# GOFFMAN BITCHES

*Rhetorical Attribution and the Perversion of Meaning*

KRISTINA ALSTAM
*Department of Social Work*
*University of Gothenburg*
*Box 720, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden*

**Abstract.** This study explores a sequence of rhetorically aggressive behavior on a Swedish parental forum as a way of attributing categories of petty value upon the opponent; while at the same time perform face saving textual activities. The analysis suggests that it is not attributing a metaphor of low social value that manages to unstable the self presentation of the antagonist but rather an advanced know-how of conceptual metaphors to the extent were the aggressor is able to pervert the meaning of a word. The study suggests the need for a forum account to exhibit normative responsibility only applies for some of the nicks writing, while other and more experienced ones are able to act more freely, thereby indicating a divide of rhetorical accountability and of possible identity displays needing further examination.

## Introduction and Aim

> *'I stand back from this forum. When things simply irritates and robs you of your energy, then it is time to lose them. I have learnt. Seeing the PC patrol snubbing people… and missing frank discussions with a respect for other's opinions. A lot of you have me on Facebook. See you there. Not here'* (extract taken from the parental forum The Parent Place 26th of April 2012).

What kind of reaction is it that we are witnessing here? The nick writing declares a forum fatigue to the point of not wanting any part of the virtual interaction that has been a piece of her everyday life since she registered in 2007. The posting comes from a nick that has been logging in on this particular forum every day: Christmas Eve, regular working days as well as on her sister's wedding. What is it more specifically she is tired of? What is it the PC patrol is doing when they are snubbing other writers? Is it true that the forum environment exhibits a lack of respect for people ventilating disparate opinions? If so, how does it come about and what might be the consequences of that kind of shortage?

It might well be that the digital divide as we are used to describe it; the extent to which employing the Internet spread out demographically uneven[1], is gradually sealing. In fact gaps between groups when it comes to education, income and geographic settings in relation to Internet access decreased considerably towards the end of the 1990's (Borgida et al., 2002). Other kinds of divides might however still be open, such as differences in knowledge of how to use the Internet effectively to obtain service and gain access to goods (Life and Shepherd, 2004), in other words questions relating to dimensions of agency. Agency in turn contains several dimensions; that of having a voice as one of the key nodes: not only to be able to present oneself but also to go about it in a way that secures an acceptance by a community. The idea of making a presentation can be understood as a rhetorical competence of composing messages that are comprehensible or likeable and so, voicing a self on the Internet is an event of producing a representation; an identity. An orientation towards the creation of virtual, identity representations transforms the object of study into an analysis of texts, making it possible to understand the textual strategies by Internet users (Mitra, 2006), and the possible differences, or divides, amongst users in this respect.

No matter forum competence, taking part in the interaction stands out as an activity where one cannot control the potential narrative transformation of a message (Tamboukou, 2010: 170) and managing well in an Internet forum appears, similar to other social contexts, to concern the provision of an expedient repertoire of stories and the competence of telling them in the right kind of context (Dingvall, 1977: 376). Several years back Winter and Huff suggested that forums dominated by female nicks made the forum environment safer, reducing the hazard of sexual harassment or enabling a language style less confrontational or competitive (1996). Is this still the case? More recent observations conclude that forum messages need to exhibit a certain normative responsibility to be accepted (Antaki, Ardévol, Núñez and Vayreda, 2006), thereby making the nicks await the right moment to present themselves, eager to know the tone of voice of the forum What kind of venture are they trying to avoid? Or in other words: what happens when the forum interaction goes wrong? How can we understand what is it the nicks do when they debate one another? How do they make attributions of each other, while at the same time protecting themselves from being attacked? The paper will in an analysis of an extract of aggressive interaction on a Swedish parental forum, begin an understanding of the processes of rhetoric attribution in virtual quarrels as a possible digital divide needing further theoretical exploration. The divide is suggestively understood as relating also to identity issues such as whose stories or presentations are supported or rejected. The paper endorses a view of digital divides as also, and to a prominent extent, rethorical.

