te zijn en de pasta wit.

23/03/2004, 19:13

23/03/2004, 19:13

Jeffrey

Jeffrey

reply

reply

9 exactly!

9 Precies!

In line 9, Jeffrey's 'exactly' orients to the truth-value of what Catherine has said in lines 1–8, thus suggesting that he has superior knowledge of the properties of chips. The immediacy of his response and the absence of any account for his contribution suggest that Jeffrey held this opinion even before Catherine had recorded hers. Interestingly, the objective formulations construct taste as 'knowable', thereby underlining the idea that taste can be disputed.

In extract five, we see another example of an objective evaluation. However, in this extract, the construction of objectivity functions to claim the first position and is used by the speaker to present himself as 'owner of the news' (see also Te Molder and Potter, 2005b).

#### **extract 5**

favourite menu

lievelingsmenu

15/03/2004, 19:22

15/03/2004, 19:22

Ray

Ray

1 scallops wrapped in wonton

1 scallops in een pakketje van

2 pastry with a sauce of two

2 loempiavel met een saus van 3

3 kinds of sherry (two lines

3 twee soorten sherry (2 lines

4 omitted)

4 omitted)

15/03/2004, 19:56

15/03/2004, 19:56

Mick

Mick

reply

reply

5 (quotation omitted) they

5 die lijken me lekker !

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6 seem tasty!

15/03/2004, 20:00

Ray

reply to Mick

7 they are tasty!!! You

8 really should prepare them!

9 I make them for everybody;

10 I even have a girlfriend

11 who insists on them!

15/03/2004, 20:00

Ray

reply op Mick

6 die zijn lekker!!! Moet je

7 echt maar een keer maken! Ik

8 schotel ze iedereen voor;

9 heb zelfs een vriendin die

10 ze eist!

In this extract, Mick produces a cautious, subjective assessment in response to Ray, who refers to the taste of scallops in a spring roll (etc.) in lines 5-6. By downgrading his assessment with the verb 'seem', Mick resists the potential inference that he wishes to claim primary rights to assess the scallops and makes available the inference that he did not taste the recipe. Ray replies with an objective assessment in line 7, suggesting tastiness as a feature of the scallops rather than based on individual preference. The reformulation is a 'partial modified repeat' (Stivers, 2005) ('they are tasty' rather than Mick's 'they seem tasty'), which emphasizes Ray's primary and superior rights to assess the dish. 'They are tasty!!!' provides a blend of alignment and competitiveness by reformulating the downgrade 'seem' into 'are'. Stress automatically falls on 'are' when reading this assessment, which instructs the hearer (reader) to reconsider the prior turn and treat the upgrade as the relevant aspect of the present turn. Also note that this is done in third position, which is not a sequentially relevant location for agreeing (Stivers, 2005). Ray's assessment is therefore a marked action in terms of position and form. Furthermore, it recasts Mick's assessment as not newsworthy and constructs Ray as the 'right' person to make the assertion.

Also note the construction of this objective evaluation: it is constructed as an immediate response (leaving out a capital letter or a greeting) and upgraded by three exclamation marks. This, along with the

accounts in lines 9-11, reinforces the epistemic strength of the evaluation. In lines 9-11 Ray displays an awareness of his overt claim of superior access by downgrading it. He makes the recipe for everybody (and is not specifically trying to convince Mick) and refers to a girlfriend who insists on having the scallops (she 'pushing' him to make it rather than he her).

#### **4.5.2 Suggesting personal and physical experience with food to index independent access**

In 28 evaluations, participants used 'gustatory expressions'. These expressions suggest direct and independent access to the referent and robustly undermine the subordinate state of the second assessment. Since gustatory expressions are constructed as if they were unmediated spontaneous reactions to a taste-experience, they are hard to dispute.

##### **extract 6**

Who really cooks with pleasure? 16/02/2004, 12:46 Josie	wie kookt er nu echt graag? 16/02/2004, 12:46 Josie
1 When I'm visiting friends in 2 Nuremberg or Munich there 3 are usually very common 4 things on the menu that they 5 know I love: 6 sour lentils with bacon and 7 home-made spätzle (a kind of 8 pasta) (3 lines omitted)	1 Wanneer ik bij mijn vrienden 2 in Nuernberg of Munchen ben 3 staan er meestal ook hele 4 gewone dingen op het menu 5 maar waarvan ze wel weten 6 dat ik ze heerlijk vind: 7 zurige linsen met spek en 8 zelfgemaakte spaetzle (sort 9 pasta (3 lines omitted)
16/02/2004, 14:50 Mary reply 9 MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM Delicious	16/02/2004, 14:50 Mary reply 10 MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM Lekker

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10 home-made spätzle. And then	11 zelf gemaakte spaetzle. En
11 with cream sauce? By	12 dan overgoten met roomsaus?
12 themselves, mushrooms, or	13 Naturel of met
10 pieces of bacon. (You can	14 paddestoelen, of spekjes.
11 get them in Austria too,	15 (Kan je ook in Oostenrijk
12 Josie.)	16 eten Josie.)

Wiggins (2002: 331) showed how the gustatory ‘mmm’ constructs pleasure as ‘an immediate, spontaneous, and yet descriptively vague sensation. This affords it an authenticity, as an evaluation seemingly based on embodied sensations’. Wiggins examined the hmmm-expression in mealtime conversations. In our corpus of online data, participants also use several constructions to imply a direct taste sensation. Note, however, that evaluations of taste in online conversations are mostly retrospective and therefore not embedded in actual eating practices as is the case with mealtime conversations.

In line 9, Mary uses the gustatory Mmm to evaluate the dish ‘spätzle’. By using the gustatory expression (in capitals), she suggests having tasted the dish herself. One cannot use ‘mmmm’ when the referent has not been directly experienced. In response to Josie’s subjective evaluation of spätzle (‘that they know I love’ in lines 4-5), the gustatory expression indexes independent and bodily access to the dish.

Furthermore, Mary evaluates the dish as objectively ‘delicious’, and invites an answer to her question regarding the sauce in lines 10-11. She then offers potential ways of preparing the dish and suggests to Josie that the dish can be eaten in Austria as well. All these discursive procedures construct Mary’s knowledge of and experience with spätzle as superior. Another expression that can be classified as a ‘gustatory expression’ is used in the next extract.

**extract 7**

vinegar and olive oil

05/06/2004, 13:43

Daisy

1 I never buy it in shops.  
2 Always 50 litres at once  
3 from Crete, partly  
4 from my own olive orchard  
5 and partly from a cousin who  
6 has a lot of olive trees and  
7 manages the harvesting of  
8 our olives. Only cold  
9 pressed. We keep the olive  
10 oil in urns and glass  
11 bottles. (2 lines omitted)

05/05/2004, 14:12

Bruce

reply

12 delicious!  
13 in Crete and Cyprus I've  
14 bought olive oil at a  
15 monastery

05/05/2004, 14:34

Daisy

reply to Bruce

16 Yes (Monastery) Moni  
17 Toplou, (URL) I've often  
18 been there, but I've never  
19 bought their olive  
20 oil. (2 lines omitted)

azijn en olijfolie

05/06/2004, 13:43

Daisy

1 Koop ik nooit in de winkel.  
2 Altijd met 50 liter tegelijk  
3 uit Kreta deels van eigen  
4 olijfgaard en deels van een  
5 neef die ook veel  
6 olijfbomen heeft en ook voor  
7 de oogst van onze olijven  
8 zorgt. Alleen koude persing.  
9 De olijfolie bewaren we in  
10 urnen en glazen flessen. (2  
11 lines omitted)

05/06/2004, 14:12

Bruce

reply

11 heerlijk !  
12 op Kreta en Cyprus kocht ik  
13 ook al eens olijfolie bij  
14 een klooster

05/05/2004, 14:34

Daisy

reply op Bruce

15 Ja (Monasterie) Moni Toplou  
16 (URL)ben ik vaak geweest,  
17 maar nooit olijfolie  
18 gekocht (2 lines omitted)

Although expressions like 'mmm' may be more convincing in constructing a direct sensory experience, stand-alone adjectives like

'delicious' in line 12 function in a similar way. When tasting a food item, speakers produce gustatory 'mmms' with a filled mouth (Wiggins, 2002). In online conversations, however, participants have more options at their disposal for reconstructing previous bodily experiences. Rather than providing a full description or assessment (that is delicious), Bruce uses 'delicious' without embedding it in a syntactical format. Furthermore, the evaluation is constructed as immediate by leaving out a capital letter or greeting. His assessment is constructed as if he is tasting olive oil from Greece on the spot and as if the 'delicious' spontaneously follows from that. Note that Bruce provides evidence for his assessment by providing his own experience in lines 13–15, thereby underlining his independence in the matter. Interestingly, Daisy responds by confirming that there is a monastery that sells olive oil and then mentions the relevant website, thereby indexing her own independent right to evaluate in a comparable manner.

### 4.5.3 Constructing an opinion as previously held by overtly agreeing

By producing an agreement as agreement (as in 'I agree with you'), participants display an awareness of performing the act of agreeing. By explicitly agreeing, they may not only align themselves with the previous speaker but also suggest that the assessment was previously held and recollected or activated by the first assessment. In other words, an explicit agreement undermines the potential inference that the second assessment came into existence through the first assessment. We found 14 explicit agreements in the data.

#### extract 8

tasting olive oil

05/06/2004, 15:24

William

1 I only use olive oil in

olijfolie proeven

05/06/2004, 15:24

William

1 Ik gebruik enkel olijf olie



2	salads and pasta, I only	2	in salades en pasta, ik
3	bake with Flemish	3	braad en bak enkel in
4	butter and sometimes French	4	Ardense boter en soms in
5	butter. Butter always tastes	5	Franse boter. De smaak van
6	better with baked meat or	6	boter is altijd beter bij
7	baked fish and on sandwiches	7	gebakken vlees en gebakken
8	I always use good butter as	8	vis en ook op de boterhammen
9	well.	9	altijd goede boter.

05/06/2004, 16:15

Tina

reply

10 I totally agree William.  
11 For us here a good butter  
12 for baking as well, and for  
13 on bread. For baking I  
14 clarify the butter before  
15 using it.

05/06/2004, 16:15

Tina

reply

10 Helemaal mee eens William.  
11 Voor ons hier ok een goede  
12 roomboter voor bak en  
13 braadwerk, en voor op het  
14 brood. Om te bakken en  
15 braden klaar ik de boter  
16 voordat ik het gebruik.

Tina displays an explicit 'total agreement' with William, thereby constructing the agreement as a conscious action. The extreme case formulation 'totally' (Pomerantz, 1986) maximizes the strength of the agreement and counters the potential suggestion that Tina just agrees because it is the relevant thing to do at this location in the interaction. After agreeing, Tina indexes her epistemic independence further by providing her own experience. By designing an agreement as agreement and elaborating on the topic of butter, Tina seems to reduce the 'secondness' of her position rather than simply 'doing to know better'. In extract 9, a similar sequence is reproduced.

## Chapter 4

### extract 9

specialty of the house

08/08/2004, 18:00

Theodore

1 well, for me a bit of fat  
2 is allowed. Yogonaise and  
3 light mayonnaise, you won't  
4 find those things in my  
5 house. Then I'd rather use  
6 less. If I do eat something  
7 like that (which doesn't  
8 happen that often, that egg  
9 salad), then I want to  
10 taste what's in it and  
11 even if the recipe  
12 contains only a minimal  
13 amount of yoghurt or  
14 another taste, I don't  
15 want that.

