'Viva Harry! Viva Meghan!': uma análise de estratégias de argumentação polidas e agressivas em fóruns online sobre celebridades

'Long live Harry and Meghan!': an analysis of polite and aggressive argumentation strategies from online forums on celebrity-related news

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RESUMO: O casamento real do Príncipe Harry e Meghan Markle aconteceu em Windsor, em 19 de maio de 2018. Antes deste acontecimento, a nacionalidade, profissão, estado civil e origem étnica da noiva tinham já alimentado os tabloides e as revistas cor-de-rosa. A grande visibilidade de ambos converteu-os em alvos de comentários de apoio, mas também de discursos de ódio e agressão verbal. Na altura do casamento, uma enorme quantidade de comentários online surgiu nos jornais, onde se exprimiam opiniões muito extremas. Uma amostra de comentários publicados no *The Daily Telegraph* online em 19 de maio, com foco nos diferentes aspetos da cerimónia, será aqui objeto de análise. De modo a explorar o funcionamento da argumentação no âmbito desta arena contemporânea de discussão pública, é objetivo deste artigo debruçar-se sobre formas de exprimir linhas de argumentação presentes nestes comentários, com estratégias argumentativas para exprimir concordância ou desacordo relativamente a pontos de vista anteriores, tanto gerais como em resposta a comentários específicos. Argumentos específicos são frequentemente apresentados de modo a persuadir; o desacordo é muitas vezes apresentado através da ridicularização das contribuições de outros comentadores. O humor pode ser uma forma eficaz de salvar a face ou de desviar comentários agressivos 'ad hominem'..

ABSTRACT: The Royal Wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle took place in Windsor, on 19 May, 2018. Prior to the event, the bride's nationality, profession, marital status and ethnicity were already news fodder for tabloids and society magazines. The couple's high visibility made them targets for supportive comments, as well as hate speech and verbal aggression. At the time of the wedding, an array of contradictory online comments could be found in newspapers, often with extreme opinions being voiced. A sample of comments found on *The Daily Telegraph* on the 19th May will be looked into, focusing on different aspects of the ceremony. To explore the functioning of argumentation within such a contemporary arena for public discussion, it is the purpose of this paper to elaborate on the ways of expressing lines of reasoning

displayed in these online comments, with argumentation strategies for agreement or disagreement about previously expressed points of view, either general in tone, or appearing as a thread in response to a specific commentator. Specific arguments are often put forward, to persuade others; disagreement is often established by poking fun at others' contributions, whereas humour can be effective for face-saving purposes or for deflecting aggressive 'ad hominem' comments.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Royal Wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle took place at St George's Chapel, in Windsor, on 19 May, 2018. This event elicited a deluge of contradictory comments on every social media. Even prior to the event, items such as the bride's nationality, profession, marital status and ethnicity were already news fodder for tabloids and society magazines. The high visibility enjoyed by a prominent member of the Royal Family and, therefore, by his bride, makes them both easy targets for entirely enthusiastic and effusive comments, as well as for hate speech and verbal aggression of every kind. The fact that they are both public figures, which creates an illusory sense of familiarity on the part of the public, can (at least partially) account for the suspension of politeness we can witness in several of the online comments that were published. As the old saying goes, 'familiarity breeds contempt' – besides, as we will emphasize at a later point, there is a sense of impunity that stems from the relative anonymity provided by online forums, and this can encourage participants to loosen up and forget politeness altogether, since there will be no immediate social sanction to punish the transgressor. In this sense, it is possible to detect the disruptive potential of such forums, since that they put at risk 'the presumption of non-threatening intention' (Goody, 1978: 15), on which we base much of our daily interactions. In this sense, we can tentatively say that this specific kind of interaction, with its peculiar characteristics, can threaten the very function of politeness rules as a shield against aggression. In the specific case of online forums (especially in the cases where there is no moderator), we might be witnessing the existence of social groups where the use of politeness is of little practical use – maybe because the discussion is idle, for the majority of participants, and any other discussion themes might elicit the same kind of disruptive behavior. As Brown & Levinson point out - based on Goffman's work (1971),

> […] the problem for any social group is to control its internal aggression while retaining the potential for aggression both in internal social control and, especially, in external competitive relations with other groups […]. [P]oliteness, like formal diplomatic protocol (for which it must surely be the model), presupposes that potential for aggression as