## Research Area

Parents using the Internet to seek information and gain contacts through everyday peer interactions stand out as a contemporary Western trend that seems more or less

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[1] In defining *demographically uneven* measures of income, race and urban vis-a-vis rural origin are often deployed (Borgida, Sullivan, Oxendine, Jackson and Riedel, 2002)

permanent (Eriksson and Bremberg, 2008). It is predominantly female nicks that reside on the parental forums, seemingly validating the general perception of men using the Internet for more instrumental reasons, and women for social reasons (Kennedy, Wellman and Klement, 2003). These communities offer a space where people (i.e. women) socialize, exchange information, argue or make friends. However, the discussions on parental forums don´t solely revolve around parenting practices such as the fostering of a child, pregnancy, giving birth etc. but also ventilate issues of related character: health, nutrition, sexuality, equality, family finance, work life balance (Caproni, 2004), and so forth. Family issues seem to appear not only inside the mere topic of family. It is the writers (and on some occasions the moderators) that set the limits of what the forum should contain and of what issues might be related to family matters. Already a flora of studies on the phenomenon has been carried out. Some of them conclude that a valuable support is being handed out, and that the parental communities are experienced as a haven away from supervision by institutions (Daneback and Plantin, 2010; Madge and O´Connor, 2006). Parents of today tend to view the advice gained by turning to previous generations as outdated (O'Brien, 1999) and the forums are thus depicted as a backing and the social capital that the forum relations render appears to ease everyday life (Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005). Other scholars highlight the dimension of social control manifested, as for example online shaming, and how race, class and gender becomes agents determining the outcome of the interplay (Hargittai, 2007; Wall and Williams, 2007). Yet again, others aim at explaining the interplay as a kind of digital Darwinism; those that adapt best to their environment will be the most successful in sustaining their point of view (Brabazon, 2007; Keen, 2007). This research onset emphasizes how a message posted on a forum needs to express a certain written normative responsibility, or accountability (Antaki, Ardévol, Núñez and Vayreda, 2006) and how there is a tendency on behalf of the users to gauge the perceived climate on forums before posting a message (Yun and Park, 2011).

## A Swedish Parental Forum

The online forum of The Parent Place[2] is the seccond biggest forum of its kind in Sweden that every week receives approximately 250 000 visitors and has quite a long history since it started in 1997. The Parent Place, further on abbreviated TPP, is organized in a seemingly infinite amount of themes. The themes are organized into larger headings, such as 'Planning of children', 'Pregnant', 'Baby', 'Children', 'Teenagers', 'Family Finance', 'Weight, 'General topics' etc. The number of headings and themes vary depending on the activity level in each heading and theme. A peek at

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[2] The name of the forum will for ethical reasons not be spelled out. The nicknames are also changed and corrections of spelling and a light rewriting of the order of words have been performed, in order to make searching for the nicks via search engines more difficult, thereby to some extent protecting the privacy of the online nicks. (For further elaborations of protecting the identity of members writing on a forum and for discussions on rendition, see McKee and Porter, 2009; Sveningsson Elm, 2009).

the forum in October 2011 provided the reader with 15 headings and nearly 300 themes to choose from. There is yet only one report (Sarkadi, 2003) that has posed questions on level of education, age and sex of the members. Amongst the informants of the questionnaire some 95 % were women, a majority of the age of between 25 and 34, married with children and with an educational level corresponding to persons of the same age in the population as a whole. However, this study dates a few years back. There is also one Swedish study on the largest competing forum in Sweden, noticing a predominance amongst members of women in their thirties from the lower middle class (Daneback and Plantin, 2010).

The phenomena of online forums have been received in divergent ways. On the one hand there have been conceptions of the computer mediated communication as liberating and on the other it has been outlined as simply promoting a kind of shout-out-loud-culture where nobody takes any responsibility for what they are saying and for that reason contribute to the downfall of debate culture (Linaa Jensen, 2003: 358, 364). Overall though, the perceptional change appears to move from views of forum interaction as liberating the self from the burden of class, race, gender and sexuality issues in an almost Utopian fashion (We, 1993) into a more pragmatic stance. One-sided argumentation is rarer and instead focus is directed towards questions of the ways argumentation is actually performed and towards questions of design (Lewinski, 2010). This paper makes an intention of probing the first dimension: how can the argumentation and thereby interaction be theoretically understood or discussed? An overwhelming part of the participants on parental forums, whether they are writers or lurks, are female (Sarkadi, 2003; Daneback and Plantin, 2010). The participants on TPP have to a large extent resided on the forum for years, which in itself is no characteristic feature of this forum in particular. However, the years spent on the forum have chiseled out certain knowledge of each other, and skills when it comes to writing techniques. In the absence of an active moderator, the discussions and debates are taken care of without much intrusion from parties outside. A pattern of rhetorically strong writers have crystallized, and weaker ones in the same respect. In the empirical extract presented below, the conversation takes place between writers with a high social status on the forum. They are logged in everyday (often several times a day) and they are all skilled debaters. The particular conversation picked out for analysis is chosen since it manifests one thing quite clearly: how the position of being socially 'safe' on the forum really is not so safe; how having a face (Goffman, 1974) does not mean keeping it safe from harm. Inflicting rhetorical damage seams not an activity solely performed by the strong against the weak, but also composes a showdown between nicks with a position to defend. If research renders a multilayered outlook on forums; of support on the one hand and oppression and caution on the other, and if writing and interacting on parental forums is a particularly gendered activity, the inquiry into how female nicks gain social positions on forums might form a part of an understanding of how a putative oppressive behavior in computer mediated contexts is executed.