08/08/2004, 18:53

Carly

reply

16 I totally agree.  
17 I don't use that garbage  
18 either. When I want to eat  
19 fewer calories, I mix the  
20 mayonnaise with water or  
21 yoghurt myself, rather  
22 than those ready-made  
23 disasters that don't even  
24 taste good. And if you  
25 want to eat fewer  
26 calories, eat less fat,

specialiteit van het huis

08/08/2004, 18:00

Theodore

1 nou er mag voor mij wel wat  
2 vet in hoor. yogonaise en  
3 halvaise, halfvolle etc. die  
4 spullen kom je bij mij thuis  
5 niet tegen. Dan gebruik ik  
6 liever gewoon meteen iets  
7 minder. wanneer ik al een  
8 keer (komt niet zo vaak voor  
9 die eiersalade) zoiets eet,  
10 dan wil ik ook kunnen  
11 proeven wat er in zit  
12 en ook al is het maar het  
13 minimale van yoghurt of  
14 andere smaak in zo'n  
15 bereiding, dat wil  
16 ik dus ff niet.

08/08/2004, 18:53

Carly

reply

17 Helemaal mee eens.  
18 Ik gebruik die 'troep' ook  
19 niet. Als ik minder  
20 calorierijk wil eten, dan  
21 doe ik wel zelf mayonaise  
22 gemengd met water of  
23 yoghurt, ipv van die kant  
24 en klare mistoestanden die  
25 zelfs slecht smaken. En ik  
26 heb ook zoiets van als je  
27 dan toch minder vet wilt

26 and don't think you are	28 eten, eet dan minder
27 better-off with those so-	29 vet, en geef jezelf de
28 called light products. (3	30 illusie niet dat je met die
29 lines omitted)	31 zogenaamde lightprodukten
	32 beter en gezonder
	33 af bent. (3 lines omitted)
08/08/2004, 19:05	08/08/2004, 19:05
Theodore	Theodore
reply to Carly	reply op Carly
30 exactly! (3 lines omitted)	34 precies! (3 lines omitted)

In line 16, Carly 'totally agrees' with Theodore, thereby suggesting that her opinion was not merely elicited by Theodore's assessment of yogonaise and light mayonnaise, but existed prior to his message. The upgrading of the negative evaluation of yogonaise and light mayonnaise to 'garbage' (line 16) and 'ready-made disasters' (lines 21-22), further constructs the prior existence of her opinion. Furthermore, she provides her own accounts of these products in lines 20–28 (don't even taste good, you are not better off with light products), thereby indexing her independent experience with and knowledge of the products. In line 30, Theodore produces an objective evaluation of the type discussed under extract 5. Rather than allowing Carly primary rights to provide an assessment of light products by simply agreeing, Theodore indexes his epistemic authority in this matter in line 30. It redefines Carly's assessment as not being newsworthy and emphasizes that Theodore has already said the same thing in first position.

#### **4.5.4 Summary of the results**

In summary, we have demonstrated how participants in naturally occurring discourse on food pleasure handle their identities themselves so as to perform particular kinds of interactional business. A dominant way in which the participants in this forum establish their rights to know what good food is rather than merely liking particular kinds of food is through the discursive construction of independent and/or superior access to knowledge of and experience with the taste of culinary food products or dishes.

First, participants accomplish superior access by presenting objective evaluations of taste. Rather than simply agreeing with evaluations of others, participants suggest factual, non-subjective knowledge about the taste of a product (extracts 3–5).

Second, participants construct independent access by constructing their bodily sensations with food as immediate and spontaneous (extracts 6 and 7). Finally, they construct their opinions as previously held by constructing agreements as explicit agreements ('I totally agree'), which marks the action of agreeing as a conscious deed rather than a spontaneous one that depends on interactional contingencies (extracts 8 and 9). By suggesting knowledge of and experience with foods in this way, participants construct themselves as having rights to assess matters of taste which common sense suggests are highly subjective and negotiable. They construct enjoying food, and being a gourmet, as having independent knowledge about tasty foods rather than having and displaying particular subjective preferences.

#### **4.6 Discussion and conclusion**

Since the appearance of *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet and Culture* (Mennell et al., 1992), the nature of research into food choice and eating practices has changed. With respect to the study of identity and food, researchers have come to acknowledge the decreasing explanatory value of sociological variables like class, gender and age and are searching for new

ways to determine the relationship. In the search for satisfying accounts of food choices and practices, there is a movement towards multidisciplinary approaches (Wiggins, 2004).

The current study is an example of an innovative approach to the study of food choice, eating practices and identity, focusing on the socio-interactional features of food talk. Drawing on conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), ethnomethodology and social constructionism (see Potter, 1996) and by reformulating insights from social psychology, discursive psychology provides an exciting new and broadly informed account of identities and their management in everyday interaction. Identity is reformulated from a cognitive concept into a participants' resource that is managed in interaction (cf. Edwards, 1991). Rather than treating identity as a predictor of behaviour, as in attitudinal studies on food choice (e.g. Povey, Wellens, and Conner, 2001; Sparks and Sheperd, 1992), discursive psychology emphasizes the constructed and performative nature of identities in talk.

The analysis demonstrates how participants in the forum actively negotiate their relative socio-epistemic rights to assess taste and thereby construct their identities as gourmets. Although sensory approaches to food evaluations imply that there is a direct relationship between the evaluation and the taste as it is physically experienced (for an overview see Conner and Armitage, 2002: 13–15), this study indicates that evaluative practices are not so straightforward in everyday life. Descriptions of taste carry all kinds of different rhetorical and interactional implications that are typically ignored in the laboratory but also in cultural studies of food preference and food liking (Fischler, 1988; Rozin, 1990). We have shown how the expression of food preferences in everyday life can be analysed as social practice.

The 'second position assessments' in the data are used to index independent or even superior knowledge of food, thereby suggesting that enjoying food implies knowing what good food is. The point here is that the enjoyment of food is not something that is automatically done or that can be

taken for granted, but something that has to be achieved within talk. Even the gustatory constructions that index an immediate physiological reaction to food serve interactional purposes (cf. Wiggins, 2002) and are not necessarily connected to actual sensations. Although these expressions seem to represent what is going on inside the body, they are selected from many alternative descriptions (Edwards, 1991), and therefore ‘designed’ (consciously or otherwise) for particular purposes. In order to enjoy food as a gourmet, participants entitle themselves to knowing what good food is all about rather than merely displaying subjective taste preferences.

As we have shown, indexing epistemic independence (and superiority) is a crucial procedure for countering the secondary status of taste evaluation. In the highly subjective environment of food talk, this procedure may be the only appropriate way of claiming expertise and thereby claiming membership of the ‘gourmet’ category. What is at stake is the construction of expertise by presenting assessments as more than an opinion without overtly ‘being superior’.

A number of interesting issues deserve attention in subsequent research. In a previous study about an online forum on veganism, we argued how participants built knowledgeability and credibility by also showing the limits of their knowledge with respect to preventing and solving health problems (Sneijder and te Molder, 2004; 2005). This may specifically be the case in ideological domains – like discussions on veganism – where what is at stake is defending the ideology without coming across as doing so. In this kind of environment, it may be particularly important for people to avoid accusations of ‘unlimited normativity’, i.e. saying things because they are in line with the ideal rather than because they are based on facts.

In contrast, what is at stake in subjective domains like the food pleasure forum is the status of participants’ claims to being a food expert. They can only be treated as a real expert if assessments stem from knowledge rather than mere personal opinion. Claiming ‘unlimited’ (i.e. objective or direct) access to the domain of good food is apparently an

adequate interactional solution for solving this problem. On the other hand, there is no disputing taste. Tastes differ, and everyone has their own. Independent or superior access is therefore claimed in an inconspicuous, descriptive manner, by claiming access to the objective world of taste (sensations), or by designing it as mere agreement. Handling knowledge and expertise is an important issue in food talk and seems to be done differently in ideological vs. subjective domains. It would be fruitful to further examine the role of knowledge in food discourse in various contexts.

It would be also interesting to examine how people 'enjoy' in contexts in which enjoying food is potentially problematic, such as obesity management groups. In this environment, enjoying food may be an accountable action as food is the likely cause of the weight problem. Are there different criteria for being entitled to enjoy food in this kind of environment? How do participants in this context accountably talk about enjoying good food?

Another avenue for further research would be to examine whether the constructions of independent and superior access through second objective evaluations, gustatory expressions and explicit agreements are specific to discussions on food. These constructions have emerged as interactionally appropriate devices for suggesting independent and superior access to the referent in highly subjective domains like food talk. We might expect that similar devices are drawn upon in other domains like interaction related to art or music.

Furthermore, it could be examined whether these devices are specific to online data or emerge in face-to-face interaction on food as well. On the whole, we hope to have shown that identity in food interaction is not so much a reflection of what participants 'are really like' but a phenomenon that is constructed and worked up for the purpose of performing major interactional business.









# **CHAPTER 5**

## **WEIGHING BLAME: ACCOUNTING FOR FAILURE IN ONLINE DISCOURSE ON WEIGHT MANAGEMENT**

This chapter is based on the following article:

Sneijder, P., Te Molder, H. F. M. and Wiggins, S. Weighing blame: accounting for failure in online discourse on weight management. *Submitted for publication*.



## Chapter 5

### **Weighing blame: accounting for failure in online discourse on weight management**

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#### **5.1 Introduction**

It is now commonly accepted that obesity is one of the biggest health threats facing western society. In the past few years, the obesity problem has been linked to numerous causes: genetic, environmental and psychological (e.g. Drewnowski, 1996; Rennie and Jebb, 2005). In the United States, obesity is now called an epidemic. There is a firm belief that lack of physical activity as well as eating habits are part of the problem. For that reason, an increasing number of people are trying to lose weight, for instance by participating in commercial weight-loss programmes. In general, attempting to lose weight raises the issue of accountability if weight loss is not achieved. In this chapter, we will demonstrate how participants in an online forum on weight control describe their lapses in weight-loss programmes and manage their accountability.

Traditional research on obesity and its causes typically ignores the ways in which attributions are done in everyday life and how they manage particular stakes or interests for the speaker. In this chapter, a discursive psychological perspective is used to examine the interactional design of attributions related to relapses in weight-control programmes. Participants' attributional concerns are not studied for what they *reflect* but for the kind of

discursive practices that they are *used* for (Edwards and Potter, 1992, 1993; Potter, 1996). The aim of this chapter is to show how participants manage their dieting failures in practice as part of activity sequences, thereby providing an innovative look at attribution of blame and responsibility in relation to obesity. Before turning to the analysis, attribution theory and the way it has been applied in obesity research will be briefly described. We will then flesh out the discursive psychological perspective on attribution as social practice, and argue how it differs from more traditional views.

## 5.2 Developments in Attribution Theory

Attribution has traditionally been explained in psychology as a cognitive process of drawing causal inferences, based on our need to explain things and to predict future events (Heider, 1958). In their overview of attribution theory, Kelley and Michela (1980) emphasized the ‘fundamental attribution error’, where observers of behaviour usually rule out external factors and ascribe causes to internal ones when trying to predict behaviour, while agents tend to ascribe actions to situational factors. In addition, Weiner (1986) has shown how people tend to explain success by means of internal (dispositional) attributions, while negative events like failures are likely to be attributed to external factors. Furthermore, Weiner identified attributions according to the dimensions of stability and control. He argued that success or failure also depend on the perceived stability of causes (for instance, a lack of ability rather than a lack of self-control may be perceived as a more stable and less changeable factor) and the perceived degree of control.

In recent years, studies in person perception have demonstrated that the distinction between internal and external attributions is not such a clear one. These studies emphasize the fact that there is an interaction between the person and the situation, allowing for variable behaviour (Plaks et al, 2003; Mischel, 2004; Kammrath et al, 2005). For instance, Mischel (2004) demonstrates how interaction between person and situation is often referred

to in everyday descriptions of personality. Likewise, Kammrath et al (2005) show that perceivers do not judge people without taking into account the situation. When people describe personality, they often encode the phrase 'if...then...' to indicate that a person can be responsible in one situation but less responsible in another. This indicates that traditional distinctions are being reviewed in present psychological research. However, the relevance of studying attribution processes as participants' practical and socially situated concerns is still not acknowledged (see also Edwards and Potter, 1993). Before elaborating on this, we will first describe how attribution theory has been applied to date in obesity and weight-management research.