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it seeks to disarm it, as makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties. But how? Goffman suggests that it is through the diplomatic fiction of the *virtual offence*, 'or worst possible reading' of some action by A that potentially trespasses on B's interests, equanimity or personal preserve. […] Thus is constructed a precise semiotics of peaceful vs aggressive intentions […], which in assigning such momentous significance to what are often trivial substantive acts requires a constant vigilance over the manner in which social interaction is conducted. *This semiotic system is then responsible for the shaping of much everyday interaction, and in so shaping it, constitutes a potent form of social control.* (1987: 1-2, emphasis added in the last sentence of the quotation)

This balance is necessary for the inner regulation of the social group: it is important that participants in the process remain aware that the 'virtual offence' is a real possibility and that, under regular circumstances it has to checked for the sake of healthy coexistence. However, as Culpeper et al (2013) point out, there are specific areas that seem to demand some degree of conflictive talk in order to work as expected, i.e. areas where the offence is no longer virtual but deliberately highlighted, in order to reach the goal intended (such as army language). Could the language of forums constitute yet one of these areas where FTAs seem to be the rule, i.e. the default way of addressing others and where we expect the response to include FTAs as well? It is significant that, in the excerpts that will be analyzed afterwards, participants do not seem to react negatively or complain as to the form they are addressed, but rather to the criticism that is addressed to them – as if the form of address was irrelevant, in itself. That represents a somewhat different scenario from what happens in the case of television debates. As pointed out by Kerbrat-Orecchioni, this is a confrontational situation, where a strict adherence to politeness rules, when addressing the other participants, would endanger the very aims of the participants. However, there are still limits to what can actually be said, since participants are well identified and there are many witnesses (in this case, the debate moderator and the audience) who are following the verbal exchanges:

C'est avec leur partenaire de plateau que les débatteurs doivent polémiquer; mais ce sont les téléspectateurs qu'il s'agit de convaincre et de séduire, en leur offrant le spectacle d'un affrontement musclé tout en évitant de les choquer (même s'ils espèrent secrètement que survienne quelque « incident » venant pimenter la routine du débat). (2010: 40)

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This 'muscled type of conflict' is one of the situations we can witness when perusing the array of contradictory online comments was to be found on the newspaper pages at the time of the Royal Wedding, often with disparate and extreme opinions being voiced. However, and unlike what happens in television debates, online debates do not have to worry about the consequences of their verbal production: they do not know each other and no one who reads the comment section can identify them. The only possible sanction would be to have a specific comment deleted by the moderator, which is, by no means, an effective deterrent to participants in these forums. Taking into consideration the particular characteristics of this discourse, and by means of methodologies from discourse analysis, a sample of comments found on *The Telegraph* online published on the 19th May will be looked into, focusing on different aspects of the wedding ceremony, such as the bride's dress(es), outfits and behavior of guests, and performance of broadcasters from different TV channels.

In an effort to explore the functioning of argumentation within such a contemporary arena for public discussion, this article elaborates on the ways of expressing given lines of reasoning which are displayed in these online comments, which often appear as a starting point to opinions 'for' or 'against'; under analysis will also be the argumentation strategies used to indicate agreement or disagreement as to previously expressed points of view, either general in tone, or appearing as a thread in direct response to a specific commentator. As we will see, specific (and sometimes fully-fledged) arguments are often put forward, in an effort to persuade other commentators; in other cases, disagreement is established by poking fun at other people's contributions, whereas in other instances, humor is also shown to be effective for face-saving purposes or for deflecting aggressive 'ad hominem' comments.

Effectively, in recent years, it is hard to think of a mundane event that could elicit so many comments, both positive and negative, as Harry and Meghan's wedding. Every element related to it seems to have been prepared on purpose to excite an impressive array of opinions, side--taking, eulogy and even hatred. Apart from the fact that a royal wedding in the UK is always

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front-page news all over the world, the novelties brought by the bride herself made the event even more interesting both for locals and international commentators.

