

‘Rachel’s not here’: Constructed dialogue in gossip¹

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Sociolinguistic research has demonstrated that gossip is a co-constructed phenomenon, which allows participants to establish solidarity and build alignments with each other, while evaluating an absent party. Gossip can also serve important social functions, such as helping to establish and reconfirm group norms and values. The present study provides a detailed analysis of an extended gossip episode that occurred within an institutional context: a study group interaction at a U.S. university. Our analysis shows how, in gossip, constructed dialogue both prompts and legitimizes pejorative evaluations towards an absent third party, and is actually the pivot around which group members negotiate values and norms in the process of arriving at a shared moral stance. Our analysis also demonstrates that alignment in gossip interactions is tenuous and must be continuously renewed.

بناء على الأبحاث المقدمة في تخصص اللغويات الاجتماعية، تعتبر الإشاعات من الظواهر التي تعتمد على تحالف المتحدثين في تأسيس العلاقات المشتركة فيما بينهم، ذلك أثناء تقييمهم لأشخاص غير متواجدين. يركز هذا البحث على دور المحاورة المركبة في المحافظة على استمرارية الإشاعات بين المتحدثين، و يعتبر إضافة إلى الأبحاث المتخصصة في دراسة وظيفة الكلام المروي أو الحوار المركب في المحادثات الحاصلة طبيعياً. و بناء عليه يقدم هذا البحث تحليلاً لحادثة إشاعة مطولة قد ظهرت ضمن سياق كلام مجموعة من الطالبات في مؤسسة علمية أمريكية. التحليل يوضح كيف أن الحوار المركب يحدث و يجيز التقييم المنقصر للطرف الثالث الغائب. كذلك توضح الدراسة كيف أن الحوار المركب يمكن أعضاء المجموعة من التناحر و تأسيس قيم مشتركة فيما بينهم. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، نتائج البحث توضح أن توافق الآراء بين المتحدثين أمر ضروري، وفي نفس الوقت متغير و بحاجة إلى التجديد المستمر من أجل نجاح هذا النوع من المحادثات.

[Arabic]

KEYWORDS: Gossip, constructed dialogue, voicing, alignment, othering

INTRODUCTION

Gossip has been recognized as a socially significant genre of everyday interaction (Bergmann 1993; Eggins and Slade 1997). Scholarly interest in the topic stems from gossip’s impact on the social relationships among people (Foster 2004). Linguists Eggins and Slade (1997) have proposed a structural

model of gossip, which includes three obligatory elements: third person focus, substantiating behavior and pejorative evaluation. Following Eggins and Slade's (1997) framework, this article contributes to our understanding of interactional dynamics of gossip, by analyzing an extended gossip episode that took place among a group of young women in a study group context within a North American University. We focus particular attention on the ways in which reported speech, or constructed dialogue, serves speakers' goals in maintaining the gossip exchange. Specifically, we demonstrate how constructed dialogue is an ideal resource for enacting the 'substantiating behavior' move (Eggins and Slade 1997), which triggers and legitimizes subsequent pejorative evaluation from other participants and makes them complicit in the gossip episode. Specifically, we argue that instances of constructed dialogue function as the interactional pivots around which the co-present group members 'other' (Jaworski and Coupland 2005) and disassociate themselves with (Thornborrow and Morris 2004) a non-present group member. Representing the words or thoughts of a non-present individual opens up the contents of the constructed dialogue for further scrutiny, commentary, or evaluation by others. In other words, in gossip, constructed dialogue serves as type of 'interactional bait' that allows a speaker to 'test the waters' and observe how other participants orient to, and take up, the topics and perspectives introduced in the constructed dialogue. Gossip is a collaborative phenomenon, which requires the participation and alignment of at least two participants (Thornborrow and Morris 2004); our study illustrates how this alignment is constructed in interaction.

PERSPECTIVES ON GOSSIP

Over the last four decades, gossip has received considerable attention from scholars in several disciplines. Not surprisingly, each field has proposed its own definitions of gossip, which vary along disciplinary emphases and perspectives. General and social psychologists tend to view gossip as a form of communicative behavior among people that provides opportunities for social interaction. Dunbar (2004), for instance, defined gossip as conversations about social and personal topics that are essential for human social interaction. Gossip has also been viewed as a neutral social opportunity to *chit chat* about daily life activities (Foster 2004), or even as an important social device to convey valuable information that is necessary for the hearer to know in order to function effectively within a specific culture and society (Baumeister, Zang and Vohs 2004). Whereas general and social psychology tend to focus on the beneficial aspects of gossip, in organizational psychology, the definition of gossip is less straightforward, as *rumor* and *gossip* are often used interchangeably (see Michelson and Mouly 2004). Nonetheless, scholars in this discipline seem to at least agree on the major aspects of workplace gossip: that is, gossip as evaluative, informal talk in an organization, usually involving

a group of people (at least two persons), about an absent member(s). This conceptualization of gossip as evaluative talk has its origins in sociology (Eder and Enke 1991; see also Kurland and Pelled 2000), which has defined gossip as 'evaluative talk about a person who is not present' (1991: 494).

In sociolinguistics and discourse studies, similar attempts to define gossip have been made. For instance, Tholander (2003) and Guendouzi (2001) have defined gossip as *off-task talk*, or as *backstage talk*, which involves the reproduction of frontstage norms in order to define acceptable social roles among women. Jones (1980) was one of the first scholars to analyze gossip in terms of its sociolinguistic features, as talk 'between women in their roles as women' (1980: 194). Jones specified this type of talk as 'intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic and setting' (1980: 194). In this early sociolinguistic work, gossip was considered a type of women's language, a claim that has been subsequently challenged by others (Coates and Cameron 1989; Thornborrow and Morris 2004).

