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Virtual talk as a communicative resource

Explorations in the field of gene technology.¹

Abstract

In face-to-face conversation, participants often give the floor, or the voice, to non-present participants – *virtual participants*. These are made present in the conversation by actual speakers quoting them, voicing them or referring to their opinions. In this paper, we examine instances of such *virtual talk*. Data are drawn from focus group discussions and public meetings about genetically modified food. Our analyses demonstrate some of the dynamics inherent in the interaction between the speaker, the present participants and one or more virtual participants. We focus on the specific functions of virtual talk, suggesting that it is a communicative resource that can be used to solve a number of different communicative tasks.

1. Introduction.

It is often claimed that, in ordinary conversation, people

talk most of all about what others talk about – they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgement on other people's words, opinions, assertions, information; people are upset by others' words, or agree with them, contest them, refer to them and so forth." (Bakhtin, 1981:338.)

Thus, participants in face-to-face conversation often give the floor, or the voice, to non-present participants. We suggest calling such participants *virtual participants* (Adelswärd, forthc.), who are made present in the conversation by actual speakers quoting them, voicing them or referring to their opinions. Accordingly, in their own

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talk, speakers integrate voices of others in the form of direct speech to achieve certain effects in the current situation. In this paper, this is referred to as *virtual talk*.

Participants in conversation can use many different cues to signal the switch-over to virtual talk. Virtual talk can also perform a number of discursive tasks. Furthermore, several forms of connections between the actual speaker and the virtual participants that he/she introduces into a conversation can be constructed. In this paper, we will examine the forms and functions of virtual talk in discourse data dealing with gene technology. By doing this we also hope to shed some light on the general aspects of virtual talk as a communicative resource.

2. Data

Two sets of data are used in this study. The first set consists of eleven audiotaped and transcribed focus group discussions on genetically modified food.² In eight of them, the participants are “ordinary people” without any special knowledge of, or connection to, the topic of genetically modified food. In the remaining three, the participants are executives in large companies from the food industry sector – representing production, wholesale and retailing. From these eleven focus group discussions, sequences in which one or several of the participants brought in virtual participants (that is quoted, or voiced, others) were analysed. (For more details, see Wibeck forthc. a; Wibeck, forthc. b)

The focus group discussions referred to in this study not only focused on what the participants thought about the subject, but also on what they thought others might think, and feel, about it. So, for this reason alone, virtual talk was abundant. Another characteristic of the chosen discussions was that all participants claimed that the question of genetically modified food was a complicated and difficult one. The discussions seemed to provide the participants more with a means of sorting out their own thoughts than with a platform from which to persuade others to accept pre-determined arguments. Thus, argumentative sequences from the discussions did not exemplify the participants airing an opinion, but rather showed how they were beginning to construct what an opinion might look like. Discursive work was being done in order to dramatise contradictions and make confusion visible, much in the way that Billig (1987) talks about discursive rhetoric. In a sense, focus groups could be seen as thinking cultures in miniature, displaying the thinking and argumentation of groups, not only of individuals (Jovchelovitch 2001; Linell et al. 2001).

The second set of data consists of a public meeting on genetically modified crops recorded within the PARADYS project.³ Oral data from public hearings represent the

² A focus group is a type of focused group interview, in which a small number of participants (in our case 4-6) are brought together to discuss a given issue, under the guidance of a moderator, who preferably assumes a retracted position. For more details about collection and analysis of focus group data, see Wibeck (2000).

³ PARADYS project (Participation and the dynamics of social positioning – The case of biotechnology. Images of self and others in decision making procedures) is a three-year EU-financed research project concerned with citizen participation in the regulation of deliberate release. One of the objectives is to

core of the corpus that is being collected, transcribed and analysed in seven European countries.

Examples used in this article are extracted from a meeting about deliberate release of genetically modified crops that has taken place in Germany⁴. This public meeting was organized by a local initiative in order to initiate stronger forms of citizen participation, to encourage people to engage themselves in the procedure and to organize support for the farm that is directly affected by the deliberate release. Invited speakers were given an opportunity to make a 10-minute statement, after which the discussion was open for comments and questions from the public. Among the participants were national NGOs engaged in environmental protection, representatives of the federal research institute that is taking part in the permitting procedure, owners of local organic farms, representatives of conventional farmers, scientists and ordinary local people.