This is certainly a promising and contemporary subject on which to look for conflict of opinion and sometimes violently expressed standpoints, which explains the reason for choosing it as the focus of this paper. However, in order to analyze it in terms of argumentation, it was also necessary to look for a material support that could keep a record of the opinions expressed, and that was the reason why online comments on this specific issue were chosen as corpus for this paper – even though the option for this kind of discourse also presents some disadvantages related with the fluidity of the medium and its inherent lack of inner structuring, which is commonly found in more formal written discourses. However, the liveliness, the immediacy of the comments, together with the argumentation possibilities in terms of full-fledged forms of expression allowed by anonymity, certainly make up for those disadvantages, even though the degree of impoliteness also increases. It is undeniable that there are strong points as well as disadvantages in choosing comments found in internet forums as material for argumentative strategies:

> […] Internet platforms are rapidly developing into formidable mediums for the encouragement of deliberative discussions. Some scholars suggest that anonymity and reduced social context cues tend to lessen individual's fears of isolation in speaking out and expressing their own opinions online. […] However, scholars have begun to doubt the advantages of Internet-based public discussions. That is, public online discussions are found to be conditionally beneficial depending on whether the discourse is civil. […] The very same features that generated praise for discussions on the Internet […] are now recognized as particularly susceptible to highly toxic uncivil content. (Kim, 2018: 405, emphasis added)

As we can see, anonymity can be seen as a positive force, in that it allows individuals to have a voice of their own. On the other hand, as was previously mentioned, that same anonymity can threaten the real possibilities for fruitful argumentation and respective analysis, since individuals can, should they choose to do so, hide behind an assumed identity and express vicious and aggressive points of view without fearing any kind of consequence or social sanction.

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One of the possibilities for partly circumventing to issue of extreme uncivility that can hinder proper argumentation is to select the corpus for analysis from forums that present some kind of moderation – although the existence of a moderating instance also raises issues related with how boundaries are established: it can be a difficult task, as well as a highly subjective one, to decide where the line should be drawn and decide what is 'toxic uncivility' and what can be read as 'an acceptable degree of impoliteness', which can encompass a number of humorous effects that, in some cases, can even foster further argumentation.

2. ONLINE FORUMS AS ARGUMENTATION ARENAS

There are several differences between the corpus that is normally selected by linguists for this kind of analysis on argumentation and the type of language we find in online forums. Kirschner et al (2015: 1) point to discourses such as newspaper articles, legal documents or scientific publications as privileged grounds for in-depth analysis of argumentation and argumentation mining, whose purpose is to identify and extract the underlying structures of natural texts. However, social media texts are also being studied with the help of tools pertaining to the area of discourse mining (Lippi & Torroni, 2016), which represents a challenge, due to their very specific characteristics. These can be summarized as follows:

> Dialogic language on the web in interactive forms of media such as social networks and online forums is very different than the newspaper articles or task-oriented dialogs typically studied in work on natural language processing. […] Online conversation is both more informal and more subjective: users tend to express their opinions with *highly subjective and often emotional language*. Moreover, in many cases context is needed in order to understand what people are saying (Justo *et al*, 2014: 214, emphasis added).

However, although it is more extreme (in that it represents emotions) and often more fluid, making it sometimes difficult to identify speech acts in its occurrences, the discourse from online forums can presents several features that characterize it as argumentative, even though there is some divergence among argumentation theorists on which exactly these features are:

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The current state of the art in argumentation theory is characterized by the coexistence of a variety of theoretical perspectives and approaches, which differ considerably from each other in conceptualization, scope, and theoretical refinement. (Habernal & Gurevytch, 2016: 129-130).

However, a basic and consensual definition of the concept could be 'the activity of making or giving arguments for some purpose, or else a collection of such arguments' (Blair, 2012: 73). On the other hand, an 'argument' could be explained as 'a set of one or more reasons for doing something, such as—but not limited to—to adopt or maintain an attitude such as a belief but also such as hope, or anger, or expectation; to accept a proposition; or to engage in an activity.' (Blair, 2012: 73). Very often, it is the purpose of argumentation to persuade others to adhere to our stated opinions. By 'persuasion' we mean 'a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom.' (Blair, 2012: 73).

That can happen on the strength of the proponent having put forward strong, relevant and convincing arguments to defend its standpoint – or, conversely, the proponent's arguments can be refuted with equally convincing arguments on the part of the other participants. It would seem to be a part of the dialectic obligation, where participants are expected to deliver balanced contributions, which try to counter and refute previous arguments (van Laar, 2005: 297) However, argumentation does not always have to aim at persuasion – and that is one of the things that often happens in online forums. What is true of a legal document or of a scientific article in an academic journal (Green, 2017) is not necessarily so when we analyse online forums.