Just as the definitions of gossip vary among different disciplines, the functions of gossip that are emphasized by each discipline tend to vary as well. Some scholars consider gossip as a useful resource, which promotes communication among people (Dunbar 2004), or as a reliable device to gather and disseminate information (e.g. Baumeister, Zang and Vohs 2004), or as a means to entertain and amuse people, such as humorous gossip (e.g. Dunbar 2004; Ferreira 2014), or as a resource to bring groups together and to establish friendship and social norms for behavior and group memberships (e.g. Ferreira 2014; Fine and Rosnow 1978; Foster 2004; Michelson and Mouly 2004). Fine and Rosnow (1978), for instance, view gossip as purposeful communication, which serves multiple social functions including gathering and spreading information, entertaining, and influencing group membership. The social functions of gossip have also been emphasized by sociolinguists, for example in the work of Thornborrow and Morris (2004) and Jaworski and Coupland (2005). Thornborrow and Morris' (2004) study of gossip episodes on the reality program 'Big Brother' showed how gossip was used as a resource by participants to build alignments with other participants as well as to disassociate themselves with unpopular contestants. Similarly, Jaworski and Coupland's (2005) emphasis on the *othering* dimension of gossip among friends also demonstrated how gossip allows participants to achieve group cohesion and solidarity.

Recognizing that such in-group alignments are often brought about as a direct result of the marginalization of a non-present individual, some scholars have instead stressed the potential of gossip to damage relationships within social organizations as well as its use in inhibiting managerial power in institutional settings (e.g. Michelson and Mouly 2004). For instance, Guendouzi (2001) examined the content and structure of 'malicious' gossip. Her findings revealed that malicious gossip was driven by participants' attempts to be part of a group, even if it was at the expense of other absent

group members. Einat and Chen (2012) examined gossip in the context of a maximum security female prison. Interviews with inmates revealed that the content of gossip usually aimed at 'upsetting, shaming, frustrating, and worsening other inmates' everyday life in prison' (2012: 127). Taken collectively, these studies of gossip have shown that gossip can enhance social communication (e.g. Baumeister, Zang and Vohs 2004; Dunbar 2004) and reinforce group membership (Eggins and Slade 1997; Jaworski and Coupland 2005; Thornborrow and Morris 2004), yet it also has the potential to threaten face (Guendouzi 2001), to damage relationships with the talked-about absent party, especially if it carries negative evaluation (e.g. Einat and Chen 2012; Guendouzi 2001; Jones 1980; Michelson and Mouly 2004), and to function as a form of social control (e.g. Eggins and Slade 1997; Kurland and Pelled 2000).

REPORTED SPEECH AND CONSTRUCTED DIALOGUE

In daily interactions, reported speech can be used to either report one's own words, ideas, thoughts or those of someone else. Research on this topic has focused on different interactional contexts in which reported speech occurs, such as story-telling (e.g. Holt 1996), non-narrative interactions (e.g. Clift 2007), academic settings (e.g. Baynham 1996; Buttny 1997; Myers 1999), legal testimonies in court (e.g. Galatolo 2007), and more recently, medical settings (e.g. Bangerter, Mayor and Doehler 2011). Gossip is a type of speech activity that can occur within many different interactional contexts, and is 'one of the most commonly occurring and socially significant genres in English casual conversation' (Eggins and Slade 1997: 273). As such, gossip provides an ideal site for further examining functions of reported speech.

Prior research on reported speech (e.g. Holt 1996, 2000) has distinguished between two basic forms of reported speech – indirect (IRS) and direct (DRS) – expressed through the use of distinct syntactic features. Unlike IRS, which is presented simply as a 'summary,' or an 'interpretation' of what was said (Buttny 1998; Holt 2000), in DRS the speaker structures the original utterance in a way that appears as though he or she is reproducing what was said (Holt 1996). DRS can be presented with a variety of signaling features including: prosodic marking; shift of personal, spatial, and temporal deixis; and equating devices (Holt 1996). In addition, a range of reporting verbs can be used to signal DRS including forms of *say*, *go*, *tell*, *think*, etc. (Holt 1996; Myers 1999). There has also been an increasing usage of the *be + like* formula to introduce DRS (e.g. D'Arcy 2007; Holt and Clift 2007; Romaine and Lange 1991; Tannen 2007).

It is important to point out that when the *be + like* formula precedes a quotation-like structure, it often introduces a characterization of an individual's thoughts or stance, rather than a representation of words that

were uttered (Romaine and Lange 1991; Tannen 2007). In fact, a growing body of research has observed that direct quotation structures are sometimes used to represent thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions (Barnes and Moss 2007; Couper-Kuhlen 2007; Haakana 2007; Rae and Kerby 2007). Furthermore, some scholars have observed that such structures can even be used to project imagined or hypothetical speech (e.g. Barnes and Moss 2007; Koester 2014; Vásquez and Urzúa 2009), as well as 'unsaid' quotations, such as 'She didn't say "I'm sorry"' (e.g. Schiffrin 2002: 317).

When quoting, speakers may employ several contextualization cues (Gumperz 1977), such as intonation, prosody, and non-verbal resources, to convey the tone of the utterance vividly, or to create dramatic effect (Holt 2000; Tannen 2007; Vásquez and Urzúa 2009). Such contextualization cues are a significant aspect of communication that impact meaning-making and interpretation. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of 'voicing,' clearly linked to the performative dimension of quotation, alludes to speakers' ability to draw on an infinite number of voices and to artfully inject them into their discourse. For instance, following Bakhtin's discussion of voicing, Jaworski and Coupland (2005) showed how speakers creatively voice others via imitations or performance of accent or dialect. In another study, Wortham and Locher (1996) demonstrated how voicing can serve as a device for implicit evaluation.