## Interaction and Impression Management

The linkage between virtual interaction and Erving Goffman constitutes a road that has been travelled before (see for example Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons, 2002; Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006), for one thing to be able to describe the kind of self presentation that takes place in these milieus of " /…/ *mediated contact with other participants"* (Goffman, 1967: 5). For depicting virtual quarrels however, there are also other fruitful notions to preponderate.

In contacts with people, participants in interaction have a tendency to act out a line, a template of verbal and non verbal acts that enable the individual to couch his/her view of the situation and of the rest of the participants. The other participants will regard his/hers utterance as a matter of taking a stand, meaning in turn that if the individual wants to interact s/he needs to take into account the impression that others probably have formed of him/her. In interaction we claim a face – a positive social value for ourselves; an approved image of self. Face is maintained when the line we take presents an image that is consistent and favored by the other participants. The face is not situated or launched in or by the body but diffused in the flow of exchanges between participants. Trough this flow we are able to seize out the frames of the interaction, thereby knowing how to interpret the context (Goffman, 1974): we know how to behave in accordance with the situation of ordering coffee, saying the last farewell on a funeral or interacting at TPP. Since the lines available during dealings with others are largely institutional in character, the whole encounter gets to be of conventionalized nature, leading to there being only a small assortment of faces to choose from when engaging in dealings with others (Goffman, 1967: 5-7). In the case of analyzing quarrels on TPP, one of the analytic endeavors might be mapping the range of available faces and the rules, regulations and efforts of saving face (1967: 12). However, it might also contain the studying of the transgressor. The transgressor as understood in the context of TPP could be of two kinds: the one who does not understand the frames, for example portraits herself in an inconsistent way and is punished for that, and the one who understands the face-work to an extent that enables her to turn the arena into a contest of making points. The idea of this kind of game is to keep every utterance free from contradiction and scoring as many points possible against the antagonist in the interaction, implying that an audience is necessary for the victory to be witnessed. One of the most urgent gains for the transgressor is to demonstrate that she handles herself better than the opponent. Having elucidated the phenomena quite thoroughly, Goffman reaches the inference: *"/.../ one deals with the capacity at what is sometimes called bitchiness"* (1967: 25).

Furthermore, the study of virtual interaction cannot afford to overlook the importance of the arena as a construction site for the fabricated and positioned self (Bevir, 1999). The metaphor of construction site however leads us looking for the drawing or the architect responsible for the format, where there is none. The making of the self in dealings with other people is in the interactionist sense rather an act of performance, and the subject plays a part on a stage. Viewing interaction this way rests heavily upon Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (1959). It is used to understand the actors, co-actors and audience in an interactional sequence where they stage and perform 'plays', establishing temporary or situated virtual teams that are mutually

negotiated and constructed (Panteli and Duncan, 2004: 423). The actor has to be aware not only of possible attributions but of her own treacherous leakage, e.g. the difference between 'given' information and information 'given off'; that exudes without intent (Miller, 1995). The activity to control this leakage Goffman calls impression management: the presentation of a character whose moral properties the audience hopefully accepts, and a display of what the presenter perceives as 'normal' within the group with which she interacts (1959: 183, 73). An important part of realizing a social identity is hence *"looking and acting the part"* (Collet, 2005: 327); e.g. composing representation (Langellier, 1989, 2001) the right way.  Yet another vital task is attributing boundaries; defining the opponent as different from oneself and by that defining the constitutive outside of the self (Torfing, 2003: 124). For this operation, an audience is necessary. It is the audience that witnesses and assesses what is being written (Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988:198) and in the milieu of computer mediated communication this is accounting in a goffmanian sense: the nick writing is counting on an audience.