The very concept of a 'proponent' whose standpoint is challenged implies some degree of hierarchy, which is totally shattered by the fact that everyone in online forums apparently feels free to start their own thread, or to engage in (sometimes) very heated discussions that are taking place simultaneously in other threads, and then, without any sense of conclusion or clo-

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sure, suddenly dropping out from the conversation, thus giving up argumentation altogether. In many situations, the sense of purpose appears to be lacking, in that commentators do not seem to expect to win the discussion, and just seem to want to voice their standpoint about a particular issue. Oftentimes, in online forums, we do not get any evidence of the result of the persuasive endeavour, which is something that can also make us doubt its very existence, if we accept the following basic tenets of persuasion:

Persuasion is an attempt to influence a person's beliefs, attitudes, intentions, motivations, or behaviors. In persuasion, one party (the 'persuader') induces a particular kind of mental state in another party (the 'persuadee'), like flattery or threats, but unlike expressions of sentiment, persuasion also involves the potential change in the mental state of the other party. Contemporary psychology and communication science further require the persuader to be acting intentionally. *Correspondingly, any instance of (successful) persuasion is composed of two events: (a) an attempt by the persuader, which we term the persuasive act, and (b) subsequent uptake by the persuadee.* (Iyer et al, 2017: 55)

Very often, in online forums, claims based on rational arguments (which would correspond to the *logos* dimension of argumentation as postulated by Aristotle) are challenged by emotional reasoning (corresponding to *pathos*). Others yet are based on *ethos*, when the commentator bases its claims on inherent or acquired credibility. All this fluidity and lack of inner structure can indeed be a challenge to an analysis of argumentation, although, as has already been pointed out, many instances of it are still possible to identify. 3. An analysis of comments from online forums

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3. AN ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS FROM ONLINE FORUMS

For the purposes of this article, and in order to minimize 'toxic impoliteness', the corpus was selected from the online edition of the *Daily Telegraph* on the days following the Royal Wedding (cf. Figs 1, 2 and 3). Although many thematic possibilities existed, this analysis focusses mainly on comments related with the bride's dress(es), outfits and behavior of guests, and performance of broadcasters from the different TV channels that were covering the event. The following data was organized according to a progressive increase on the level of impoliteness and face-threatening speech acts detected in some of the comments. This organization was established purely for methodological reasons. However, in fact, all the possibilities often co--exist in the same thread, which can show that participants are either adapting communicative practices that already exist to this new environment or devising new possibilities in terms of communication (Gruber, 2017: 1) In some cases, the increase in impoliteness correlates with an increasing loss of structure, but that is not necessarily the case in every instance. Once again, even in the case of comments where aggression is more evident (i.e., the last section), the level of absolute derision, with extremely offensive insults, is never reached, as opposed to other social forums, where it often happens, with drastic effects for the communicative process as a whole. This is due to the fact that there is moderation, which includes written warnings to participants that insulting comments will be eliminated, but also to the typical readership of the *Daily Telegraph* online, a broadsheet that has a consensual reputation for quality. As often happens in online comments, several typos and defective syntactical structures are to be found, since many participants are clearly writing hastily, so as to keep up with the speed of the debate. They were not corrected in the transcripts provided below.

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3.1. TRADITIONAL ARGUMENTATIVE STRUCTURE

Fig.1: 'Oh Doria; why was the mother-of-the-bride left looking lonely?'

In this first instance, the comments selected follow the traditional argumentative structure, where a proponent makes a claim based on rational arguments and, in turn, is supported or, conversely, opposed by other(s), as we can see in the following transcript. In italics and capital letters are indicated the functions that each contribution fulfils in the dialogue established by the participants:

> TW (*CLAIM*): Single mothers of children are accustomed to attending significant events in the lives of their children, alone, I know because I am one (*PROVIDING EXPERTISE BASED ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE*). Doria would have been tearful whether with someone or alone. She was not uncomfortable being alone, perhaps, somewhat embar-

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rassed that her daughter's father pulled out at the last minute; that his other children had created such havoc for weeks on end, besmirching her daughter, but, she knows those people better than any. She did not take responsibility or ownership of them. She is her own person, as is her daughter. (…)

AR (*AGREEING AND PROVIDING CONFIRMATORY ELEMENTS*): Wonderful comments. Doria was my stand-out person on Saturday. Her grace and dignity were exemplary. Prince Charles was very attentive and did his best to make her feel included. Of course, Meghan was a very beautiful bride. She seems to have inherited her mother's inner calm and strength.