Holt and Clift (2007), among others, have questioned the commonplace assumption that reported speech is merely a reproduction of what was said by the original speaker. For example, in support of Bakhtin's (1981: 340) argument that 'the speech of another, once enclosed in a context, is – no matter how accurately transmitted – always subject to certain semantic changes,' Tannen (2007: 105) has challenged what she calls 'the conversational American literal conception of "reported speech".' She argues that when a speaker presents an utterance as someone else's, it should not be described as 'reported speech,' but rather, more accurately, as 'constructed dialogue.' Highlighting the dynamic relationship between the reported speech and the reporting context, Tannen claims that constructed dialogue 'represents an active, creative, transforming move which expresses the relationship not between the quoted party and the topic of talk but rather the quoting party and the audience to whom the quotation is delivered' (2007: 111). Actually, the relationships among all four elements (quoted party, topic of talk, quoting party, and audience) are important to the process of meaning-making; nevertheless we agree with Tannen's emphasis that constructed dialogue creates involvement in discourse, and encourages active participation in the interaction. As a result, it can be viewed as an especially useful resource in gossip, which requires the active participation of at least two parties (Thornborrow and Morris 2004).

One of Tannen's criticisms of the notion of 'reported speech' is that scholars tend to overlook 'the possibility that the reported utterance might have been

provoked by someone present at the time, including the reporter, or constructed in the service of some immediate interactional goal' (2007: 108). For this reason, Tannen has called for questioning the teller's motive in reporting the utterances and also for consideration of how the context of telling triggers this reporting. In the analysis that follows, we will advance these claims further, by illustrating some specific ways in which multiple instances of constructed dialogue within an extended gossip episode function as a sort of 'interactional bait' that opens up the words and actions of the non-present participant to scrutiny and evaluation by others.

Research on reported speech, and other quotation-like structures, has shown that they serve a number of different functions in interaction (e.g. Baynham 1996; Buttny 1997; Holt 1996; Holt 2000; Holt and Clift 2007; Myers 1999). For instance, reported speech can be used as an effective and economical device to provide various types of evidence during a conversation (Holt 1996). Moreover, Holt (2000) found that in casual conversation reported speech can contribute significantly to the construction of actions embedded within complaints or stories. Holt also pointed to the recipients' important role in assessing the reported utterance based on embedded clues within the teller's utterances, and she noted that recipients tend to react to the reported utterance in a way that supports the teller's implicit assessment. While various studies have highlighted diverse functions of reported speech in different contexts, the function of providing information and evidence clearly aligns with the model of gossip presented earlier (Eggs and Slade 1997), in particular, with the substantiating behavior move. This suggests that a closer examination is warranted of both reported speech constructions in gossip – as well as how recipients of this type of talk orient to such reported utterances.

With respect to the role of reported speech in gossip, Bergmann (1993) was one of the earliest scholars to observe that the use of 'quotes in the reconstruction of events' is often a feature of gossip (1993: 109). Bergmann illustrated how in gossip exchanges, when a speaker inserts a *verbum dicendi* (or verb of speaking) the speaker indicates that 'a bit of – someone else's or one's own – discourse is being repeated, which occurred in another situation and at another time' (1993: 109). Constructed dialogue can be readily observed in extracts from prior sociolinguistic studies of gossip (Guendouzi 2001; Tholander 2003; Thornborrow and Morris 2004).² However, beyond a brief mention, most authors have not focused on this particular feature of gossip in terms of its specific functions in situated interaction. Yet there are a few exceptions, including Ferreira (2014), who observed that reported speech, in some instances, serves to mock or ridicule the absent party, and Jaworski and Coupland (2005), who illustrated that reported speech can serve as a substantiating behavior move. They further noted that a speaker engaging in gossip can move between more and less obviously marked forms of voicing: in the former, the speaker clearly 'performs' the voice of another, whereas in the

latter, there is less of a perceptible shift in pitch and volume from the speaker's normal tone of voice.

Developing this line of inquiry in more detail, the present study offers an account of how constructed dialogue (i.e. representations of speech, as well as hypothetical speech, and the 'unsaid') functions in advancing an extended gossip episode. We focus specifically on the ways in which the initiator of the gossip uses multiple instances of reported speech of the non-present participant to invite evaluative commentary from other group members. We demonstrate how recipients' varied responses to constructed dialogue result in different types of interactional alignments, which are subject to subsequent (re) negotiation.

METHODS

The data in this study come from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). MICASE is freely available online (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/>) and is comprised of naturally occurring academic speech events recorded in a university setting. The data analyzed here come from one of eight available transcripts of study group interactions.

A study group is a small group of students who take a class together and meet on a regular basis outside of class, in order to complete a specific task(s) related to the class they share. Typically, study group interactions involve making decisions and deciding on ways of working together to complete the given task(s). Our initial research interest in study group discourse led to the discovery of this particular transcript, which captured our attention because the gossip episode occurs near the beginning of the students' interaction. This group session is labeled 'American Family Group Project Meeting' and appears under the searchable category of 'Study Groups' in MICASE, along with its transcript ID number (SGR565SU144). The associated sound file can be accessed at: <http://talkbank.org/media/MICASE/study%20groups/sgr565su144.mp3>. This interaction involves five female participants as they discuss a group project for 85 minutes (13,388 words). This study focuses only on the gossip episode, which lasts approximately 10 minutes. Following MICASE's conventions of labeling individual speakers with alphanumeric speaker IDs, we refer to the participants as they are identified in the transcript: S1, S2, S3, S4 and S5. Speaker 5 (S5) – who is identified by name as 'Rachel' – is the absent party, and appears later in the transcript. We reproduce segments of the transcript as they appear in MICASE, with their associated conventions (e.g. square brackets used to indicate overlapping talk). However, we have added quotation marks to indicate instances of constructed dialogue, and – where relevant to our analysis – we have provided additional detail about pauses and overlaps. See the Appendix for a full list of the transcription conventions.