### **5.3 Attribution, obesity and weight management**

Psychological studies on obesity and attribution have focused on stigma attributed to obese patients (Weiner et al, 1988; Crandall, 2000; Crandall et al, 2001) and the locus of control (internal or external) of the causes of obesity and being overweight (Flanery and Kirschenbaum, 1986; Moss and Dadds, 1991; Mills, 1991). For example, a number of psychological studies have argued that obese people are perceived as less active and intelligent (Crandall, 1994) and as lacking control and success (Radbill et al, 1995). Some research also indicates strong prejudices against patients amongst professionals in the field of obesity (Schwartz et al, 2003; Teachman et al, 2003; see also Wadden and Didie, 2003; Foster and Wadden, 2003; Ogden and Hoppe, 1998).

In a study by Weiner et al (1988), obesity was characterized as a 'mental-behavioural' stigma. Weiner et al presented two conditions to respondents. In the first, obesity was presented as being caused by glandular dysfunction. In the second, it was presented as due to overeating. The researchers describe how in the second condition, respondents expressed more anger and showed less pity towards the patients. Respondents attributed responsibility and blame to the obese person and they indicated that they liked the person less (see also De Jong, 1980).

Furthermore, Barker et al (1999) showed that people with high fat intakes characterize high fat consumers using both negative and positive stereotypes, while consumers of low-fat products only used negative stereotypes to describe consumers of high-fat diets.

Although one would expect that engaging in weight control may evoke sympathy and encouragement in others, Blaine et al (2002) argue that weight loss sometimes has the reverse effect. In their study respondents evaluated weight loss as controllable after being confronted with someone's recent weight loss, especially when that person was heavy. Respondents treated this result as 'proof' that weight is a controllable issue and that obese people are responsible for their condition.

A number of studies show that the locus of control is a problematic category, also from a traditional psychological perspective. While for instance Flanery and Kirschenbaum (1986) argue that weight control was most successful in children who attributed weight to internal (personal) and stable causes rather than external (situational) and changing causes, Moss and Dadds' study (1991) undermines the notion of a strong correlation between internal locus of control and weight-loss success. They show that although internal attributions increased with age, self-perceived control over eating practices decreased. These and similar results make the locus of control a relatively unreliable predictor of success in weight loss (see also Mills, 1991). Furthermore, internal control implies that a person has control over his or her own weight, but it may also cause that person to blame him or herself for being overweight or for weight-loss failure. This would have negative effects on self-esteem and make it harder to lose weight (Wooley, and Garner, 1991; cf. Radbill and Ross, 1996).

Ogden et al (2001) found that the locus of control for the cause of and solution to obesity may be different. For instance, they described how patients attribute obesity to bodily causes and rated the help of general practitioners as a solution. In contrast, general practitioners attributed obesity to the behaviour of the patients and also saw a change in this



behaviour as the solution.

While flaws in the predictive quality of attribution theory are a focus of debate, psychological studies do not take into account the fact that attributions are done in the practical context of everyday talk, that is, not in isolation. When studied in the sequential flow of interaction, attributions can be inspected for their 'normative, reality-defining and intersubjectivity-oriented work' (Edwards, 1997: 66). In this chapter, the focus lies on attributions for what they *do* rather than what they *are*. From this perspective, the variability of attribution concerns can be understood in terms of their orientation to a wide range of social actions.

## **5.4 Attribution and discursive psychology**

Discursive studies show that 'traditional' distinctions in attribution theory are even more blurred when studied in everyday interaction. They are used by participants as a *resource* for interaction rather than a fixed starting point. Furthermore, participants may design, obscure and resist their own 'distinctions' so as to meet the requirements of the interactional business at hand. Sneijder and Te Molder (2005) for example showed how participants in online discussions on veganism indirectly ascribe responsibility for a lack of vitamins to the individual rather than to veganism as an ideology, thereby resisting a principled relationship between veganism and health problems. A specific hypothetical construction (such as 'if you eat X, you should not have Y') was used to blur the nature of the action in terms of it being simple logic or a moral act of blame attribution. By exploiting the linguistic properties of modal constructions (such as *should*), participants were able to limit the implications of what they were saying and at the same time resist accountability for the general validity of their claims. This also shows that participants attend to causation and accountability both in the event that is described and in the action performed through this description (Edwards and Potter, 1992; 1993).

In discursive psychology, then, attribution is treated as an action-oriented participants' concern. Rather than handling it as a cognitive predictor of behaviour, it is studied as a social and discursive tool for achieving particular interactional goals, varying from context to context, even within one conversation (Edwards and Potter, 1993). A previous DP study on weight issues examined the construction of body weight and size in a childcare helpline (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2005). Hepburn and Wiggins argued that body size is used to make people accountable for their actions and to make relevant other problematic behaviours, such as child neglect in cases where children are underweight. Another discursive study focused on 'news' deliveries in everyday dieting practices in weight management groups (Mycroft, 2004) and showed that weight loss is treated as both accountable and an accomplishment.

More generally, the way people hold each other accountable for their food choices and health problems has been the topic of several studies. For example, accountability management in relation to health problems has been examined by Horton-Salway (2001; 2003) in her work on narratives on ME, or 'chronic fatigue syndrome'. Wiggins (2004) studied the way in which parents hold their children accountable for eating or not eating particular foods. And, in a study referred to earlier, Sneijder and Te Molder (2004; 2005) demonstrated how participants in online discussions on veganism suggested individual practices as the cause of health problems, thereby ruling out the possibility that problems arise through veganism as a matter of principle.

In line with these studies, this chapter analyses online talk on weight management as embedded in social practice. More particularly, we focus on the ways in which participants describe their lapses in dieting while at the same time discounting 'mind explanations' such as lacking control over eating practices. By using a set of interrelated devices, participants are able to 'normalize' their lapses and invite the recipient to dismiss a possible explanation in terms of the speaker's personality.

## **5.5 Method and material**

### *Data*

The data was taken from the USA website of an international slimming organisation. This organisation aims to manage weight control by using a system by which people can 'count' and plan their daily food intake.

The website contains several message boards. Data was collected from the '100 pounds to lose' and the '200 pounds to lose' boards, which can be characterized as 'extreme cases' in the sense that participants are expected to be overweight by at least 100 pounds. Furthermore, obesity is a widespread issue in the United States (American Dietetic Association, 2002; Contaldo and Pasani, 2004). The website's privacy policy states that the organization is not responsible for the privacy of any information posted in public forums such as message boards or chat rooms. Although we consider postings as public acts (e.g. Sudweeks and Rafaeli, 1995), we have changed all names and dates in the original postings for the sake of anonymity.

In total we have collected 50 discussion threads from each message board, each containing at least three postings, relating to the topic of 'lapses' in weight loss, and more specifically to binges (instances of extreme overeating) or cravings (desire for a particular food). This data was chosen because of the potentially accountable nature of (re)lapses in weight control for participants in a 'slimming group'. By claiming to be concerned with weight loss, individuals may become accountable for their actions on both moral and social levels. The focus is on the ways in which participants themselves handle the issue of accountability and the interactional goals that may be achieved.

### *Analytic procedure*

A discursive psychological analysis focuses on the performative and rhetorical features of talk. Treating discourse as constructed and constructive, rather than a reflection of reality, involves the analyst treating

the fine-grained detail of language as action-oriented building blocks for participants' versions of mind and reality. The notion that actions such as resisting blame or providing support are mostly done as descriptions, and in connection with sequential next turns, is of great analytic interest. Analysis is directed at turns in talk, starting from participants' own understanding of these turns so as to allow for valid observations about the actions performed (Sacks, 1992; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1992). Furthermore, and in relation to the sequential features of talk, analyses are made of how versions of reality are produced to rebut rhetorical alternatives of the same person, event or object (Potter, 1996; Edwards, 1997).

## **5.6 Analysis**

We will show how participants account for their dieting lapses by describing the interplay between agency, responsibility and control as part of participants' distinctions, and as consequential for participants' personal identities. Throughout the analysis, we will focus on three discursive practices that work in relation to one another.

First, a common feature of the lapse accounts is that they start off with or contain contrast structures that present the lapse as an incident or one-off choice, i.e. a breach with the ongoing process of losing weight.

Second, lapse accounts are constructed as if participants were a witness to their own failure (cf. Potter, 1996). By reporting rather than evaluating facts, while simultaneously setting up for particular inferences about the cause of the lapse, recipients are invited to remove the speaker's personal accountability for what happened.

Finally, the lapse accounts are constructed as 'scripted', in the sense that lapses are formulated as events that would happen to any normal person in the same situation (Edwards, 1994; 1995) rather than being related to an individual's enduring disposition. Successively, we will be considering three kinds of lapse accounts as they emerged in our materials, namely:

- Being a witness to your own incidental and logical failure
- 'Eating too much' as a one-off and logical choice
- Lapse projections

### **5.6.1 Being a witness to your own incidental and logical failure**

In the first part of the analysis, we focus on how participants formulate their 'lapse' in weight management as an incident that is logically explainable in itself. While doing so, participants present themselves as witnesses of their own behaviour and construct their lapse accounts as observation rather than evaluation. They make available particular inferences about responsibility and blame but leave the upshot of these implications to the recipient.

#### **extract 1**

why am I so hungry?

19/02/2005, 13:49

Patsy

```
1 Was doing really good until dinner and
2 then I blew it. I have been starving all
3 day even though I ate a good breakfast
4 and a good lunch.
5
6 Does anyone else have those days where
7 you just can't seem to get enough food?
8 I'm already into flex and really mad at
9 myself. I tried gum, I tried vegetable
10 beef for a point, I drank lots of water,
11 but every two hours --- it was like I
12 never did even eat today! :-(
13 (3 lines omitted)
```

The first thing to note is that the introduction to this narrative (lines 1-2) contains a structure that marks the contrast between doing really good and blowing it, that is, a contrast between a past achievement and subsequent failure. The description of an achievement (X) before the introduction of a failure (Y) shows similarities with other contrast constructions in previous CA studies. Jefferson (1984) found that participants in interaction frequently use the formulation 'At first I thought X, but then I realized Y' when describing unusual events (see also Wooffitt, 1992; 2005). In these cases, first asserting an ordinary version of events presents whatever was realized as exceptional and, in principle, as wrong or unusual. In this extract, Y is not presented as something realized but as something that happened, whereas X is not displayed as a thought but as an evaluation of the previous process. However, similar to the 'At first I thought X, but then I realized Y' construction, Y is presented as a breach with the normal, i.e. what is to be expected. By first referring to her successful dieting practices up till now, Patsy suggests the abruptness of things having gone wrong. It was not to be foreseen in the present flow of events.

She then underlines the fact that she has been starving (line 2) despite having taken all the necessary precautions (lines 3-4). This account is almost repeated in lines 9-10. Using a three-part list (I tried gum, I tried vegetable beef, I drank lots of water), Patsy shows in detail that she has done everything she could to prevent the failure. Still it was like she never did even eat (lines 11-12). Both extreme case formulations ('starving all day'; 'never did even eat'; see Pomerantz, 1986) set up for the recipient to draw the conclusion that it was understandable, or even logical, that the lapse occurred. One cannot expect anyone to starve all day. Those physical circumstances almost enforce lapsing as the 'natural' thing to do.

The logical nature of what happened is further elaborated by scripting the lapse as (caused by) one of "those days" (line 6). Describing it as a 'normal exception' manages to build an image of the speaker as in control and undermines the idea that the lapse is related to personality

characteristics. Note how Patsy's account provides details about what she did and how she felt and feels ("really mad at myself", lines 8-9) but avoids any evaluations on the blameworthiness of it all. While for example "I blew it" in line 2 reports that Patsy was the agent here, it does not spell out what blowing things means in terms of personal accountability. The only part that is personally evaluated is the X-part of the contrast structure (Was doing really good until dinner).