MW (*AGREEING, SINGLING OUT PROPONENT FOR CORROBORATION PURPOSES, AND EXPANDING THE ISSUE AT STAKE*): @Tommye Winkley Great comment. Doria, throughout, has shown constraint, dignity and she is discreet. My only worry is her pending interview with Oprah. Is going to spoil it all by running to the press with stories? She should leave that to the Ugly sister!

A RIC (*DISAGREEING, IDENTIFYING PROPONENT, PROVIDING REASONS FOR DISAGREEMENT*): @Tommye Winkley   I dont think her father pulled out, he was never on the ticket. The pretence that he was showed Meghan in a better light, he supposedly had heart surgery, a day later Meghan was celebrating Charles birthday, there was little evidence to suggest she was concerned.

In this brief excerpt from the comments section on the bride's mother (cf. Fig.1), we can see that agreement is expressed by positive comments on previous contributions, which is done by means of eulogistic strategies such as the use of positive adjectives ('wonderful', 'great'), followed by emphatic elements that reinforce what has been said by the other participant. On the other hand, at this stage, disagreement is merely expressed by indicating a different opinion, preceded by the neutral 'I don't think…'. In this case, no impoliteness is involved, and

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we do not see any face-threatening acts, although emotional matters are being discussed, establishing a comparison between the situation experienced by the mother of the bride and the commentators' own life experiences. The commentators seem to be genuinely involved in the dialogue and are following argumentation rules.

3.2. COMMENTS THAT STILL FOLLOW ARGUMENTATIVE STRUCTURE, BUT WHICH VERGE ON IMPOLITENESS

KJ (*RESPONDING TO ANOTHER PREVIOUS COMMENT AND INTRODUCING NEW THREAD*): This is a silly article […] What worries me, is the big emphasis on race. Because despite our faults, Britain outlawed slavery in the early 1800s and The Royal Navy was located off West Africa preventing foreign boats from carrying slaves to the plantations. We have never had slaves in this country or black servants and we have never had segregation. […]

PW (*DISAGREEING AND IDENTIFYING PROPONENT*): @K Jen We certainly had black servants. Read your history books.

KJ (*REACTING TO ATTACK*): @Peter Wayde @K Jen I do read my history books and I have lived in Africa. Of course there may have been a few, but it was not the norm to have black servants as they did in the Southern States of the USA.

MW (*RESPONDING TO BOTH*): @K Jen @Peter Wayde Yes the wwc did have it rough but they were seen as indentured servants. They received a salary but African slaves did not.

KJ (*RESPONDING TO THE TWO OTHER COMMENTATOR*S): We are talking about Britain. There were no slaves here in the UK and the white working class were not indentured here in UK, despite that, some lived in shocking poverty.

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In this excerpt, the argumentative structure is once again present: commentators are clearly addressing each other in the comments, in what sometimes looks like a private discussion. The tone is serious and humorous attempts are not discernible. Negative adjectives are used ('silly') to classify the article that starts the discussion.

Interestingly, the article itself (which is still the one from Fig.1) is deemed unworthy of attention, and it is taken as an excuse to tackle subjects that really matter ('What worries me…), something which, in effect, deviates slightly from the original thread of discussion. After this reframing of issue at stake, by dismissing the original one, the ensuing comments seize elements from the first participation and introduce disagreement, by stating facts that contradict previous arguments. At this point, criticism is being expressed by the use of a patronizing tone towards other commentators ('Read your history books.'), highlighted by the use of an imperative. Criticism of this type triggers an irritated and emphatic response (I do read my history books…') and a claim to superior expertise as to the point debated ('…and I have lived in Africa). In this response and others, the structure 'Yes, but…' is used to indicate partial agreement with a previous point and to introduce further counter elements. This happens either at the beginning of the sentence or at the end, where it is used to make a concession to the partial veracity of a previous argument (as in 'There were no slaves here in the UK (…) despite that, some lived in shocking poverty.'), with the adjective 'shocking' also working to that effect. In this instance, despite the presence of more or less direct *ad hominem* attacks, the dialogue still preserves the decencies of debate and indicates interest and emotional involvement in the communicative interaction itself, which is clearly visible in the last comment, with its use of a collective 'we' ('We are talking about Britain.).