THE GOSSIP EPISODE

The transcript begins with a conversation between S1, S2 and S3 about writing conventions related to their project's draft (lines 1–24, not included here). This is followed by a shift in topic in line 25. In this segment of the conversation (Extract 1), S2 explains to the group members (who were not present) what she and Rachel worked on the previous evening. In her lengthy and uninterrupted account, S2 stresses the collaborative work that took place between herself and Rachel in finding and incorporating more articles related to the group's project.

Extract 1

25 S2: this was mine i don't know if um, we had like a really, i got together
 26 with Rachel last night at the Fishbowl and um, we, were trying to
 27 like write it, and we were trying to go about, starting with, like the
 28 l- stuff from lit articles you know from articles and, getting the
 29 stereotypes from that but like, it was really hard cuz we, ended up
 30 both reading the same article, um, and like i didn't think that the
 31 article had a lot of, stereotypes, per say. like it just talked about it,
 32 um, e- economic disadvantage in single mothers, um, was kinda
 33 hard. so then we just ended up, going through and seeing what we'd
 34 found, in the media, kind of and just kind of expand it and give
 35 examples, um, and, like she looked up some more articles so
 36 hopefully we'll be able to find more stuff. like i don't know it's
 37 gonna be hard, or it'll be funny to see how like everyone else wrote

[lines 38 – 48, with S1 and S2 discussing the organization of the final paper, have been deleted]

49 S1: [S2: mhm] and then i used like, Rachel's article had a definition
 50 of what a successful, relationship is, and I thought that would be
 51 interesting to use because, it just said relationship it didn't say
 52 marriage or anything so you could, use it for child parent
 53 relationship or, husband wife relationship

In this monologic account, S2 uses the first-person plural pronoun *we* six times (e.g. *we were trying like write it*, . . . *we ended up both reading*), indicating that she (S2) and Rachel (who is not present at the moment) worked together collaboratively. Through these linguistic choices S2 offers a particular account of her own and Rachel's work, and their combined contributions to the group's project. At this point, there is no indication of any tension in their working relationship and several turns later, in line 49, a different participant (S1) presents to the group another of Rachel's contributions: selecting a useful article for supporting their paper's argument. Following this, the group members continue with the topic of their research paper's organization, and make plans for their next group meeting (a topic that begins in lines 38–48, and continues until line 122). However, S2 suddenly shifts the topic (in line

123, below in Extract 2) to Rachel's absence in the current meeting. This is where the gossip episode begins.

By introducing Rachel as a topic into the discourse, S2 provides the third person focus, the initial obligatory stage of gossip (Eggins and Slade 1997). It is through this move that the absent person is established by the group members as an outsider and the object of the group's judgment. Unlike Extract 1, which consisted of longer, uninterrupted turns, Extract 2 is comprised of a series of shorter turns, which include a number of question and answer sequences, as the group's members work together to make sense of Rachel's absence.

Extract 2

- 123 S2: me too. um i find it really funny that (1.0) Rachel's not here. i i just
 124 S3: you just saw her last night?
 125 S2: yeah we worked on our paper in the Fishbowl
 126 S1: and she knew it was this one? this cafe?
 127 S2: yeah yep, cuz i gave her directions on like, where she could park in
 128 the back.
 129 S1: do any of us have her phone number?
 130 S3: i don't
 131 S2: no, i had it written down at home but
 132 S1: cuz this is like
 133 S2: i recycled it. . . i almost wonder if_ i don't know. [S3: what?] like i
 134 was just gonna say i almost wonder if she didn't have a purpose
 135 like, called me last night and wanted to meet with me, so that it's
 136 like, you know she (wasn't coming) today.
 137 S3: did she give any hint that she wouldn't be here?
 138 S2: No
 139 S1: yeah but people do that sometimes. they'll be like 'oh yeah, i'm
 140 coming,' 'i know about it' 'i know i'm supposed to be there'
 141 S3: this is dumb though (. . .) <LAUGH>
 142 S2: like she m-[S3: i'm sorry but,] like you know what i mean like sh-
 143 maybe she's like 'well [S3: she couldn't be doing anything else
 144 right now] if i meet with her tomorrow night it'll get done she'll
 145 [S1: did she] have a copy of it to, have there.' oh i'm so evil but,
 146 S1: did she miss, you know the first two meetings that we had?

To shift the group's focus to the absent party, S2 begins her talk in line 123 with a hesitator *um*, followed by the evaluative preface *I find it really funny that*. She then pauses mid-turn for one second, before continuing with the rest of her utterance, *Rachel's not here*. This variation of a cleft construction syntactically marks Rachel's absence as the focus of the discourse.