In separating observation from evaluation, Patsy ascribes the role of judging the cause of the lapse to the recipient (see also Potter, 1996: 165). However, reporting these details simultaneously constructs Patsy as a reliable 'witness' of her own actions and it makes available the inference that the hungry feeling was too strong to fight against. The header of the message ('Why am I so hungry?') also suggests the cause of the hunger as the key question to be solved rather than pointing towards some internal factor (Am I to blame?). Interestingly, the replies to this message select the validity of the proposed cause (hunger) as the issue at stake here and orient to its meaning at a personal level, although not tackling the issue explicitly.

## extract 2

why am I so hungry?

19/02/2005, 13:50

Hazel

reply

14 YES...me. I am starving. I still have  
15 my flex and 2 regular pts, but I am just so  
16 hungry. I think it's the cold. The urge  
17 to eat more always hits me. Either  
18 that, or PMS. Who knows...good luck with  
19 yours

## Chapter 5

In this first reply, Hazel answers the question that was posed by Patsy in line 6: 'Does anyone else have those days where you just can't seem to get enough food?'. She shows recognition of the problem by confirming it in capital letters and repeating the phrase 'starving'. Thereby she also orients to the absence of personal accountability (except for the sheer agency of having performed certain actions) in Patsy's account by treating her as not personally responsible but as susceptible to external causes of hunger. For instance, in lines 16-18 she ascribes 'hunger' to potential external or uncontrollable internal causes: the cold and PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome). She also presents the urge to eat more as a routine (logical) consequence of the cold, using the script formulation 'always'.

### extract 3

why am I so hungry?

19/02/2005, 13:56

Giovanna

reply 2

20 I'm no expert....but I would have to ask  
21 what kind of protein you ate today. I  
22 know that if I load up on mainly carbs  
23 throughout the day....I'm starving all  
24 day long. Even 1 slice of cheese for  
25 breakfast or a tbsp or 2 of cream cheese  
26 or a ff cheese string...some chicken, etc.

Giovanna attributes Patsy's hunger state to eating a particular kind of protein, which nicely blurs whether responsibility lies with this nutrient or with the one who eats it (Patsy). By constructing eating mainly carbs throughout the day as the cause of *her* hunger (lines 22-24), Giovanna suggests that this type of protein could also be causing Patsy's hunger feelings without explicitly accusing her. So she is telling *her* story and resists



presenting a specific inference from Patsy's story about blame or responsibility. Note that the reference to protein and carbs is a rather technical explanation for hunger. By first claiming not to be an expert, Giovanna categorizes her account as potentially technical and therefore more credible, while the orientation to 'expertise' simultaneously reduces the recipients' accountability for not having known this.

In the next extract, the 'speaker' again constructs herself as the agent of a lapse 'incident' that is logical nonetheless. The extract shows how a failure can be constructed as exceptional and *scripted*, that is, the failure or relapse is formulated as if it is the outcome of a series of chronological steps (Edwards, 1994; 1995) and therefore 'inevitable'.

#### extract 4

I am so stupid

25/02/2005, 10:00

Jocelyn

- 1 I have been doing very well on my program,
- 2 except for tonight. My boyfriend
- 3 asks me to go to dinner with him and his
- 4 son, and I went. We went to a mexican
- 5 restaurant. Bad choice! There was nothing
- 6 low fat or health conscience on the
- 7 menu. So I ordered a chicken fajita taco
- 8 salad, and I ate it. I feel so guilty,
- 9 and I weigh in tomorrow. I feel like going
- 10 to go take some laxatives, but I
- 11 don't know. I hate myself for this!! Sorry
- 12 I had to vent.
- 13 Jocelyn

Again the first speaker starts with a contrast, this time between business as usual (doing very well) and the one-off deviation (tonight). The

contrast structure also functions as a story preface (Sacks, 1992). It not only announces the account but also marks this turn as a story. Story prefaces also work as instructions for the recipient; they prepare for the kind of story to be told and the appropriate conclusion to it. Jocelyn explicitly presents the lapse as an exception that is limited to tonight (line 2) and thus as very unusual. On the other hand, the very notion of exception constructs the lapse as something that can reasonably happen to anyone. Note that in the title of this message, Jocelyn seems to make an internal attribution (I am so stupid) for what happened. However, while being 'so stupid' may be an internal explanation, it is a long way from being responsible or guilty in terms of an enduring state. It suggests acting 'mindlessly' rather than acting 'on behalf of your mind'. Also in the story itself, the potentially blame-implicative nature of what happened is reduced rather than elaborated.

To further support this, we invoke the notion of 'footing' (Goffman, 1981). Goffman argues how different speech roles can be identified: the principal, who is the source of whatever is reported, the author, who designs the talk and finally the animator, who is the actual speaker. By suggesting that they are merely telling what happened and describing their own actions as part of a narrative, participants are able to present themselves as animators (messengers) rather than principals (the source, or in this case, the force behind the reported actions). By 'noticing' their own actions, however, they also suggest that they are in control and aware of what they have done. The usual accountability implications that follow from agency are managed by presenting the actions as 'scripted', that is, as part of a logical sequence of events (Edwards, 1994; 1995).

Jocelyn presents her lapse, eating at a Mexican restaurant, as the outcome of a logical and chronological chain of events (see also Edwards, 1994: 1995). First, she describes the trip to the restaurant as something that was not her initiative, but that of her boyfriend (lines 2-4). She claims that he invited her to go to dinner with him and his son. Providing this latter detail evokes the idea that there was a preference for accepting the invitation. The

addition 'and I went' in line 4 presents Jocelyn as agent. Note that 'and I went' does nothing other than show that this was the first moment that Jocelyn could have acted otherwise. By merely telling that 'she went' without presenting her own inferences about this step, Jocelyn constructs her role as that of an eyewitness and animator, allowing the recipient to evaluate the action taken.

When describing the actual visit to the restaurant, Jocelyn uses a classical 'restaurant script' (Nelson, 1981) for describing the lapse in detail. She separately describes the actions of going to the restaurant, ordering a chicken fajita taco salad and eating it, as components of the failure. In restaurants, people perform several actions routinely in a fixed order (entering, ordering, eating). Once you are inside the restaurant, ordering a dish and eating it are logical next steps. While restaurant scripts are the most common explications of psychological script theory, this schematic description is used by Jocelyn to construct her failure(s) as being part of a *logical script* in which one step automatically leads to another (see also Edwards, 1994; 1995; 1997). Hereby, the facts speak for themselves and the story tells itself (see also Potter, 1996: 158).

The script suggests that Jocelyn was neither a victim (she was the agent) nor guilty. She does not deny that she was at the scene of the crime but she personally is still not the one to blame. On the contrary, suggesting there was no alternative to the logical flow of events downplays the idea that Jocelyn could have prevented the failure(s) and normalizes the lapse by suggesting that it could have happened to anyone in this situation. An external factor (the restaurant's menu, lines 5-7) adds to the logicity of what happened. Moreover, as in the first extract, Jocelyn's notes about her own emotional state remain distant as to their upshot in terms of blame. While she for example observes herself *feeling* 'so guilty' (line 8), she avoids suggesting that she *is* guilty.

As in extract one, it is the validity of the externalizing and scripted explanations that is at issue in the reply to this message. This orientation

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reflexively shows personal blame and responsibility to be at stake here, and again, it is dealt with diffusively. In her reply, Layla refers to Jocelyn's responsibility without directly accusing her of having done anything wrong:

### extract 5

I am so stupid

25/02/2005, 12:25

Layla

reply

14 (4 lines omitted)

15 If anything, learn from what happened

16 tonight. You can enjoy yourself at a

17 restaurant, even a Mexican one. Even

18 the taco salad can be a good choice, if

19 you skip the taco shell and sour cream.

20 Eat half, take the rest home, or just

21 leave it there.

22 (4 lines omitted)

In this reply, Layla depicts the moment at which Jocelyn 'chose' from the menu as crucial for implications of accountability. She points out that the taco salad can be a good choice if certain other choices are also made. So she ascribes *agency* to Jocelyn by referring to her choice capacity *without blaming her* by pointing out that she made a bad choice. However, Layla also carefully constructs the way to act as something to be learned instead of just being there (line 15) and limits the failure to 'tonight' (line 16) in order to maintain its exceptional nature.

A slightly different but related way of displaying the lapse as incidental and logical at the same time can be found in extract 6. Here the lapse is constructed as the negative and completely unexpected outcome of a 'treat'. The speaker does not deny her agency in having performed the separate actions, but embeds it in a narrative that emphasizes the

unexpected negative outcome of these actions. Again, this is done by providing a detailed witness account of what she did without evaluating her actions as blameworthy. The recipient is invited to conclude that the speaker is not to blame for the negative result of her actions since they could not be foreseen.

**extract 6**

WHAT HAVE I DONE!

21/02/2005, 10:17

Antonia

1 I went to Starbucks this morning, I only  
2 go on Monday mornings, I always order  
3 a small fat free white chocolate  
4 cappuccino with no cream (5 points)well,  
5 today, since I have been so good, I  
6 asked for a medium (grande) regular white  
7 chocolate mocha cappuccino. I finished it  
8 by the time I got to work. Once I got  
9 here, I went to their website to check  
10 the nutritional value. 500 calories!!!  
11 13 POINTS! HOLY COW! (that's what I  
12 feel like now!)  
13 . . . . .  
14 ANTONIA IN CHICAGO

Antonia provides a detailed witness narrative about her visits to Starbuck. She immediately counters the potential inference that she goes there on a regular basis by inserting 'I only go on Monday mornings' (line 2), which presents this activity as a routine exception. Constructing events as routine may counter the idea that the activity in question is an irrational one and the person performing it is out of control. This suggestion is enhanced by the referral to 'always' in line 2. 'Always' is a temporal adverb that works

as a script formulation, that is, as a way of presenting events as routine (Edwards, 1994; 1995) rather than unusual.

In addition, Antonia is being very specific about what she always orders at Starbucks. It is not just a cappuccino but it is a small and fat-free one with no cream (lines 3-4). By describing all these details, Antonia presents herself as someone who is very conscious about what she eats and thus able to anticipate failures when they are likely to happen. She also presents the number of points the coffee is worth, which shows that Antonia is not only aware of ingredients, but also constantly counts her diet points in terms of the slimming programme (line 4).

As in the other extracts, there is a contrast between having done well and the present unexpected failure, although it is formulated slightly differently and in a more veiled way. Antonia first marks a contrast between her routine activities and the 'deviant' activity that led her to post this message. She suggests that ordering a medium (rather than small), regular (rather than fat-free) white chocolate mocha (rather than white chocolate) cappuccino was a reward for having been a 'good' weight watcher. Constructing the treat as a reward works to emphasize that Antonia is doing well on her diet programme and it also presents the choice of having a treat as motivated, rather than showing a lack of discipline (lines 7-8). Note the slight changes in her 'normal' ordering and this special treat; the treat contains only some minor extras compared to the normal coffee.

'Once I got here' (line 8) shows that Andrea's first priority when she got to work was checking the nutritional value of the treat (lines 9-10), which presents her as in control of her actions and doing the right thing. She constructs the 500 calories as a total surprise by placing three exclamation marks and reformulating it into '13 POINTS' in capital letters. Presenting the high calorie content as a surprise attack (it was not foreseen) and scripting the lapse as rooted in reasonable and logical behaviour (doing as any other normal person would) externalizes Antonia's responsibility for the failure itself, and manages it as undeserved rather than blameworthy.

Again, Antonia's report contains 'perceptual noticings' (Edwards, 1997:149) rather than assessments of what these facts mean. While she does not deny having performed the actions that led to the failure, inferential implications are left to the recipient.

extract 7

WHAT HAVE I DONE

21/02/2005, 10:18

Tanya

reply

15 Starbucks is dangerous, so I hear! LOL!

16 I've never been. I figured I'd be

17 1 better off if I don't start. LOL!