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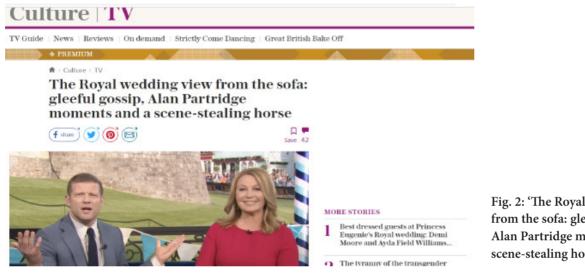### 3.3. ARGUMENTS THAT GET SIDE-TRACKED AND DEVIATE FROM THE ORIGINAL THREAD

Fig. 2: 'The Royal wedding view from the sofa: gleeful gossip, Alan Partridge moments and a scene-stealing horse'

DW (*PROPONENT*): Someone should arrange a tour of the UK for her I would suggest Tynwald, the Trough of Bowland, the Lake District, York, Sycamore Gap and Alnyck Northumbria

KD (*CORRECTS MISTAKE IN ONE OF THE WORDS, ALTHOUGH AGREEING WITH PROPONENT'S ARGUMENT*): It's Alnwick in Northumberland and your right it's amazing. :-)

JS (*CORRECTS MISTAKE MADE BY KD, BUT TRIES TO BE NICE*): @Kris Davison Tut tut ' you're '......well I'm just saying ;)

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AM (*ALSO CORRECTS KD'S MISTAKE, BUT REBUKES HIM FOR STARTING THIS*): @Kris Davison it's "you're right" if we're going to be pedantic!!

AN (*CONFIRMS TOTAL DEVIATION FROM THE THREAD AND POKES FUN AT KD INVOKING AN OLD JOKE*): The quote "your right, it's amazing" reminds me of a famous sketch: "Your right leg, I like. I like your right leg. A lovely leg for the role. That's what I said when I saw you come in. I said, "A lovely leg for the role". I've got nothing against your right leg. The trouble is – neither have you." One might say "your right, it's amazing."

In the case of the excerpt above, the original thread is completely abandoned, which is something that happens quite often in online forums. The title of the article, however, is especially inviting for idle aimless thoughts, with its kitchen-sink approach. Therefore, in the comments section, the tone is light-hearted, and the participants attack each other on the strength of grammatical mistakes that were committed by previous participants. Several linguistic hedges are employed so as to minimize the possibility of face-threatening situations, and minimising aggression also happens by means of graphic signs that indicate good-will (such as ;)). The confirmation that this dialogue is to be read as harmless banter is confirmed by the last participant, who takes the opportunity to tell an old joke, which apparently confirms that the grammatical mistake that started the dialogue might not be a mistake at all, provided the correct context is supplied. In this case, although the main issue was side-tracked and the ensuing conversation delves on quite trivial matters, the participants take the trouble of addressing each other by name and downplaying what could be perceived as FTAs – also anticipating possible attacks from others, with pre-emptive strategies (such as '…if we're going to be pedantic!!'). Therefore, although the subject matter is trite, the niceties of discussion and argumentation are being respected, and the rules of polite give-and-take are observed.

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3.4. IMPOLITE COMMENTS

Fig. 3: 'Meghan Markle's wedding dress is a triumph in its simple perfection – and controversial nod to Wallis Simpson'

CD (*PROPONENT*): While I guess Meghan had heard of Wallis Simpson, the idea that she chose Givenchy to design her dress as a nod towards the earlier American really is nonsense. If I can borrow a remark of John Bercow, why must the Telegraph employ such stupid women?

JdW (*AGREEING*): What complete nonsense. What is it with DT girly - some of them have spent the weekend stirring up racial division and inventing all sorts of 'messages', whilst the rest of them spend their days obsessing about a dress and its implications. They obviously live in a parallel universe, starkly at odds with mainstream humanity.