Following an interactive sequence of clarification questions and responses, S1's turn in line 132 is formulated as though she is about to offer some evaluation of Rachel's absence (*cuz this is like*); yet she does not complete this utterance, leaving the evaluation slot unfilled. S2 responds (lines 133–134) with several

false starts (i.e. *I almost wonder if, I don't know, like I was just gonna say*) which signal her ambivalence about going on record with an assessment of Rachel. However, prompted to complete her utterance by S3's *what*, S2 continues with her candidate interpretation of Rachel's actions: i.e. that Rachel acted intentionally by calling her the previous evening in order to avoid attending the current meeting. This suggestion that Rachel actually planned her absence from the current meeting serves as S2's first attempt at formulating a substantiating behavior move. S3 questions this implicature directly, and S2 answers in the negative. Next, S1 uses hypothetical constructed dialogue to illustrate how people sometimes act in ways that are opposite of their words or behavior (*yeah but people do that sometimes. they'll be like 'oh yeah, i'm coming,' 'i know about it,' 'i know i'm supposed to be there.'*), thus offering her own account for Rachel's absence. This hypothetical constructed dialogue is prefaced by the syntactic frame *they'll be like*, and is also evident from S1's shift in intonation to a higher pitch as well as with more exaggerated pitch movements. Presumably also referring to Rachel's absence, S3 responds with a pejorative evaluation, *this is dumb though*, followed by a brief pause and her quiet laughter. When there is no immediate uptake to S3's pejorative evaluation, she offers a partial apology (*I'm sorry but*) for her statement, which overlaps with the next speaker's turn in line 142. S3's apology comes as an afterthought and points to her awareness of the face-threatening nature of her on-record negative assessment.

S2 begins another turn (line 142) with a series of false starts (*like she m-, like you know what i mean, like sh-*) followed by a syntactic frame prefacing constructed dialogue (*maybe she's like*). This frame is used to introduce a representation of what Rachel may have been thinking. S2 then 'performs' (Jaworski and Coupland 2005) her voicing of Rachel's thoughts ('*well, if I meet with her tomorrow night it'll get done, she'll have a copy of it to have there.*'), as is evident by both a shift in deixis (the *I* here refers to Rachel, and the *her/she* refers to S2), as well as a shift in prosody (a slightly higher pitch, and stress at the beginning of *meet with her*). This instance of constructed dialogue serves as the second phase of S2's substantiating behavior (hereafter, SB) move, as S2 again implies that Rachel acted deliberately the previous evening in order to avoid the present meeting. Although S2's voicing of Rachel's thoughts is overlapped by both S3 and S1, S2 completes her turn in line 145 with an evaluation – of herself. By immediately following her characterization of Rachel's intentions with an assessment of herself as *so evil*, S2 indexes the potentially harmful, or malicious, dimension of the gossip that she is engaging in. However, S2's *oh I'm so evil but* utterance remains incomplete, as the talk immediately moves to which group members have missed which meetings (lines 146–161).

At this early stage in the gossip episode, there is still ambiguity about group members' stances with respect to Rachel. S2 draws others' attention to Rachel's absence, and offers a possible interpretation of it through the use of constructed dialogue. Yet this interpretation is not explicitly ratified by the other group members. Similarly, S3's pejorative assessment of *this is dumb* receives no uptake,

nor do any of the group members orient to S2's self-assessment of *I'm so evil*. The related face-work (e.g. S3's apology, and S2's self-assessment) is significant here, because as Guendouzi (2001) and Jaworski and Coupland (2005) have argued, an individual engaging in gossip needs to sustain a positive self-image while simultaneously negotiating the pejorative evaluation of the other person. At this point, the gossip is still incipient, and the group's attention shifts to accounting for all of the members' attendance in prior meetings.

Having established that the majority of the group members have also missed at least one prior meeting, 'othering' Rachel now requires the group to focus on some other morally questionable behavior. Therefore, in the next segment (Extract 3), it is no longer Rachel's absence from the current meeting that is the issue. Instead, her actions during the previous evening's meeting are called into question. Following a brief pause after the discussion of who attended and was present at which meetings, S1 shows her interest in continuing the previously-initiated line of gossip, as she uses constructed dialogue to introduce a new substantiating behavior move. This time, the constructed dialogue takes the form of the unsaid: what Rachel did *not* say (line 163).

Extract 3

- 162 S1: and it's not like, it's not like she had this done either or anything
 163 you know what i mean? [S3: right] it's not like she hande- like
 164 'i know i can't come on Friday but here's my paper.' [S3: right]
 165 well sort of but like, you wrote it
 166 S2: [i (...) did a lot of the writing] last night like she was online
 167 looking for articles. you know
 168 S1: i thought we had an overabundance of articles
 169 S2: oh God yeah
 170 S4: (we do yeah)
 171 S3: yeah we do

Building on S2's previous explanation of Rachel's absence, S1 offers a vague – though more explicitly negative – characterization of what else Rachel has failed to do (*it's not like she had this done either or anything*) in line 162, which she follows with the inquiry *you know what I mean?* to solicit agreement and support from other group members. Obtaining interlocutor agreement here is important because gossip is a highly interactive type of speech activity and participants need continual feedback from recipients not only to ensure their interest and involvement (Eggs and Slade 1997) but also to co-construct a shared moral stance (Jaworski and Coupland 2005). Accordingly, after S3 responds with the agreement expression *right* (overlapping with S1 in line 164), S1 continues with her SB move.

By using hypothetical constructed dialogue in line 164, S1 models possible responses that the absent party, Rachel, might have said or intended (i.e. giving a portion of paperwork to the group in lieu of attending the meeting) – but did not

actually do. This move is supported by a second agreement token from S3 (line 164), again overlapping S1's speech. S1 continues with a hedged concession (*well sort of but like*), followed by a claim which now attributes authorship solely to S2: *you wrote it*. Agreeing with this particular version of the previous evening's events as presented by S1 (who herself was not there), S2 emphasizes her own actions as separate from Rachel's. In line 166, S2's utterance overlaps with the end of S1's qualified *well sort of but like*, as S2 emphasizes her own contribution with increased pitch and stress on the pronoun *I* and a slight pause before continuing with her actions: *did a lot of the writing last night*. As part of this dissociation from Rachel, S2 then provides another SB by describing Rachel's actions as searching for articles rather than contributing to the writing. S1 responds by implying that Rachel's actions were unnecessary, thereby devaluing Rachel's work. At this point, all of the group's members chime in – even S4, who is otherwise silent during the gossip episode – and agree that the group has *an overabundance of articles*. In line 169, S2 agrees, using exaggerated affect (*Oh God yeah*), which contradicts her earlier, more neutral, characterization of Rachel's efforts to locate more articles (line 35).