    A way of understanding what is going on in the forum conversations is viewing them as the construction of subject positions from which to speak or write. If the foucauldian notion on subject positions more pronouncedly focuses how discourses shape the inner state of the subject, how we (are allowed) to think (Foucault, 1982: 208), a goffmanian onset rather emphasizes the displays of the self in micro contexts or in short; uses an approach of bottom-up (Hacking, 2004:299-300). A display of self might consist of demonstrations of material assets as well as symbolic (Stommel, 2007). Applying Goffman on the image of displays means for the sake of the paper to map out possible rhetorical ways of accounting (Orbuch, 1997) and the displaying is depicted as having a lot in common with presenting a self. If rhetoric is exerted in the appropriation of the self or others, something is narrated, orchestrated and maneuvered in a certain direction. There is a narrative transformation (Tamboukou, 2010: 170) going on in the interactions on TPP, through the work of the audience receiving, interpreting and commenting the accounts.   Some nicks can control the process of transformation to an extent that make them able to sharpen impression management (Goffman, 1959) to a higher degree; some exhibit failures in the same area.


## Words and Concepts

The way to understand the quarrel to be introduced goes through the analytical concepts of *presuppositions* and *conceptual metaphors*. In this case the presuppositions will be examined in search for their tentative connotations, or their semantic relations to categories of different magnitudes. Things that belong to categories that are placed low (spatially, socially or metaphorically) have less status than things that are sited high[3] (Boréus, 2005). Words and concepts structure our everyday living and is reflected in

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[3] There are other modes of arbitrary dichotomies, scrutinized by for instance Bourdieu (2001); one of the most important being the one of men as spatially, socially and metaphorically placed higher than women.

language by a variety of expressions. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) use the concept of argument as an example of the linkage between concept and metaphor, claiming one of its conceptual metaphors being war. The conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is visualized in a multitude of expressions, such as:

> Your claims are *indefensible.*
> He *attacked* every weak point in my argument.
> His criticisms were right on *target.*
> I *demolished* his argument.

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. Arguments of course really *are* not war. Arguments and wars are distinct, the argument is a verbal conflict and war is a conflict carried out with arms. So the actions performed are not the same. But ARGUMENT is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of WAR. The concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3-6). For the analysis conceptual metaphors will be construed as more or less unspoken presuppositions of what is a high quality and what is not, what is good and what is bad etc. The link between the use of a word and the metaphor it is leaning on relies on presuppositions: we need to agree on what is high versus low quality and what is good or bad. Through the use of Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 14-17) the analysis will examine orientational linkages between for instance being sick/lying down, (which equals a low quality in comparison) and being healthy/standing up. Words that metaphorically are pointing upwards are regarded as representing a better state than words that are associated with a spatially low position. *Orientational metaphors* render a concept a spatial orientation, for instance HEALTHY IS UP.

## A Case of Bitchiness?

The forum of TPP uses a threaded structure, meaning that one easily can follow who gives response to who and manages to study the frequent occurring sub groups, arguing or discussing a particularity within the general discussion of a topic. But it also means that, contrary to the flat forum structure, topics are not updated and placed on the top of the forum page when a new insertion for that topic is made. This means there is no point in debating a topic that is a few hours old, since it by that time is placed on page two or three and hence is not visible if one does not look for it. The nicks therefore have developed the custom of 'lifting the topic'; starting a topic over and over to get their insertions read. The chosen conversation starts off with a nick doing just that; by lifting a topic that has been debated during the day, she manages to get her view of the topic out. This time, the maneuver gets questioned by another nick.

    The reason to pick this line of conversation for analysis however relates to other dimensions of making conversations in the forum environment. The first is how an initial posting sometimes gets overtaken by other writers that focus on other aspects of the posting or characteristics of the nick behind it. The second dimension concerns the

frequent battle between writers equipped with a high social status on the forum. In this case the battle revolves around what topics you are allowed to ventilate at what times but it soon takes off to orbit around attributions of the counterpart and, in that sense, becomes a struggle of representation (Langellier, 1989, 2001). The two main antagonists; *Bebopalula* and *up-the-creek*, are both equipped with a solid forum reputation and are both skilled in the art of endless forum discussions. The debate opens up by an initial posting about infidelity, discussed on the forum several times during the previous hours. The first posting will not be rendered in full length, since the following conversation quickly leaves the topic.