One of the characteristics of this debate are argumentative sequences in which participants express their attitudes towards GMO, discuss risk and responsibility, ethical questions as well as questions of safety and control. As a support for their arguments, they quote written documents such as letters, guidelines, directives and declarations. Speakers present themselves with the help of social categories: they enter the scene as experts or non-experts, as farmers, consumers or ordinary people. Apart from that, they use virtual talk to integrate other voices into their speech: Voices of politicians, prominent authorities, decision makers, experts, consumers, and ordinary people. It is also interesting to observe how participants link together different levels of discourse: the participants describe their social actions that have taken place before 'here and now'. They combine singular and plural voices originating from within and outside the current discourse and a polyphony of voices appears.

3. Usage of virtual talk

Speakers can have different reasons for incorporating others' utterances or thoughts into the ongoing talk⁵. Virtual talk can take many forms and perform different functions. All participants in conversation make communicative choices. For instance, they can choose to talk or to be silent. If they talk, they can either talk for themselves or for someone else – as their spokespersons or messengers. But they can also use their own turn to present someone else's words or thoughts without accepting the role as spokesperson or messenger.

collect oral, written and electronic data from the administrative procedure of deliberate release of genetically modified crops in each country and to compare them crossculturally. The project is interdisciplinary and consists of 10 partner projects including sociological and linguistic researchers in seven European countries (Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy, Hungary and Sweden). Coordinators are Alfons Bora and Heiko Hausendorf. More information can be found at <http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/iwt/paradys/>.

⁴ The meeting was recorded by Heiko Hausendorf, transcribed and translated by Melanie Werner.

⁵ There are different ways to introduce other voices in conversation, by using verbs, discourse markers, prosodic means or non-verbal signals. For an overall presentation, see for instance Holt 1996, where she analyses 'direct reported speech'.

There are a number of different ways the speaker can use to signal his/her view of the virtual participant and the virtual talk. Virtual talk can be presented as typical or atypical, or as true (in the sense 'actually uttered') or not. Virtual participants can be presented as plural, such as "scientists" or "modern women", or as singular, such as "the man on the street" or "common sense". A virtual participant can be presented as a real person, as "the managing director of Monsanto" or as completely anonymous. A virtual participant can also be presented as hypothetical or unknown. A virtual participant can also be the speaker him/herself speaking from another perspective, time or context ("if I were young today I would say:"). When examining our data we found that, most of the time, there was no explicit mention of who the virtual participants were. The context made this obvious.

The stance that the actual speaker takes towards the virtual talk can be completely neutral. But in actual fact, virtual participants are often brought in to support the speaker or to take the role of an opponent with whom the speaker can have an argument.

In the following we will present examples where

- a) the virtual talk consists of one virtual participant's contribution (notice that the virtual participant can be plural, unknown or hypothetical as just discussed)
- b) the virtual talk consists of two or more virtual participants' interaction and
- c) the virtual talk is constructed by several speakers presenting several virtual participants' joint contributions.

We have chosen musical metaphors, such as 'solo', 'duet' and 'polyphonic chorus', to represent the three types of virtual talk presented. By analysing the examples presented below we will not only demonstrate some of the dynamics inherent in the ongoing interaction between the speaker, the present participants and one or more virtual participants, but also comment on the specific function of virtual talk in each example.

4. Virtual talk as 'solo'.

The first example comes from the German public meeting. Shortly after the statement of the deputy representative of the local farmers (Speaker G), a person from the audience wants to know the farmers' attitudes towards gene manipulated crops. The question is whether the farmers are willing to use GMO as soon as it is legalized or whether they are more cautious about using it. G answers the question partly with the help of virtual talk. In his opinion, the attitude of the farmers is more practically oriented. Higher crops, lower costs, and elimination of the use of herbicides are the most important motivations for the farmers to adopt GMO. After this introduction, Speaker G uses a scenario – a demonstration through the local town – to illustrate the kind of behaviour that will not occur in their hometown.

Example 1⁶

G: there won't be any demonstrations here through our town 'we desperately want to have genetically modified sorts . of wheat or sugar beet' but . if it is made available . then in presentations . then these things will be presented in information sessions . and then one or the other little by little . will make use of it, I am quite sure of that

By constructing virtual talk as a plural voice of the general public using the slogan '*we desperately want to have genetically modified sorts . of wheat or sugar beet*', he gives an example of an action that the local population would not take or of something that they would not say. This constructed kind of non-probable behaviour, or utterance, is then contrasted with how Speaker G thinks the situation will develop instead. In his view, there will be no sudden acceptance or enthusiasm among the population, but the general public and the farmers will get used to GMO little by little.