Having reached some consensus, the gossip episode is temporarily suspended at the end of Extract 3, as the group resumes discussion about their project for several more turns (lines 172–195). The data thus far illustrate how participants' orientation to the topic of gossip is actually interwoven throughout their ongoing interaction, temporarily receding as the group's primary focus and attention shifts to the task at hand, and occasionally re-emerging, as different participants bring the focus back to Rachel: initially S2 does so in Extract 2, followed by S1 in Extract 3. In the turns immediately preceding line 196, the group discusses how to integrate sources into their literature review. Seamlessly merging the topic of Rachel into the ongoing flow of talk about the group's paper, S2 re-introduces the target of the gossip once again (line 196, below).

As the gossip progresses, there is a shift in the type of constructed dialogue used, as seen in Extract 4. Whereas earlier in this interaction participants used hypothetical or 'unsaid' forms of constructed dialogue, here, in lines 196 and 202–205, S2 uses direct reported speech that is specifically attributed to Rachel (and to herself) to produce explicit SB moves, which invite and elicit further pejorative evaluation by others toward Rachel.

Extract 4

- 196 S2: cuz like last night Rachel's like 'well do we hafta, explain our arti-
 197 the articles that we talk about?' and i'm like 'n- no' like i'm
 198 assuming that's what the lit review is for and the lit review is being
 199 turned in with it. [S3: yeah] so, i don't think that, we do
 200 S3: okay

- 201 <PAUSE: 5.0>
 202 S2: um, but like and you know like Rach- or she's like 'well i'll do the
 203 intro and Conclusion' or like 'i'll take it to Sweetland Writing
 204 Center and get it looked over' and, you know like, [S1: i just] 'i'll
 205 do all of this stuff' [S1: i just don't believe her] but like, i don't
 206 even know if it, makes up for her not being here because like,
 207 you know?
 208 S1: cuz all of us would love to be sleeping right now. <LAUGH>
 209 S3: i just don't want to, count on her for something, because i mean we
 210 only have a week left, and if we count on her for something if she
 211 doesn't do it, [S1: what are we gonna do?] but then, she can't just
 212 do nothing'
 213 S1: she can and i'll give her a D.
 214 S2: Yeah
 215 S3: Yeah
 216 S1: i, i'm totally not afraid to do that
 217 S3: i know <LAUGH> i don't have a problem with it either.
 218 <S1: LAUGH>

In this sequence of talk, initiated by S2, Rachel is portrayed as confused about the writing task. In the same turn, S2 simultaneously presents herself as more knowledgeable, as she illustrates – through her own reported speech – how she clarified Rachel's doubts. The contrast between Rachel's confusion and S2's certainty is not only indicated by S2's lexical choices, but is also underscored by a more subtle contextualization cue: her shift in intonation. S2 uses a rising intonation to index Rachel's uncertainty about the task (lines 196–197), whereas when she reports her own response to Rachel's question, she uses a falling tone and lengthening to convey her own authoritative stance. Her *no* in line 197 is emphatic and definitive. S2 is not merely transmitting the talk that occurred the previous evening. S2's use of constructed dialogue in this particular interactional context invites closer scrutiny, considering that the meaning of any speech utterance once transferred to another context, will fundamentally change (Bakhtin 1981). Since constructed dialogue is often deployed in order to serve some interactional goal (Tannen 2007), the reporter's intentions need to be taken into consideration. In this case, S2's interactional goals, while initially vague, become increasingly clearer, as she continues to re-introduce the topic of Rachel even at points (for example, in line 202) where this topic could be considered completed.

Following a five second pause (line 201) – after none of the participants respond with evaluative comments to S2's constructed dialogue – S2 begins another SB move, again through constructed dialogue attributed to Rachel: 'well i'll do the intro and conclusion,' 'i'll take it to Sweetland Writing Center and get it looked over,' 'i'll do all of this stuff' (lines 202–205). S2 uses this constructed dialogue to share with the other group members her own projections of Rachel's intentions. Regardless of the seemingly positive content of these

instances of constructed dialogue, in the current context they function as another SB move that invites a number of pejorative evaluations of Rachel. This time, the other participants do respond to the constructed dialogue offered by S2, and their pejorative evaluations include S1's *I just don't believe her* as well as her comment in line 208 (*cuz all of us would love to be sleeping right now*), which builds on S2's earlier speculations that Rachel met with S2 the evening before in order to avoid the current morning meeting. S1's pejorative evaluation is reinforced by S3 in line 209 (*i just don't want to, count on her for something*), lending further support to S1's pejorative evaluation: that Rachel is not trustworthy. Another SB move is provided by S3 (*but then, she can't just do nothing*), which effectively 'erases' any contributions that Rachel has already made to the group's project. Through these moves, the participants construct their shared norms related to acceptable behaviors and appropriate actions with respect to their collaborative work.