*Initial posting*
**I don´t own my partner**
and he doesn´t own me. That is if he sleeps with somebody else she doesn´ 'take' him from me. He has left all by himself!
/…/
**Bebopalula**

*Insertion no 1* (Answers initial posting)
But wtf, haven't we reached the end of it, at least for today? How many do you think have changed their opinion the last hour, since Flames wrote the same thing a couple of lines down? 😊
**vendela01**

*Insertion no 2* (Answers vendela01 above)
Hahaha, Bebopalula the educator of The Forum has spoken. 😀
**up-the-creek**

*Insertion no 3* (Answers up-the-creek above)
How do you mean now, up-the-creek?
**Bebopalula**

*Insertion no 4* (Answers Bebopalula above)
I mean this:
That your insertions often are very interesting. And very long. And very predictable and like look how crazy I am-goody two-shoes.
Often you lift a conversation from way below and write a looong and wiiiise answer of how one really ought to think. When one thinks like you.

And it´s ok. Calm down! But I have to be able to call you Educator Of The Forum too. It is also ok.
 **up-the-creek**

*Insertion no 5* (Answers up-the-creek above)
Yes, it's totally ok, I can call you The Psycho Lady from the South, it's also supernice 😊.

'Look how crazy I am' -goody two-shoes?? Imagine, I think a little the same about you sometimes, when you write your insertions and try to sound like Micki (nothing wrong with Micki, on the contrary, she is one of the best writers here I think!).
That I bring up some conversation from way below has something to do with me not sitting here all the time, but sometimes I do other stuff too, And then some interesting topics get lost. Then you can lift them up, and that is done by many more than me 🙂.

It's nice you see my answers as wise. But I don't mean at all that one 'really' should think like me – but I must have the same rights as everybody else to have opinions here?
**Bebopalula**

*Insertion no 6* (Answers Bebopalula above)
It's totally ok, cause I've been living in the East the last 16 years… 😁

It's probably about that you have so many words, and the lack of respect for those who don't have them. For you and me it is easy, pissing easy to assert ourselves in texted debates, but one has to have respect for the one who can't. By living in the present, saying hakkuna matta [sic!] to certain things. You don't always have to reassert yourself. Everybody still knows you think the right things. 🙂
 **up-the-creek**

 *Insertion no 7* (Answers up-the-creek above)
Oh, I really needed good advice from you, up-the-creek. You are so smart… 😁

And the South and the East is same same but different. But ok, Psycho Lady from the East I´ll say then.
**Bebopalula**

*Insertion no 8* (Answers Bebopalula above)
See! That's just what I mean! The lack of self-awareness and the incapacity of embracing possible criticism. Nuff said. 😁
**up-the-creek**

 /…/

*Insertion no 9* (Answers vendela01 above from insertion no 1)
But wait, did I force you to participate? No, I didn't 🙂.
I think however that the subject is just as interesting as your new hairdo or your shoes or your new corset or whatever it is that you want to show off for the moment 🙂. We think differently!
**Bebopalula**

*Insertion no 10* (Answers Bebopalula above)
I'll await in suspense to see where you manage to turn this discussion around in this conversation then. 🙂
**vendela01**

*Insertion no 11* (Answers vendela01 above)
No, I agree, it was stupid. We'll have to shut it down so you get space to lay up new
pictures of what you bought 😊. I'll step aside.
**Bebopalula**

*Insertion no 12* (Answers Bebopalula above)
To this I agree, in the middle of everything. Some assert themselves through words,
others through all they can buy, insert BRAND, nevermindthecolour. It is the assertion
in itself that is the problem, and whatever you assert yourself with in front of strangers it
points to one thing. Crappy self-esteem.
**up-the-creek**