18

19\*Tanya\*

Tanya attributes the ordering of the high-calorie coffee to Starbucks being a 'dangerous' place. While this seems to confirm Antonia's explanation of a surprise attack, Tanya also distances herself from some of the implications set up by Antonia. She presents herself as a 'good' participant in the weight-management programme by underlining that she has never been to Starbucks, in contrast to Antonia who goes on a regular basis. By suggesting that she would be better off by not starting with Starbucks at all, Tanya also constructs the temptation of a high-calorie coffee treat as 'to be expected', and indirectly as something that Antonia should not expose herself to. Personal blame is again attended to as a relevant issue, and managed by blurring internal and external attributions.

### 5.6.2 'Eating too much' as a one-off and logical choice

Now let's turn to extract 8 in which Brooke confesses she ate like a fool at the weekend. The title of the message already indexes that the lapse (eating like a fool) is an exception: people don't usually go about behaving like fools. Furthermore, this title immediately constructs the message as a confession. In the message, Brooke presents the lapse as her own choice, but even this choice is embedded in a story, implying that the choice is the consequence of a flow of events. As in the previous extracts, Brooke undermines the potential inference that her choice is related to a dispositional state or personality but works to present it as logical.

#### extract 8

I ate like a fool this weekend!

03/08/2005, 11:04

Brooke

1 I am pretty sure I blew my flex points  
2 for the week. I am on core, but I took  
3 the weekend off for sure. I ate 1 pint  
4 of Ben and Jerry's Half Baked ice cream  
5 (over two days), nachos at a super bowl  
6 party (the chilli was core), carrot  
7 cake at church and three snickerdoodles,  
8 grape soda at said superbowl party and  
9 a muffin and a half on Friday. So, I hope  
10 I do not gain this week. I can say  
11 that the ice cream was good. If I thought  
12 more about my choices, I would have  
13 passed on the muffin, carrot cake and grape  
14 soda. Oh, I also had falafel twice.  
15 So, here is to a better week that is more  
16 on plan! I had a soda this morning  
17 for my upset stomach (from Sunday's eating  
18 quest--too much chilli I think). So,



19 that is the extent of my confession.  
20 I feel cleansed. Good luck staying on plan  
21 this week!

Note that the 'good' behaviour is formulated in the present tense (I am on core = I am on programme) (line 2) and only the failure description is constructed as past tense (I took the weekend off). Hereby Brooke suggests that the lapse was an exception to the usual situation. Furthermore, the phrase 'took the weekend off' implies agency and choice. By constructing this failure as her own (though foolish) choice, Brooke suggests she was in control and aware of not behaving in accordance with the programme.

However, several elements of this narrative design this choice as logical rather than entirely spontaneous or irresponsible. For instance, the locations where the eating took place are described (super bowl party and church, lines 5 and 7). These descriptions situate the eating within social practices, thus implicating other people and different sets of responsibilities. This suggests that situational factors encouraged Brooke to overeat. It also scripts the failure in that eating at such places is a logical and normal thing to do.

Brooke shows that she was in control even while overeating, by describing her intake very specifically in terms of quantity and item (lines 3-9: 1 pint of Ben and Jerry's Half Baked ice cream, nachos, carrot cake, three snicker doodles, grape soda and a muffin and a half). All lapse accounts have in common that binges are described in great detail and are very specific about what was eaten in terms of quantity and quality. They show the participants to be constantly aware of their eating practices and generally in control. This also shows that control and responsibility are treated as two different things. One can be in control but this does not automatically imply that one is responsible for bingeing.

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Brooke provides a detailed witness account of what happened and how she felt without denying that she was the agent in lapsing. However, the recipient is invited to judge whether Brooke's choice is related to personal disposition or situational factors.

In her reply to this, Amy provides a second story (Sacks, 1992) and also presents herself as being in control and aware of her actions.

### extract 9

I ate like a fool this weekend

03/08/2005, 11:06

Amy

reply

22 I ate and drank like a fool. Odd thing is

23 I remember saying to my boyfriend

24 "this is one week out of my life, I'm in

25 weight watchers for the long haul, and

26 whatever this does, I'll be ok in the long

27 run."

28

29 Amazing clarity for someone hammered on

30 champagne :)

Amy aligns herself with Brooke by repeating the title of her message and adding 'and drank' to show that she sinned even worse and implying that what Brooke did was not so bad. Furthermore, she presents the overeating as exceptional, but also as a rational decision (line 23: 'I remember saying to my boyfriend...'). The reference to being in the programme for the long haul (line 25), evokes the idea that weight loss is a long-term journey and ups and downs are to be expected. By providing a comparable story, Amy manages to build an image of herself as 'in control' and also confirms Brooke's self-presentation as someone who is generally

in control of her eating practices and not irresponsible despite her failure. Also in the next reply displayed here, Mary aligns herself with the previous messages.

**extract 10**

I ate like a fool this weekend'  
03/08/2005, 11:27  
Mary  
reply 2  
31 Wow, was there a full moon or something?  
32 I ate like crazy, too!! But like the  
33 both of you, I'm right back on track  
34 this morning and getting ready for my 30-  
35 min treadmill this morning (at 10:30).  
36 Pats on all of our backs for a positive,  
37 healthy attitude and getting right  
38 back OP!  
39  
40 Have a great week!!!

Mary implicitly ascribes her own behaviour and that of Brooke and Amy to something external, like 'full moon or something' (line 31). She suggests that the fact that three people all ate like crazy cannot be a coincidence. Then she shows she is now in control, also by indicating the time (this morning, at 10:30, line 35) as if this is an official ending to the 'crazy behaviour'. Lapses are constructed as an expected 'downfall' in the course of the weight-loss programme.

### **5.6.3 Lapse projections**

The final extracts refer to lapses in the plan to lose weight, although the actual binge has not occurred yet. In these extracts, speakers embed

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descriptions of their intentions in detailed narratives that make the lapse or psychological struggle seem predictable and not related to dispositional states of the actors in the story. Again, by providing a detailed witness account and taking the roles of author/animator rather than principal, participants set up for the inference that their lapse is due to external rather than to internal factors. However, it is up to the recipient to do something with this. We first see how Annie describes her eating pattern for the day in extract 11.

### extract 11

I did okay today

21/02/2005, 2:45

Annie

1 I had my day all planned. Knew my lunch  
2 was going to be a guess on points. One  
3 coworker again made fun of me for ordering  
4 my entree without the breading. Who  
5 cares, the broiled fish was great. Could  
6 not eat that much. First was the  
7 salad, with real ranch. Carrots almost  
8 swimming in butter, ate all of them. One  
9 small piece of a potato. The 1/3 of my  
10 slice of cheesecake. Rest of the day  
11 was good except for that darn Italian  
12 cookie. I am actually hungry now and want  
13 popcorn. Some days are just better than  
14 others. All in all, I think I did good.  
15 Could have ate a lot worse.  
16 Peace, Annie

Annie starts her message with the positively oriented 'I had my day all planned' which functions as a story preface; it projects a lapse narrative.

It also suggests a contrast between the fact that the day was all planned and what actually happened, especially with the use of the past perfect tense. Throughout the narrative Annie displays that she was constantly aware of what to eat by being very specific about this (lines 7-8: carrots swimming in butter, small piece of potato). In line 10 the 'story' about how her day went is ended (rest of the day was good...).

Describing the rest of the day rather than her own behaviour as 'good', Annie implies that all days can be different and suggests that it is unpredictable whether a day will be good or not. Then in line 6 Annie confesses to being hungry and wanting popcorn and she constructs this confession as an honest statement by the use of 'actually'. 'Actually' introduces a dispreferred or negative statement, while at the same time providing a relevant account for the production of this statement, e.g. the will to be honest (cf. Edwards and Fasulo, in press). Note how Annie indeed does not provide any account for being hungry and wanting popcorn. She suggests that these feelings happened to her and are beyond her control; they happened despite the fact that she had planned her day.

The phrase 'some days are just better than others' shows the 'journey metaphor' again, suggesting that weight loss is an ongoing process with ups and downs (line 13). Describing certain days as belonging to a recognizable category (bad days) avoids ascribing responsibility for success or failure to personality characteristics, for example. Failures are constructed as logical/recognizable because there are just good and bad days. Also note how this formulation subtly blurs whether the day Annie described was good or bad.

So in this message, Annie presents herself as in control of her eating practices, but she also provides details that build the impression that not every day can be like this. By 'witnessing herself' she builds a factual account of her day that incorporates both positive and negative aspects without these being spelled out in terms of their implications. In this way, the recipient is invited to be the ultimate judge of Annie's day.

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### extract 12

I did okay today

21/02/2005, 8:16

Sheila

reply

17 Congrats, and I think you did better  
18 than all right, you did fantastic in your  
19 choices, I know going out to eat is  
20 something I often avoid because I'm  
21 afraid of guessing and what to get, you  
22 handled it really well.

Sheila treats Annie as being the director of her day, referring to her 'fantastic' choices in spite of guessing. She upgrades Annie's way of handling from okay to fantastic, which is a further way of providing support. At the same time, she constructs Annie's own behaviour and choices as superior to unforeseen circumstances, thereby constructing the cause of success at weight loss as internal.

In the next extract (13), Princess is describing her struggle against cravings.

### extract 13

commitment to continue

25/02/2005 12:24

Princess

1 I swore this time was the time I was going  
2 to do it! This time would be  
3 different - this time I wouldn't give up  
4 when I hit a stumbling block. I am  
5 fighting some MAJOR cravings here and am  
6 working diligently to keep myself  
7 focused. I WILL NOT GIVE UP, I WILL NOT  
8 GIVE UP, I WILL NOT GIVE UP.

The first statement in this narrative projects a description of whatever has gone 'wrong'. "I swore this time was the time I was going to do it!" describes a strong intention at a certain moment in time and makes available the idea that this intention has not yet been translated into behaviour. The use of 'this time' and 'would' (lines 1-2) indicates backdated predictability (Edwards, in press) in the sense that at a certain moment in time it was predictable that things would be different and failures could not be expected. The repetition of 'would' (Smith, 1986; Edwards, 1994) combined with the phrase 'this time' suggests that the speaker has routinely tried to be on programme and has had experience with failing. In fact, in line 4 Princess constructs giving up when hitting a stumbling block as something she routinely did. Furthermore, a 'stumbling block' refers to a recognizable obstacle; she is showing that others may experience this as well.

In this extract, 'would' evokes a tacit contrast with the current state of affairs: 'would, but ....'. Note however that she does not make explicit the fact that she is dealing with major cravings now *despite* her intentions. As a witness to herself, she describes how she now experiences major cravings, without explicitly referring to experiencing these cravings as stumbling blocks. She describes the cravings as if they were autonomous actors against which she is fighting. However, she indicates that she has not yet given up and is presenting the wish to match what she 'swore' with reality. The extreme contrast between what she swore and what happens now indexes the unfairness of the occurrence of these 'major' cravings.

In the replies to this message, recipients describe the ways in which lapses may be prevented without ascribing responsibility for this to Princess as a person, but rather to the body as independent actor. See for example the next reply:

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### extract 14

commitment to continue

25/02/2005, 13:05

Malorie

reply

9 Drinking water helps. Sometimes the body  
10 confuses hunger with thirst. You can't  
11 go wrong with drinking water. If you're  
12 craving a particular food or class of  
13 food (salty or sweet, say) then there's  
14 something else besides hunger going on.

In this reply, Malorie advises drinking water and claims that the body sometimes confuses hunger with thirst. So 'the body' in general is constructed as causing confusions of hunger with thirst, rather than Princess herself.

Furthermore, Malorie blurs whether or not her advice is directed at Princess. She does not directly address the recipient by name and addresses the recipient as 'you', which may also imply a general public. Through advising in general, Malorie also constructs Patsy's (projected) lapse as a recognizable and shared problem, and thereby blurs whether Patsy is personally accountable.