At this point, an interactional pattern can be observed. Earlier, near the beginning of the gossip episode, S1 responded to S2's introduction of Rachel as the target of gossip by using hypothetical forms of constructed dialogue to invoke particular inferences about Rachel. Now, at this stage of the interaction, S2 uses forms of constructed dialogue that appear more like direct representations of actual speech to offer up more specific evidence of Rachel's morally questionable behaviors to the rest of the group. S1 and S3 respond by providing negative evaluation of those behaviors, and in doing so, they 'other' (Jaworski and Coupland 2005) Rachel. As the initiator of the gossip, S2 treads carefully, because gossip is face-threatening in nature. Constructed dialogue is thus a useful resource for appearing to 'objectively' present the words and actions of the non-present group member, while simultaneously opening up those words and actions for scrutiny and evaluation by others. In short, constructed dialogue serves as a type of 'interactional bait,' which others must respond to, and build on, in order for the gossip to be successful.

The assertion *but then she can't just do nothing* is followed by S1's threatening consequence (*she can and i'll give her a D*), which is met with agreement from both S2 and S3. This show of solidarity and support by the other group members allows S1 to emphasize her position on the matter (*i'm totally not afraid to do that*). S3 makes a similar statement in her turn that follows, further validating the norms that the group has jointly created. At this moment, all three speakers are clearly aligned in their judgment of Rachel and in their assessment of her actions. They have also reached consensus on a particular version of Rachel's (inadequate) contributions to the group project.

In the final extract, S2 continues to use constructed dialogue as an interactional strategy to encourage others' assessment of Rachel's behaviors. Furthermore, S2's lexical choices in line 219 (*always pushing*) serve as contextualization cues, revealing her own negative stance towards Rachel's behavior.

Extract 5

- 219 S2: well you know how she like is like always pushing like 'well if
 220 someone that works a lot on the paper and doesn't talk a lot in the,
 221 presentation like, i think that's totally fine or someone talks in the
 222 presentation, and doesn't do as much on the paper i think that's
 223 fine.' i mean she's like setting herself up for like, you know?
 224 S3: i don't think that's fine
 225 S2: i yeah i do, i think it's fine_ i mean, wait what'd you say?
 226 [S3: i said i] you don't think it's fine?
 227 S3: i don't think it's fi- i mean
 228 S2: yeah i mean
 229 S3: i don't think it's fine that she's saying because i think she's saying
 230 that just, [S2: to, get out of it mhm] as an excuse like, and that
 231 she thinks she's gonna talk during the 't presentation but that
 232 won't happen. [S1: right] you know?
 233 S2: yeah cuz she's like well 'i don't mind talking in front of people.'
 234 S1: she, she won't work in the paper and then she,
 235 S3: is saying that she's_ yeah
 236 S1: won't do anything in the presentation either.
 237 <PAUSE: 6.0>
 238 S2: and like if she's gonna, like put this paper together and write a
 239 intro and, conclusion, well she better get it done by the ear- early
 240 next week so that way, we can come together and look at that
 241 and make sure it's fine, you know?
 242 S1: do you guys think_ maybe i'll just discuss what i was thinking
 243 about putting in the, and the like_ cuz I watched the movie l- i told
 244 you like r- Lorenzo's Oil [S3: uhuh] which was the true story and
 245 then In the Gloaming was like, almost the same thing, [S3: uhuh]
 246 it was about a- another sick son and he was sick in a different way
 247 and he was older but he was still, sp- dying. [S3: uhuh] and uh...
 248 S2: hi Rachel
 249 S5: i'm sorry my alarm didn't go off this morning (..)
 250 S1: um, i think it's really interesting to show_ like they paralleled each
 251 other exactly with how the mother acted and how the father acted.
 252 and then i'll note that's
 253 S2: the two different movies?
 254 S1: yeah, and one was based on a true story.
 255 S3: that one's supposed to be, based on a true story.

After constructing the group's shared stance through the use of *you know how she like is* (line 219), S2 uses the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986), *always*, to characterize Rachel's behavior as consistently *pushing* to have her own ideas about equitable division of the workload accepted by the other group members. Interestingly, at this point in the interaction, there are no hesitations or false starts as S2 launches into her final characterizations of Rachel. Perhaps S2 is no longer hesitant, having observed that the other group

members are 'on board' with the gossip episode, with the strong consensus that was reached at the end of Extract 4. S2 ends her turn in line 223 with another incomplete pejorative evaluation move, which suggests some intentionality on Rachel's part (*she's like setting herself up for*). This unfinished statement is followed by a request for agreement (*like, you know?*). Following an incomplete utterance with a solicitation for agreement allows S2's interlocutors to fill in what she has left unfinished, and indeed leads to a direct pejorative evaluation of Rachel's presumed behavior by S3 (*I don't think that's fine*).

There is some ambiguity in lines 221–223 with respect to whose perspective is being voiced in S2's *i think that's totally fine*. On the one hand, this appears to be a continuation of constructed dialogue, introduced by the same syntactic frame S2 used previously (*she is... like*), and followed by discourse marker *well*, which was also used to initiate her previous reports of Rachel's speech or thoughts (lines 143, 196 and 202). On the other hand, in this instance there is no shift in S2's intonation, so it is unclear whether the constructed dialogue ends and S2's own perspective begins just after *doesn't talk a lot in the presentation* (lines 220–221) – or just before *i mean she's like setting herself up for like* (line 223). Regardless of whose perspective is being voiced here, S3 projects a clear counter-position in line 224. In response, S2 (apparently having misheard S3), begins to disagree, but stops herself mid-utterance and requests clarification from S3: *wait what'd you say? [...] you don't think it's fine?*. S3 repeats her clear disapproval of Rachel's behavior (*i don't think that's fine*) two more times. This represents a crucial moment in the interaction, since a divergence of opinions about legitimate contributions to the group's written product and oral presentation could threaten the recently-achieved group consensus. In lines 229–230, S2 and S3 co-construct a pejorative evaluation, as S2's *to get out of it* completes S3's utterance (*i think she's saying that just*), and overlaps with S3's own characterization of Rachel's behavior as *an excuse*. As S1 overlaps with agreement in line 232, the group's perspectives converge once again, and their alignment is re-established. In this segment of the interaction, it becomes evident that achieving alignment or consensus is not 'once and for all,' but rather, alignment must be continually managed and negotiated throughout the interaction. And it is only by examining an extended gossip episode (in this case, one that is interwoven with other task-oriented talk) that the tenuous nature of this alignment becomes apparent.