/…/

There are a lot of common and unarticulated forum norms of conversation operating in
this conversation and the brief analysis will highlight only a few. One of them is the
convention of not lifting a topic that already has been ventilated. (Or rather, the rule
appears to be not to lift it too many times. The problem is defining when the limit is
reached). Insertion number one reminds Bebopalula of this rule. Insertion number two
ignores the violation as well as the content of the posting and targets instead a character
flaw of the nick behind the posting: Bebopalula is depicted as the educator of the forum.
Being an educator is not necessarily a bad thing. It might tentatively be associated with
presuppositions of high quality properties: KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM or SKILL. But
by starting the insertion with laughter, up-the-creek perverts the regular metaphors of
the word educator. The laughter indicates the audience rather ought to associate the
word with low quality properties, possibly ARROGANCE, CONCEIT, or the phrase
up-the-creek herself uses; GOODY-TWO-SHOES. The insertion manages to unstabilize
the word, throwing it into a quagmire of meanings.  In insertion number four up-the-
creek elaborates further on the defects of the nick of Bebopalula. The rhetorical
technique revolves around arguing against the style of writing of Bebopalula, and the
implications of that style, thereby leaving suggestions of dubious personality traits.
Bebopalula on the other hand, chooses in insertion number five a more up-front
response, delivering a blow directly at the mental properties of up-the-creek, she's
mentally ill. This ought to attribute up-the-creek a rather low position. 'Psycho' as a
concept, with its obvious correlations to (mental) illness, has as a relation to
presuppositions such as being UNSTABLE, WEAK or DESTRUCTIVE. The use of
'Psycho' is to some extent an orientational metaphor, with the concept of health being
up and the concept of sickness being down. (The basis for the metaphor is relying on
how humans are forced to lay down physically when sick which is a more degrading or
dubious position than standing up). The connotations of the metaphor is visualized in
sentences such as 'being at the *peak* of health', to '*rise* from the dead', to 'come *down*
with the flu', or having a health that is '*declining*'. 'Psycho' as an insult is orientational
also in referring to not being rational, since rational is up and emotional is down;
obvious in formulations such as ' put ones feelings *aside*', *rise* above ones emotions', or

in 'the discussion *fell* to the emotional level'. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:15-17). But in this case the attribution does not appear to work properly. In insertion number six up-the-creek settles for sedately delivering a geographical correction and seemingly unconcerned continues to enumerate the flaws of Bebopalula, thereby proving a better behavior than her opponent (Goffman, 1967: 25). Instead Bebopalula concentrates on face-saving activities (Goffman, 1974) that might be worth mentioning, such as the sentence in insertion number five, stating that: *'That I bring up some conversation from way below has something to do with me not sitting here all the time, but sometimes I do other stuff too'.* It is a rather classical remark of a quarrel at TPP, convincing the audience that you have a life outside the forum. By this remark Bebopalula is reasserting her social value; she does not live by and off TPP. In insertion number seven, Beboplaula makes a last attempt of bringing up 'Psycho' again, but this time up-the-creek uses the effort on behalf of Bebopalula of attributing a low quality on up-the-creek as evidence of the unstable character of Bebopalula: she is said to suffer from a "*lack of self-awareness and the incapacity of embracing possible criticism*". Remarkably the rather innocent connotations of 'educator' seams to inflict more harm to the face of Bebopalula than the harsh designation of 'psycho' does to up-the-creek.

The two main debaters of this conversation both belong to the forceful writers of the forum and their debate proves yet another thing: the social position of the forum, or the face, is never entirely safe. A high status position or an identity that doesn't get damaged requires constant work or at times, defense. But Bebopalula walks in a trap, resentfully defending herself against the accounts on how to behave against the rhetorically weaker nicks: '*By living in the present, saying hakkuna matta* [sic!] *to certain things. You don't always have to reassert yourself. Everybody still knows you think the right things.* 🙂' (Insertion number six, written by up-the-creek). The nick of up-the-creek immediately uses the anger in insertion number seven: *'Oh, I really needed good advice from you, up-the-creek. You are so smart...* 🤢*And the South and the East is same same but different. But ok, Psycho Lady from the East I´ll say then.* ' as an opening to make a point (Goffman 1967: 25). She simply uses the force of Bebapelula to prove it: "*See! That's just what I mean! The lack of self-awareness and the incapacity of embracing possible criticism./.../*". The damage is done, and it is done by Bebapelula herself.

Bebopalula is moreover waging a two-front war. In the same conversation she is fighting off the reproaches from vendela01, claiming by techniques of understatement that she has every right to bring up a subject that has already been discussed. In this attack, she is surprisingly aided by her other opponent up-the-creek. This feature of the scolding is also recurrent on the forum; there are no stable liaisons – nicks that you trust can turn on you and sworn enemies might back you up, if you target one of their own enemies or if you touch upon issues important for them. In this case, insertion number twelve by up-the-creek makes a u-turn and sides with Bebopelula, as if the needs of up-the-creek to define her constitutive outside (Torfing, 2003: 124) against the suggested commercialized identity work of vendela01 overrides her lust for scorning Bebopalula. So, in a few lines the experienced nick of up-the-creek manages to ignore a contagious conceptual metaphor of mental illness, prove that Bebopalula is too hot headed to have any self-awareness and cannot take criticism and almost simultaneously mock the identity display built on material assets (Stommel, 2007) of vendela 01. This in turn