### 5.7 Discussion and conclusion

This analysis has shown how participants in an online message board on weight management deal with control and responsibility in relation to dieting lapses. It dealt with the way causes of overeating are constructed and the implications this has for the speaker's accountability and personal identity.

The first thing to note about the participants' reports is that explicit self-blaming is absent and that they follow a distinct narrative construction.



In presenting themselves as mere witnesses to their own practices, participants evoke the impression of merely telling the facts. They do not deny their agency in the events leading to the lapses, but embed it in a detailed narrative that makes the lapse seem logical or inevitable. This manages the speaker identity as being victim nor guilty and invites the recipient to present a particular judgment on the causes of the lapse as being external and not related to personal disposition.

As the responses show, personal accountability is sometimes *implicitly* ascribed, but never without reference to external causes. More specifically, respondents show ambivalence as to whether the lapse was caused by internal or external factors. In contrast to traditional views on attribution and obesity, which treat internal and external causes as relatively clear-cut distinctions and which largely ignore the interactional functions of talk, this chapter highlights the following features of weight-management talk in relation to lapse accounting:

- Attribution is a situated and social activity rather than a cognitive event, and is usually done through descriptions rather than being overtly labelled (see also Edwards and Potter, 2005: 242). As we saw, participants describe their lapses in a detailed manner without making any explicit causal inferences.
- Blame and accountability is first and foremost a matter for participants themselves. In relation to attribution, participants handle their own 'distinctions'. For instance, agency does not necessarily entail blame. Participants use a witness perspective to describe their lapses as factual events, but resist taking the blame for the negative outcomes of their actions and avoid presenting themselves as mere victims of external factors. They normalize their lapses by describing them as part of a logical and recognizable pattern, suggesting that the lapse would have

happened to anyone in the same circumstances. The responses define personal blame as the issue at stake but simultaneously blur internal and external loci of control. So, rather than making a clear-cut distinction between internal and external attributions, participants make their own distinctions, or blur distinctions, for specific interactional purposes.

- Attribution in relation to matters of being overweight is treated as a controversial issue. Participants themselves do not explicitly spell out matters of responsibility, while recipients of the lapse accounts never explicitly attribute responsibility to personal disposition. Interestingly, through the very action of blurring personal blame and making it a prime concern, participants reflexively mark the issue as delicate and as a potential plausible cause of lapses in weight management.

The construction of the narratives as mere factual reports may be linked to the overt relevance of accountability when failing to lose weight. Participants' accounts orient to the idea that there is a precondition to present oneself as the agent. The ambivalence of agency without blame is then exploited to present oneself as being aware and in control of one's actions, to the extent that any normal person would be, without necessarily being responsible or guilty for these actions.

In all cases the failures are constructed as a *logical* and thus scarcely avoidable, or inevitable, outcome of particular circumstances, using several types of script formulations (Edwards, 1994; 1995). By presenting the relapses as part of a logical chain of events, participants undermine them as having a dispositional cause, related to their personality. If things could not have turned out differently, the actual occurrence of the failure cannot be attributed to the person. In this way, the identity of the speaker as

being the kind of person who is in control over his or her eating practices is protected.

Further research could make use of face-to-face data to compare the way accountability is attended to in online environments with contexts in which co-participants are directly available. Another interesting avenue for further research is the examination of narratives in which speakers do blame themselves for lapsing. It would be interesting to look at how this type of account is treated in subsequent turns.

An interesting side issue is the use of taste evaluations in binge accounts (see for instance extract 8). These orientations to enjoyment as an aspect of bingeing seem to resist possible 'victimization' of the narrator. The speaker is demonstrating that he also enjoyed the binge despite its negative consequences. In subsequent research it would be interesting to explore these taste evaluations more closely and to compare them with taste evaluations in other contexts, for instance discussions on food pleasure.

More generally, research on food choice and eating practices may benefit greatly from understanding the ways in which attributions are produced and organized in natural settings, as this study has tried to show.







## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**





## Chapter 6

### Discussion and conclusion

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#### 6.1 Introduction

This thesis aimed to explore the relationship between food and identity by looking at a crucial and frequently overlooked factor, namely the construction of identity as a discursive category and concern, designed to perform interactional goals. In this chapter I will first consider some general findings as to how identities are embedded in everyday food practices. I will then provide an overview of more specific kinds of discourse activities as revealed in the research project. Some observations will be made on studying computer-mediated interaction in comparison to the use of face-to-face data. Finally, I will formulate some suggestions for further research.

#### 6.2 Identity work in food talk

There are some general conclusions to be drawn from the way identities are constructed, used and implicated in food talk. This project has demonstrated that category construction in food discourse is active and ongoing. In the sequential unfolding of discourse, participants build, evoke, use and counter (different) identities. Even in institutional environments in which people can be assumed to be participating *because of* their identity as vegans, gourmets or overweight people, we see that identities and their inferential implications are an *achievement in* interaction rather than a fixed *starting point for* interaction. This can be explained by the action-oriented nature of talk and text.

For instance, participants in the forums on veganism and obesity construct alternative identities – ordinariness and normality respectively – for the interactional purpose of resisting negative inferences potentially related

to veganism and obesity. Visitors to the forum on veganism do not simply define themselves as vegans; they also present themselves as ordinary and self-responsible people in order to account for their food choice, while participants in the obesity discussions undermine the idea that their weight-loss lapses stem from 'abnormal' eating practices by establishing their 'normality'. The occurrence of these legitimizing practices shows that particular potential inferences about ideology or personality characteristics are treated as relevant and actively countered.

In the forum on food pleasure, the gourmet identity is 'worked up' through different types of knowledge entitlements. We see here that it requires 'work' to present oneself as being entitled to the identity which is the assumed reason for participation in the forum. Mere participation is not enough to be treated as an authentic member of the category of 'gourmets'. Implications of being a gourmet are also being negotiated. Taste, for instance, is redefined from a subjective into an objective characteristic of food.

The idea that identity is social practice has some important implications for research. While cognitive approaches tend to 'impose' categories on participants, usually based on questionnaires or laboratory experiments, a discursive perspective examines identities as constructed by participants themselves in their natural context. Studying everyday discourse often reveals participants designing, attributing and resisting other kinds of identities than we may assume in the first instance (see this thesis). Participants' own definitions and uses also show us how identities are inextricably bound up with and used for social practice, such as performing and resisting blame, or 'doing enjoying'.

Studying and describing these practices, rather than treating groups of people as possessing particular personal and social characteristics, lies at the heart of understanding the relevance of food in everyday life. In their everyday talk, people employ interactional skills that often go largely unnoticed. Although they *do* talk all the time, participants are often unaware

of what interactional business is being performed, and how. Discourse analytic studies could be applied in (food) education, for instance by reflecting on the discursive work performed, in cooperation with the relevant groups or individuals (Willig, 1999; see also Lamerichs, Koelen and Te Molder, in prep). For example, the study on obesity discourse shows how participants reflexively mark general concerns about personal blame as relevant and potentially plausible by continuously resisting these concerns. This finding could be a starting point for critical reflection and, if desirable, change.

More generally, the implications of the specific findings from the studies in this thesis include a better understanding of implicit concerns that play a role in consumers' everyday life, independent of consumer attributes that researchers may presuppose (see also Puchta and Potter, 2004). Below, I will discuss in somewhat more detail the kinds of identity work that emerged from the three case studies.

### **6.2.1 Managing inferential implications of food choice**

Identities imply certain characteristics and activities, and vice versa, by describing particular features or practices particular identities are being evoked (Sacks, 1992; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). Participants in the study used identities to undermine inferential implications about their membership of categories. The study on veganism talk shows that participants designed alternative identities, alongside their 'vegan' identity, to undermine negative inferences about veganism as a doctrine. Constructing the identity of an ordinary human being enables them to resist the potential inference that veganism is a complicated lifestyle. Furthermore, the study on veganism shows how participants attribute health-responsibility to the individual, rather than to veganism as an ideology. This shows that consumers may flexibly combine identities as long as it enables them to fulfil relevant social purposes.

Although a topic for further research, we may expect that other life styles or food products commonly associated with ethical motives are susceptible to similar counter-arguments about their complex and unpractical or restrictive nature. In other words, promoting this kind of lifestyle may effectively include attention to its practical and mundane character, i.e. the ordinariness of its practitioners, rather than only making a link to the ethical benefits.

The analysis of the obesity forum shows how participants manage their personal accountability for weight-loss failures by presenting a 'factual' account of what happened. Participants describe lapses in dieting while at the same time heading off 'mind explanations' such as having a lack of control over their eating practices, which would raise delicate issues regarding the narrator's personality.

It is shown how participants work up a disinterested account of their lapse by presenting a detailed report of what happened and how they felt, while not spelling out what these 'facts' mean. Furthermore, their accounts display the lapse as a one-off incident or choice in an ongoing process. The one-off event itself is scripted up as recognizable and logical in a chain of events, thereby inviting the recipient to dismiss a possible explanation in terms of the speaker's psychological make-up.

By constructing lapses as part of logical and recognizable patterns, and not making inferences with respect to blame or responsibility, participants invite the recipients to draw conclusions about the issue of causality. What we see is that participants in this forum approach personal accountability as a delicate issue. In this respect, the case is comparable to the veganism forum, where identity constructions were used to undermine negative inferences about the ideology. Obesity is treated as a condition that is related to personality characteristics such as lack of self-discipline or control.

More generally, the studies in this thesis show how certain inferential implications about one's food choice, such as 'complicatedness',

'abnormality' and 'subjectivity', are managed by fleshing out their rhetorical alternatives (ordinariness, normality and objectivity).

### **6.2.2. The role of knowledge claims and entitlements in identity work**

Participants in the culinary forum build their identity as gourmets by claiming knowledge and constructing superior access. The knowledge entitlements about taste formulate objective access as a feature of their gourmet identities. Conversely, gourmet identities are approached as being dependent on particular knowledge claims. Participants present their evaluations of dishes and products as independent of those of others, thereby building their rights to speak as an authentic 'gourmet'.

The analysis shows that participants treat independent access to and experience with food as an important criterion for membership. Knowing what good food is rather than merely liking it is attended to as *the* identity-defining issue. The discursive gourmet identity thus draws on knowledge and authenticity rather than food liking and preferences for hedonic qualities of food. Remarkably, this finding is in line with recent developments in the study of gastronomy in which taste is defined as an objective matter (Klosse, 2004).

Most importantly, the analysis demonstrates that even the 'physiological' concept of taste can be studied as social practice. This reformulation of taste as social practice has some important implications for the study of food liking and preference in its natural context. Participants' *redefinition* of the gourmet identity as involving knowledge rather than liking, also redefines the enjoyment of food itself as an interactional achievement rather than a pure physiological sensation. Talk on food pleasure seems to focus on the *independency* of one's knowledge and experience with food items and practices, and in that sense the enjoyment of food goes hand-in-hand with a certain degree of autonomy (or the presentation thereof). These

results indicate that formulating your own judgment is a precondition for food (pleasure) talk. This may prove to be a matter of being trained or raised to do so and it would be worthwhile to investigate this avenue further.

Handling knowledge and expertise is an important issue in food talk and seems to be done differently in 'ideological' vs. 'subjective' domains. In the veganism forum, a typically ideological domain, participants emphasized the limitations and subjectivity of their knowledge rather than its objective and superior status. By presenting the limitations of knowledge, participants were able to construct credibility and avoid invoking the impression that they were overtly protecting their ideology (see also Edwards, 2003).

The difference between the veganism case and the gourmet case shows that knowledge is not always approached in the same way; rather, the way knowledge is used depends on the interactional business being performed.