In line 233, S2 uses constructed dialogue again to represent Rachel's position: *yeah cuz she's like 'well i don't mind talking in front of people...'* The group members continue to work together to co-construct a projection of Rachel's future actions, along with possible implications of those actions. In her turn that starts in line 238, S2 establishes a boundary between *she*, Rachel, (*like if she's gonna, like put this paper together... well she better get it done*) and *we*, the group that includes S1, S3, and herself (*so that way, we can come together...*). As S1 finally shifts the topic from the gossipee, Rachel, back to the task at hand (line 242) – a discussion of two

similar films that she watched for the project – the up-until-now absent Rachel suddenly appears. Her presence is acknowledged by S2 in turn 248, with the quietly-uttered greeting *hi Rachel*, to which Rachel responds with a barely audible account of her alarm not going off. Following a brief pause, S1 continues with her talk about the films. With this, the gossip episode officially ends, and for the remainder of the meeting, the group members discuss the content and structure of their project. After Rachel appears, the ‘on-task’ talk continues with no indication in the continuing dialogue about how the group collaborated to criticize Rachel before she showed up. In fact, as their project talk continues, Rachel does offer to write the paper’s introduction (as the other group members had predicted), but she also takes an active role in the continuing discussion about the paper’s content.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study has merged two lines of inquiry in sociolinguistics: research on gossip and research on constructed dialogue. Our analysis builds on and extends prior research by focusing specifically on the ways in which constructed dialogue serves as a productive interactional resource in gossip, by inviting evaluative commentary from others. We have shown how constructed dialogue can be viewed as a type of ‘interactional bait,’ which may implicitly encode a speaker’s perspective on the target of the gossip, but which ultimately relies on subsequent evaluation and explicit judgment from others. It is this process that leads to gossip as an interactional achievement. Furthermore, this process is iterative, which means that each new sequence of constructed dialogue and evaluation offers participants the opportunity to negotiate and renegotiate their emerging shared values and alignments.

Whereas prior studies of gossip have tended to rely upon shorter excerpts of gossip from interactions among different groups of participants, the present study also differs in its focus on a single extended gossip episode, embedded within a larger speech activity. Examining how gossip unfolds over time in a single ongoing interaction with the same group of participants enabled us to show how, at some points in the interaction, constructed dialogue was treated as a shared resource oriented to by various group members – while at other points, it was not. It also revealed that even though different participants may have different roles in the construction of gossip, there must be a shared commitment and orientation to sustaining the gossip if it is to evolve over time.

Finally, even though gossip enables participants to work out and negotiate mutual norms and values and to establish a shared stance (Jaworski and Coupland 2005), at the same time gossip is also a potentially problematic and face-threatening mode of discourse (Blum Kulka 2000; Thornborrow and Morris 2004). This tension was reflected in the discourse of the participants: in the early phases of this gossip episode, group members’ evaluative contributions were more tentative. In later phases, judgments became more explicit, as individual

group members began to align with one another. We also observed a parallel in the progression of types of constructed dialogue deployed by participants, with speakers using instances of hypothetical or unrealis (i.e. 'unsaid') constructed dialogue (i.e. instances that cannot be heard as representations of actual speech) earlier in the interaction, to representations of speech that was purportedly said appearing later in the interaction. We look forward to future sociolinguistic research to shed even more light on finer distinctions among different types of constructed dialogue in gossip.

NOTES

1. We thank Allan Bell, Joseph Park, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We are also grateful to Charles Antaki for early words of encouragement, and to Amanda Huensch for her analytic insights about prosodic features.
 2. Of course, as one reviewer pointed out, some topics of gossip (e.g. an individual's appearance) may preclude the use of reported speech.
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APPENDIX: *Transcription conventions*

- , A comma indicates a brief (1–2 second) mid-utterance pause with non-phrase-final intonation contour.
- . A period indicates a brief pause accompanied by an utterance final (falling) intonation contour; not used in a syntactic sense to indicate complete sentences.
- (1.0) A pause in number of seconds.
- ... Ellipses indicate a pause of 2–3 seconds.
- [] Square brackets indicate a speaker overlap.
- 'words' Single quote marks enclose instances of constructed dialogue.
- (words) Words surrounded by parentheses indicate the transcription is uncertain (e.g. ...*(seem) to lose it myself*).
- < > Various contextual (non-speech) events are noted in angle brackets (e.g. <LAUGH> or <WRITING ON BOARD>).
- wor- Truncated or cut-off words have a hyphen at the end of the last audible sound/letter (e.g. *sell its output and buy th- all its*).
- word_ An underscore at the end of a word indicates a false start in which a whole word is spoken but then the speaker re-starts the phrase (e.g. *or i don't_ i mean f- so what you're saying is for any*).
- S1: Speaker IDs are assigned in the order in which they speak in the recording (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, etc.).

More detailed information about the conventions used in the MICASE corpus can be found at: <http://micase.elicorpora.info/micase-statistics-and-transcription-conventions/micase-transcription-and-mark-up-convent>

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