might imply that there really is one conceptual metaphor that is really working in the moment of conversation, since it brings the nicks of Bebopalula and up-the-creek into a sudden alliance. It is the conceptual bridge between shopping and its semantic relations to categories of petty value. The nick of up-the creek spells it out: some people assert themselves through words; others by what they can afford to buy. It is all the same because both the words and the shopping reveal a need for reasserting oneself. So this need of reasserting gets equated with low self-esteem, thereby establishing a bridge between shopping and INSECURITY, SHALLOWNESS or, in relations with these two; WEAKNESS. Tentatively, this might be what the rhetorical hunt is about – the search for weakness. When a conversation turns aggressive an exploratory scouting starts, where the nicks probe each other in search for a leakage (Miller, 1995). In this case the leakage is determined to be the manifestation of commercialized identity work; it is what for this line of conversation will be depicted as the abnormal behavior within the group (Goffman, 1959: 183, 73), although in other places of the forum or in the same place but in another day, the same identity display would be celebrated. This, the temporarily lowest of the low categories, finally reunites the two combating nicks, turning them towards an unspoken presupposition of the conversation.

## Discussion

One needs to bear in mind that the debate discussed takes place between nicks with a high social status on the forum. Further analytical endeavors on rhetoric attribution on forums of this kind might want to continue exploring the possibility of proficient writers cunningly holding the rhetorically strong positions, and weak ones in the same respect that are exposed to the workings of their force[4]. However, as a point of departure it can serve the general understanding of the forum debating structure, to turn also to the textual interrelations of the strong writers to understand the real savoir-fare of attacking and still manage to maneuver face-saving activities more in-depth. However, the inference that the rhetorical attributions above to its core is about a hunt for weakness should be considered merely the first inquiry into what it is that make some conceptual metaphors stick and some to pass without much attention. Plausibly the light-headed attitude on behalf of up-the-creek regarding the quite troublesome attribution of 'Psycho' relates to a couple of things. The nick is first and foremost an experienced one, with many years on the forum and she knows her way around the terrain. Secondly, there is an audience to the debate. Presumably, if the assault is too crude the semantic relations to categories of lower magnitudes (Boréus, 2005) no longer have any bearing. It is impossible to inflict damage to a face with exaggerations. With an attribution such as 'Psycho' the response of up-the-creek does not have to do a lot, since Bebopalula takes the risk of ruining her own face on the forum with the acting out and with the

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[4] Although perhaps a coincidence, the nick from the very first cited insertion opening the paper is the nick of up-the-creek stating she is leaving the forum. Despite the skills received through years of battles, even this rhetorically potent writer comes out as a wounded warrior; tired of the endless combats, whether they result in victories or defeats.

using of a disproportionately offensive wording. By making a too strong accusation, Bebopalola simply jeopardizes more than up-the-creek. Paradoxically, and although the accusations started with up-the-creek accusing Bebopalula, the former comes out in a somewhat better place.

The skills demonstrated have something to do with rhetorical competence; knowing the available nuances of a word, (such as 'Educator') and thus being able to pervert it. If this would hold true, it means taking into analytical account the diverse accessibility to linguistic resources in terms of creatively handling them; thereby partly confirming the observation that a forum insertion needs to produce normative responsibility (Antaki, Ardévol, Núñez and Vayreda, 2006) but also to some extent contradicting it; the need for responsibility appears to be valid for everybody; but for some of the nicks the task is not as heavy as it might be for others. This, if nothing else, makes up a divide of rhetorical accountability that makes the wrongdoings of some stand out and other infringements to vanish. This divide also raises further questions worthy of exploration. One such might be: what kinds of identities are possible to launch in what kind of contexts and are there specific forum cultures that promote or rule out certain identity displays? Having considered the proposition of a digital divide consisting of differences in rhetorical competence, i.e. differences in skill and artisanal ability the result is also linking once again to structural issues such as those of socioeconomic positions, education and class – thereby referring back to divides that have been assumed to be dissolved (Borgida et al., 2002). The problem area seems to have moved from a divide in terms of access towards one that more relates to acquired skills in handling the world that faces the forum user, once s/he has entered.

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