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MS (*AGREEING*): Christ, do these people live in a perpetual state of b/s.

DS (*agreeing*): "A nod to Wallis Simpson" - baloney! Unless you received royal-family verification, your naive interpretation should have been struck by whatever passes for the editorial department of this section. Grow up, and the sooner the better.

JB (*AGREEING*): Bethan. Do you actually get paid to write this drivel?

FT (*AGREEING, INTRODUCING HUMOUR*): Did you mean Marge Simpson? Elsewhere it's a nod to Audrey Hepburn. And else~elsewhere it's a nod to Jackie Kennedy. Too much nodding going on, in my opinion.

MS (*AGREEING, REINFORCING HUMOUR*): All that nodding and not a sodding brain.

MSc (*AGREEING, REINFORCING HUMOUR*): Wallis Simpson deserves all the 'nods' we can give her. She rescued the country, albeit without meaning to, from the idiot Edward VIII.

MS (*AGREEING, REINFORCING HUMOUR*): True. This one is only saving us from a playboy.

The above excerpt features comments on an article about Meghan's wedding dress (cf. Annex 3), and is the one that features the highest degree of impoliteness. Considered in the present situation, impoliteness, as Bousfield & Locher point out, 'even if most generally seen as face-aggravating behaviour in a specific context, clearly involves the relational aspect of communication in that social actors negotiate their positions vis-à-vis each other.' (2008: 5). In fact, all the commentators disagree with the editorial content (classified as 'drivel') and, consecutively, express their criticism towards the author of the article and the newspaper editorial policy, revealing impatience and exasperation towards the piece of news that started the thread. It is relevant to note that, in the present instance, they all 'agree to disagree' – thus establishing their

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position within the group - against a common target, instead of criticizing each other, as commonly happens. This results in a string of comments that successively complement each other with further layers of humorous remarks. Different types of humour are at stake in this case, mingled with insults (sometimes with direct interpellation), which can be very face-threatening, at points, and clearly correlated with the concept of 'face'. Insults, as noted by Culpeper (2013: 5-6), are a good example of this kind of situation: the journalist (addressed by her first name, Bethan) is directly questioned in the comments as to her professional competence (Bethan. Do you actually get paid to write this drivel?) and about the veracity of her statements about Meghan's dress ('Unless you received royal-family verification, your naive interpretation should have been struck by whatever passes for the editorial department of this section'). All the participants are clearly joining forces against the editorial content and its author, and it results in humour against those two targets, which evolves and extends so as to encompass harsh but humorous criticism about members of the Royal Family itself, as can be seen in the two last comments.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Many more examples of argumentation strategies could have been mentioned in this article, but this very brief analysis clearly points to the wealth of material that can be found in online forums on this issue. It is certainly a wide area to explore, in a systematic matter, also in order to find appropriate forms of analysing discourse which is electronically produced and mediated, with all that this fact implies in terms of discursive instability and the doubts it entails about the ultimate purpose of the commentators in participating in such forums.

At the moment, it is possible to affirm that these commentators are indeed involved in argumentation processes of some kind – although some distinctive features of the phenomenon

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seem to be lacking or are only present at an incipient level. On the other hand, the matter of 'active intentionality' is still moot in several occurrences: there must be an intention of some kind that prompts commentators to participate and get involved. However, this intention is not clear-cut and can, indeed, correspond to one possibility amidst a plethora of possible different aims – it is even possible that many are doing it for entertainment purposes and that their participation does not imply any real effort towards proper argumentation and, therefore, it is possible that there is no persuasive intent at all. This can even undermine the very existence of a communication act in some online forums, in the case of some participants, since the use and abuse of 'toxic impoliteness' effectively kills the possibility of appropriate response from other commentators. In some cases, especially in instances that can be found in online forums without moderation, some comments can be construed as mere narcissistic endeavours, where the participant rants and raves at all the others, shouting a given personal opinion without showing any interest for the responses or reactions that it might elicit.

Further work in this area (along the lines of that undertaken by Iyer et al, 2017, among others) is still required, so that more can be found on the participants' motivation to engage in this kind of discussion, to improve our knowledge on the specific and varied forms online discourses can assume, as well as to look in more depth into the possibility that new practices are emerging since the medium being used (internet) can affect the characteristics of the argumentation that takes place in social networks.

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