### **6.2.3. Managing (health) accountability as a salient theme in identity work**

All studies show accountability to be a central theme in identity work. It is through constructing actions as instances of or exceptions to a normative order that participants show what they treat as accountable events, objects or persons (see also Garfinkel, 1963; Edwards, 1997). In the forum on veganism, participants construct accountability on both moral and logical levels. By exploiting the semantics of modal constructions, thereby blurring whether they are talking about facts or morality, participants are able to present predictions about the consequences of particular individual eating practices as mere logic while simultaneously ascribing moral accountability to individuals. At the same time, participants in the online discussions on veganism manage their speaker accountability by showing the limitations of predictive claims. Doing this also works up their status as credible

spokespeople, and prevents them from being suspected of wanting to protect their ideology.

The talk on food pleasure shows how participants manage their food evaluations as stemming from direct access to food products. By claiming that their knowledge is not just a matter of opinion, participants resist the need to provide further support for their evaluations (see also Potter, 1996, chapter 6). They construct taste as grounded in factuality, thereby resisting accountability for the preferences they present.

The obesity data show participants managing their accountability for failure by suggesting the logicity and normality of certain behaviours and letting the facts speak for themselves. These ways of managing and blurring causality are shown to have direct implications for the causal strength of personality explanations in this domain, as they build the identity of a person that has a 'normal' lack of self-control over his or her life.

### **6.3 Findings related to the specifics of online data versus conversational data**

Discursive psychology draws on insights from conversation analysis, the study of the sequential organization of face-to-face conversation. Although the DP perspective allows for a broad range of written and verbal data to be used, the choice of using online data rather than face-to-face interaction has several implications for the analytical procedure and focus of the analysis.

First of all, some obvious differences between online and face-to-face interaction need to be considered. Online interaction consists of written texts which are not produced in 'real time', which means that the production process for the utterances is not visible to the recipients and the researcher. Furthermore, conversational phenomena such as interruptions overlap and continuers are not present in online interaction. A 'speaker' has the full opportunity to complete his or her turn without being interrupted. Continuers,

silences and other tools that a recipient uses to invite the speaker to go on with his or her turn are not available in an online environment (see also Schönfeldt and Golato, 2003, for an interesting analysis of 'repair' in online interaction). However, posted messages – whether consciously designed or not – can still be examined for their functional and rhetorical qualities, within their sequential context.

### 6.3.1. The sequential organization of online interaction

Conversation analysts have described some basic principles in the sequential organization of turns at talk. First and foremost, participants in interaction organize their talk through turn-taking. A number of interactional mechanisms are at work within the systematic sequential organization of conversation. A turn at talk provides for the production of a preferred next turn. Together, turns at talk form adjacency pairs (Sacks and Schegloff, 1973). For instance, an invitation makes the production of an acceptance or a rejection relevant and a question projects an answer. Recipients display their understanding of a turn in their next turn.

In online interaction, the structure of turn-taking is not always easy to detect. We cannot immediately see who a participant is replying to (Lamerichs, 2003; Schönfeldt and Golato, 2003). However, by quoting or addressing the recipient by his or her name, participants are usually able to demonstrate which message they are responding to. When relevant second pair parts are absent, they are *noticeably* absent, that is, their non-production is likely to be interpreted as problematic. In the second study on veganism, the recipients of the attributions of self-responsibility did not reply by using a third turn. It could be argued that by not replying to the implicit attributions of self-responsibility, participants were able to blur whether they did not understand or just missed the attributions. However, in the one deviant case in which the attribution was overt, the recipient *did* reply and undermined the accusation of having caused her health problem herself.



The reverse happened in the food pleasure study. In some cases, contributions were 'noticeable present' rather than absent. Some participants added contributions that could be argued as not being relevant or being 'redundant' in terms of adjacency pairs or turn-taking. In this forum, participants were constantly negotiating the status of their contributions as 'given' or 'new'. Once a recipient had agreed with the speaker and continuation was not relevant, the speaker still worked at bringing him- or herself into the first position again, for instance by elaborating on the current topic.

Schönfeldt and Golato (2003) indicate that it may not be possible to determine whether a noticeably absent turn is related to a dispreferred turn, the server or the lack of attention from the co-participant. However, the insights from these studies provide some interesting directions for exploring preference organization in online interaction. One thing we notice is that the concept of 'preference' may be less obvious in online interaction. This finding is in line with recent literature arguing for a less mechanistic treatment of preference organization and instead viewing it as another possible normative orientation depending on local details (ten Have, 1999; Boyle, 2000; see also Schegloff and Sacks, 1973).

### **6.3.2 Immediacy and spontaneity as designed**

Another interesting finding that may be specific to this medium is the fact that spontaneity and immediacy are often *constructed* in online discourse, for specific interactional purposes. In the vegan forum, participants constructed their responses as 'immediate', thereby suggesting that it is not difficult to provide simple answers to potentially complicated questions about health and veganism. For instance, participants left out greetings and capital letters to suggest their immediate availability as advisers, thus undermining the idea that health is a problematic and delicate issue.

In the food pleasure data, 'immediate sensations' were drawn upon to claim independent access to taste. Whereas the gustatory 'hmmm' is used in conversation to construct the embodiment of pleasure, it can be used quite differently in online interaction. Immediacy is apparently used as an important tool in the construction and use of identity. When possibilities for responding directly are not available in time and space, participants can claim immediacy, thereby showing that they are active conversation partners who are experts on the topic of the interaction.

### 6.4 Further research

This thesis generates a number of interesting avenues for further research. Although some suggestions for further research have already been described in section 6.2, I will end by presenting an overview of a range of topics.

In the first place, future research on discursive identities and food choice could be extended to other food domains, including face-to-face data. It would be interesting to compare online materials to face-to-face data in relation to identity work and food choice. How do participants manage identities in food talk when their co-participants are directly available? Insights into identity work in other food domains would make it possible to sharpen the insights gained from the three cases studies in this thesis. For instance, how does the role of knowledge entitlements differ in alleged 'subjective' and 'objective' environments? This question may also be relevant in research on themes other than food, for instance talk on land use and environmental issues.

Health is a second interesting theme that emerged from the data and requires further exploration. One limitation in the effectiveness of nutrition education would be that people already believe they are eating healthily enough, although they are in fact not (see for instance Kearney and McElhone, 1999). This 'unrealistic' view is subsequently related to a lack of

knowledge about food practices and their health implications. However, rather than just assuming this to be the case, it would be more fruitful to first study how health is defined in relation to diet and made relevant in everyday life by participants *themselves*, and for what purposes.

In the food pleasure case, participants do not 'talk health'. The relationship between food pleasure and health is not approached as a salient theme. Although recent understanding of health promotion suggests that a connection between health and food pleasure may be a novel entry for improving health and lifestyles, participants do not seem to make this connection themselves. However, further research could explore at what moments in conversation health is an issue, and if so, in what 'disguise' and for what purposes. Moreover, if we understand food pleasure as a precondition for improving health, another interesting theme is how participants build or resist food pleasure as part of potentially problematic eating practices such as in the context of obesity.

In the discussions on veganism and weight management, health is already a dominant issue. In the veganism forum, it is presented as an individual responsibility, separate from the lifestyle itself. While health motives are often attributed to and used by vegans as a criterion for their food choice and lifestyle, the second study indicates that participants do not treat health as a *goal* but as something that is (only) potentially at risk. The study suggests that from the perspective of current consumers, the role of health in relation to more sustainable, ecological products and lifestyles is not so much promotion-focused (improving one's health) but predominantly prevention-focused (minimizing potential risks/problems). It would be interesting to examine whether this is the case in other 'ethical' food environments.

Participants in the forum on veganism were also shown to treat 'artificial' methods for health control such as the use of food supplements as simple and routine practices, thereby resisting the notion that veganism and health make difficult partners. In contrast to the prototypical image of vegans

using natural and organic food products, these results point to a different conclusion. The simplified nature of procedures like taking tablets or adding certain nutrients to food positions vegans as post-modern eaters, using functional foods and supplements as part of their daily routines. Further research into talk on food supplements in different domains will increase our understanding of the way people construct food supplements in their everyday lives. For instance, are food supplements approached as food or merely as health stimulants? Are these products also important in relation to building identities?

Finally, as pointed out earlier, this thesis raises some interesting questions about the emergence of conversational patterns in online data. Further research should look into the way participants organize their online discourse in terms of turn-taking, adjacency pairs and other conversational phenomena (see also Schönfeldt and Golato, 2003).





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## Summary

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### Chapter 1

This thesis focuses on the construction and use of identities in food interaction. Insights from discursive psychology and conversation analysis are drawn upon to examine the interactional functions of identities in online food talk.

Discursive psychology (DP) explores how psychological themes, such as identity, are handled and managed in discourse, by participants themselves. The main principle of this approach is that talk is action-oriented. Rather than assuming a cognitive basis for identity, a discursive study focuses on identity as a means of achieving particular interactional goals, such as accounting for food choice. In this respect, the DP perspective marks a shift away from current approaches in anthropology, sociology and social psychology, which largely ignore the notion that identities are part of social actions performed in talk, and thus designed and deployed for different interactional purposes.

The project is spread across three research settings, namely online interaction on veganism, food pleasure and obesity. The main criterion for selecting these cases was their relationship to recent dominant trends in current food choice, namely ethical considerations, hedonism and weight concerns. These 'motives' are also likely resources for identity-related activities.

## **Chapter 2**

In this chapter we draw on a corpus of online discussions on veganism in order to explore the relationship between food choice, eating practices and identity work.

A discursive psychological analysis focuses on action, rhetoric and construction. The analyst studies how speakers react to one other and show interpretations of previous turns. The analyst also considers potential alternative versions of descriptions, in order to demonstrate which version of reality is being undermined or countered.

The analysis in this chapter demonstrates that participants draw on specific discursive devices to (1) define vegan meals as ordinary and easy to prepare and (2) construct methods of preventing vitamin deficiency, such as taking supplements, as routine procedures. In 'doing being ordinary', participants systematically resist the notion that being a vegan is complicated – in other words, that it is both difficult to compose a meal and to protect your health. In this way, participants protect veganism as an ideology.

More generally, it is argued that identities and their category-bound features are part and parcel of participants' highly flexible negotiation packages rather than cognitive predictors of their behaviour.

## **Chapter 3**

In this chapter we apply methods developed by conversation analysis and discursive psychology in order to examine how participants manage rules, facts and accountability in a specific ideological area. In particular, we focus on how participants in online discussions on veganism manage the problem posed by alleged health risks such as vitamin deficiency. We show how speakers systematically attribute responsibility for possible deficiencies to individual recipients rather than to veganism.

The analysis focuses on a conditional formulation that participants

use in response to the recurrent question about supposed health problems in a vegan diet (for example, if you eat a varied diet, there shouldn't be any problems). By using this formulation, participants blur whether they attribute responsibility or predict the absence of health problems. The blurring of logic and morality is used to implicitly ascribe responsibility for potential, assumed shortcomings in the lifestyle (such as calcium deficiency) to the individual. This implicit attribution allows participants to protect veganism as an ideology.

## Chapter 4

Chapter 4 draws on insights from discursive psychology to demonstrate how members of an online forum on food pleasure handle the hedonic appreciation of food in everyday interaction. The analysis focuses on how participants work up and establish their identities as 'gourmets'.

A dominant tool in performing this identity work is the discursive construction of independent access to knowledge of and experience with food items, in order to compete with or resist the epistemic superiority of a preceding evaluation. Participants formulate their judgments in such a way that they are independent of or even superior to evaluations of the same dish in previous turns. The construction of independent access to and knowledge of culinary items is important in the interactional achievement of an identity as a gourmet who not only *likes* good food, but who knows what good food *is*.

Contrary to sensory approaches to food choice, this study portrays the enjoyment of food as an achievement that comes into being through interaction. We discuss the wider implications of this study for the relationship between food, identity and taste.

## **Chapter 5**

Weight management is a problematic activity, involving issues of accountability and control. In this chapter, we focus on how people discursively manage these issues in an online support group. A discursive psychological approach is used to highlight some of the practices employed by participants to handle their dieting failures, like overeating or bingeing, in terms of blame and accountability.

We focus on the way in which participants describe lapses in dieting while at the same time heading off 'mind explanations' such as a lack of control of one's eating practices, which would raise delicate issues regarding the narrator's personal identity. It is shown how participants work up a disinterested account of their lapse by presenting a detailed factual account of what happened and how they feel, while not spelling out what these 'facts' mean. Furthermore, their accounts display the lapse as a one-off incident or choice in an ongoing process. The one-off event itself is scripted up as recognizable and logical in a chain of events, thereby inviting the recipient to dismiss a possible explanation in terms of the speaker's psychological make-up.

Rather than treating attribution as a cognitive process, the study shows how attributions can be studied as situated productions that perform identity-implicative work through managing accountability and blame.

## **Chapter 6**

In chapter 6, we provide an overview of the main observations in this study and formulate recommendations for future research. The study as a whole shows that identity construction is active and ongoing. This thesis has shown how identities were constructed to manage inferential implications of food choice. Such implications, for example 'complicatedness' in the case of veganism, 'abnormality' for obesity and 'subjectivity' for food pleasure, are

managed by formulating rhetorical alternatives – ordinariness, normality and objectivity respectively. The relevance of rhetorical alternatives in everyday talk shows that identities are not fixed, but are flexible and negotiable. This implies that groups of consumers cannot be addressed as if they have only one identity, imposed from the outside.

In this chapter, we discuss the importance of knowledge claims and accountability in identity work. We also discuss findings relating to the specifics of using online data compared to conversational data.

Future research may draw attention to identity construction in face-to-face food conversations and in food interaction in other domains than the three examined in this study.





## Samenvatting

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### Hoofdstuk 1

Dit proefschrift richt zich op de constructie en het gebruik van identiteit in alledaagse interactie over voeding. Er wordt gebruik gemaakt van inzichten uit de discursieve psychologie en conversatie-analyse om de interactionele functies van identiteiten in voedingsinteractie te beschrijven.

Discursieve psychologie onderzoekt hoe psychologische thema's, zoals identiteit, worden behandeld door participanten in natuurlijke interactie. Het hoofdprincipe van deze benadering is de handelingsgerichtheid van taal. In plaats van uit te gaan van een cognitieve basis voor identiteit, richt een discursieve studie zich op identiteit als middel om bepaalde interactionele doelen te bereiken, zoals bijvoorbeeld het verantwoorden van voedingskeuzes. Discursieve psychologie neemt daarmee afstand van huidige benaderingen in de antropologie, sociologie en sociale psychologie, die geen aandacht hebben voor het idee dat identiteiten onderdeel zijn van sociale handelingen in alledaagse interactie.

Het project maakt gebruik van drie onderzoekssettings, namelijk online interactie met betrekking tot veganisme, genieten van voeding en obesitas. Het hoofd criterium voor het selecteren van deze cases was hun relatie met recente en dominante trends in moderne voedingskeuze, namelijk ethische overwegingen, hedonisme en gewichtsproblematiek. Deze motieven vormen tevens waarschijnlijke bronnen voor identiteitsgerelateerde activiteiten in interactie.

## Hoofdstuk 2

In hoofdstuk 2 wordt de relatie tussen voedingskeuze, eetgewoonten en identiteit in interactie onderzocht aan de hand van een corpus van online discussies over veganisme.

Discursieve analyses zijn gericht op actie, retoriek en constructie. De analist bestudeert hoe sprekers op elkaar reageren en op die manier interpretaties laten zien van voorgaande beurten. Ook betreft de analist mogelijke alternatieve versies van een beschrijving in de studie, om aan te tonen welke versie van de realiteit er wordt ondermijnd of tegengesproken.

De analyse in dit hoofdstuk toont aan dat deelnemers specifieke discursieve middelen hanteren om twee doelen te vervullen, namelijk (1) het definiëren van veganistische maaltijden als gewoon en makkelijk te bereiden en (2) de constructie van het voorkomen van vitaminegebrek (bijv. het nemen van supplementen) als een routinematige activiteit. Door de identiteit van een 'gewoon persoon' op te bouwen (*doing being ordinary*), weerleggen participanten op systematische wijze de notie dat het gecompliceerd is om een veganist te zijn. Ze ondermijnen zowel dat het moeilijk zou zijn om een maaltijd samen te stellen als het idee dat gezondheidsbescherming een gecompliceerde zaak is voor veganisten. Op deze manier beschermen ze het veganisme als ideologie.

In bredere zin wordt beargumenteerd dat identiteiten en hun categoriegebonden kenmerken onderdeel zijn van een flexibel onderhandelingspakket van participanten in interactie en niet slechts behandeld kunnen worden als cognitieve voorspellers van gedrag.

## Hoofdstuk 3

Hoofdstuk 3 laat zien op welke wijze deelnemers omgaan met normen, feiten en verantwoordelijkheid in het specifieke ideologische domein van online discourse over veganisme. De nadruk ligt op de manier

waarop deelnemers aan online discussies over veganisme omgaan met de veronderstelde gezondheidsrisico's van een veganistische levensstijl, zoals vitaminegebrek.

We zien hoe sprekers op systematische wijze verantwoordelijkheid voor mogelijke vitaminetekorten toeschrijven aan de individuele recipiënt in plaats van aan de doctrine. In de analyse staat een specifieke 'als-dan' constructie ((zoals: als je gevarieerd eet, zou er geen probleem moeten zijn)) centraal, die in het midden laat of er sprake is van een attributie dan wel een voorspelling. Deze formulering, waarin logica en moraliteit door elkaar lopen, wordt door de forumdeelnemers gebruikt om verantwoordelijkheid voor eventuele, veronderstelde tekortkomingen van de leefstijl (zoals kalkgebrek) op indirecte, natuurlijke wijze bij het individu neer te leggen. Deze impliciete attributie beschermt veganisme als ideologie.

## Hoofdstuk 4

In dit hoofdstuk wordt geanalyseerd hoe deelnemers aan een online forum praten over de hedonistische waardering van voeding in een alledaagse omgeving. De analyse richt zich op de wijze waarop deelnemers hun identiteiten als 'fijnproevers' opbouwen en bevestigen.

Een belangrijk middel in deze identiteitsconstructie is de discursieve formulering van onafhankelijke toegang tot kennis over en ervaring met voedingsproducten in zogenaamde 'tweede evaluaties'. De deelnemers formuleren hun oordelen op zodanige wijze dat deze onafhankelijk zijn van of zelfs superieur aan voorafgaande evaluaties van hetzelfde gerecht. Het construeren van onafhankelijke toegang tot en oordeelsvorming over culinaire zaken blijkt van belang bij de interactionele totstandkoming van de identiteit van de ware genietster, die niet 'slechts' van lekker eten *houdt* maar vooral weet wat lekker eten *is*.

In tegenstelling tot sensorische benaderingen van voedingskeuze, laat deze studie zien dat het genieten van voeding ook een interactionele

prestatie is die in discourse tot stand komt. Verder worden implicaties voor de relatie tussen voeding, identiteit en smaak besproken.

### **Hoofdstuk 5**

Gewichtsbeheersing is vaak een problematische kwestie, waarbij verantwoordelijkheid en controle in het geding zijn. In dit hoofdstuk laten we zien hoe men hiermee omgaat in online support groepen voor mensen die proberen af te vallen. In het bijzonder analyseren we welke discursieve methoden deelnemers gebruiken wanneer ze een terugval tijdens een dieet beschrijven. Deze beschrijvingen zijn erop gericht om verklaringen ondermijnen die te maken hebben met de persoonlijkheid van de sprekers, zoals een gebrek aan controle over bepaalde eetgewoontes.

We zien hoe deelnemers een gedetailleerde feitelijke beschrijving geven van wat er is gebeurd en hoe ze zich voelden, zonder daarbij expliciet te maken wat deze 'feiten' in termen van schuld en verantwoordelijkheid betekenen. De vertellingen construeren mislukkingen in het dieet als een eenmalig incident of een keuze in een voortgaand proces. Het incident zelf wordt beschreven als herkenbaar en logisch binnen opeenvolgende gebeurtenissen, waardoor de recipiënt wordt uitgenodigd een mogelijke verklaring in termen van persoonlijke identiteit van de hand te wijzen.

Aan de hand van deze analyse laat dit hoofdstuk tevens zien hoe attributies bestudeerd kunnen worden als gesitueerde producties die identiteit-implicatief werk verrichten.

### **Hoofdstuk 6**

Hoofdstuk 6 geeft een overzicht van de belangrijkste observaties in dit onderzoek en formuleert een aantal aanbevelingen voor toekomstig onderzoek. De studie in haar geheel laat zien dat identiteitsconstructie een voortdurend en actief proces is. Dit proefschrift heeft onder andere laten zien

hoe identiteiten worden geconstrueerd om bepaalde implicaties van voedingskeuzes te ondermijnen. Algemeen veronderstelde identiteitsaspecten, zoals 'gecompliceerdheid' in de veganisme case, 'abnormaliteit' in de obesitas case en 'subjectiviteit' in de voedingsplezier case worden ondermijnd door de constructie van retorische alternatieven, respectievelijk 'gewoonheid', 'normaliteit' en 'objectiviteit'. De relevantie van retorische alternatieven in het alledaagse gesprek laat zien dat identiteiten in interactie niet vaststaan, maar flexibel en onderhandelbaar zijn. Groepen consumenten kunnen dan ook niet slechts benaderd worden alsof ze te vatten zijn in van buitenaf opgelegde identiteiten.

In dit hoofdstuk worden ook de rol van kennis en van verantwoordelijkheid voor de constructie en het gebruik van identiteiten besproken. Verder identificeren we relevante verschillen en overeenkomsten tussen face-to-face conversaties en gesprekken via het medium Internet.

Toekomstig onderzoek zou zich kunnen richten op identiteitsconstructie in face-to-face conversaties over voeding. Daarnaast kan dit type onderzoek worden verplaatst naar verschillende andere domeinen op het gebied van voeding en gezondheid.



## List of publications

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### Journal articles

Sneijder, P. and H.F.M. te Molder (2004). Health should not have to be problem: Talking health and accountability in an internet forum on veganism. In: *Journal of Health Psychology*, 9: 599-616.

Sneijder, P. and H.F.M. te Molder (2005). Moral logic and logical morality: Attributions of responsibility and blame in online discourse on veganism. *Discourse and Society*, 16: 675-696.

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Sneijder, P. and H. F. M. te Molder (submitted for publication). Normalizing ideological food choice in online discussions on veganism.

Sneijder, P., Te Molder, H. F. M. and S. Wiggins (submitted for publication). Weighing blame: Accounting for failure in online discourse on weight management.

### Book chapters

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**Abstracts in conference proceedings**

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Sneijder, P. (2005) *Disputing taste: epistemic authority in food pleasure talk*. Awia Symposium, Anela working group interaction analysis, Utrecht, June 2005



Sneijder, P., Te Molder, H. F. M. and Wiggins, S. (2005) *Accountability in online weight management groups*. International Pragmatics Conference, Riva del Garda, July 2005



## Curriculum vitae

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Petra Sneijder was born in Utrecht, on October 22 1974. In 1994 she started the study Dutch Language and Literature at Utrecht University and developed an interest in communication processes in everyday life. Her undergraduate thesis focused on the semantics of the Dutch expressions 'I think' and 'according to me' in everyday interaction in different contexts.

From 1999 until 2001, she worked as a teacher at the Department of Dutch Language and Literature at Utrecht University. She was involved in teaching classes such as 'Language and Social Interaction' and 'Formulating correctly' and developing course material.

In September 2001, Petra started her PhD-study *Discursive identities, food choice and eating practices* at the Communication Science Group of Wageningen University. During this period, she presented at several international conferences, published in international journals, joined the education program of the Mansholt Graduate School and participated in advanced courses of, for instance, the Mansholt Graduate School, Nutrition and Health Sciences (VLAG) and the Graduate School for Linguistics (LOT).

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