We will now look at yet another example from the German debate. Here, Speaker P, a university professor, mentions a risk connected to the release of GMO, namely the endangering of ground water. He refers to a discussion he had on this topic with the current minister of agriculture and quotes one of the minister's actual statements: *ground water is a psychological problem*.

Example 2

P: when we see how . the endangering of ground water . a ah for example, . is an unsolved problem and I had a discussion with the incumbent minister of agriculture . at another area of release (? in ...) ah where he said . <lower voice> '*ground water is a psychological problem*' . the ground water was eighty centimetres . under (ground level) . it was located in a valley . right under the area of releases . one has to imagine this . a minister calls this a psychological problem . it was broadcast live . it is therefore possible to verify this . .

One can imagine that the same utterance in a certain context could be interpreted in positive terms (the minister could have meant that 'people are concerned'). But the current speaker is picking up a political authority and quoting his opinion on an important question out of context. The effect of letting the minister utter this statement – without giving any information about the verbal and situational context in which it was uttered – is that he sounds irresponsible. Speaker P is editing the statement and putting it into another frame that invites another interpretation of its contents. In consequence, the party quoted seems to say unreasonable things. To increase the absurdity of the quoted opinion, Speaker P shows how dangerous and serious the situation was and gives ironic comments on the minister's reaction. Subsequently, he provides additional proof (such as reference to television broadcast) that the quotation is correct. What happens here is that the politician is portrayed as

⁶ The original version of the data can be found in the appendix.

a morally irresponsible person, which makes the speaker himself appear to be the more responsible of the two.

To sum up, Speaker P makes, in Example 2, strategic use of virtual talk in his argumentation to indirectly malign and depreciate an authority. As Tannen puts it, "the construction of the 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." (Tannen 1989:109). In addition, this strategy seems to have consequences for the positioning of the speaker. As Harré and Langenhove (1991:398) express it: "When somebody positions someone else, that always implies a positioning of the person him/herself". In our example, depreciating the quoted person seems to strengthen the speaker's own credibility and position him as a responsible and thus morally superior person. A similar use of virtual talk is quite frequent in discussions about 'the others', in which virtual talk allows speakers to position those who are animated as speakers in an unflattering light (Holsanova 1998b:258).

In the two examples just presented, the speaker constructs virtual talk as a solo performance with which he/she can interact and argue. In the following, we will see how virtual talk constructed as an interaction between two virtual participants, as a 'duet', can have the same function.

5. Virtual talk as 'duet'.

As we have seen, some speakers have, by means of virtual talk, the chance to position themselves in relation to others (see for instance Example 2). Virtual participants may be a communicative resource for the speaker to illustrate differences in the way of speaking and behaving, as well as differences in opinions. Using virtual talk may in such cases be interpreted as a form both of taking a position and of presenting oneself in a favourable way – what Goffman (1959) describes as 'impression management'. In the following example, taken from the Swedish focus group data, a group of young Greenpeace activists discuss different ways of reasoning about genetically modified food.

Example 3

A: But if you don't know ... an awful lot about biology and chemistry but you know enough to know that 'OK DNA' that it sort of *'well it sits in a spiral'* and then you think, you understand *'OK you take away one part and put in another and then maybe it affects the qualities and gets bigger, better and more beautiful or more red or whatever'* but... I mean actually you arrive at a way of thinking that you, that we perhaps have learned, do you see what I mean, that we in this room maybe think *'it is OBVIOUS that you have to question, it is OBVIOUS that we must have thirty years of more research, it is ethically wrong and all you cannot do what you want with nature'*

Using constant frame-shifting, A manages to involve several (types of) participants in one and the same utterance. Starting out by describing the situation of an unspecified, collective agent, “you”, she first takes the perspective of an “ordinary person”, who is only slightly familiar with biology and chemistry. By means of prosodic changes, A demonstrates how the virtual voice speaks vaguely about the phenomenon of gene technology. No technical language is used by the virtual participant to describe the technology, but rather colloquial expressions like “take away one part”, “put in another”. The “ordinary person”, thus, is positioned as an uncritical person who does not reflect upon ethical aspects or potential risks connected to the technology.

In contrast to this, A shifts frame again, back to the present participants, who at this point are treated as a homogeneous group (“we in this room...”). Nevertheless, she makes her claim to speak for the others weaker by inserting “maybe” (“we in this room maybe think...”).

The status of the virtual talk, which A attributes to the collective voice belonging to all the present participants, is complex. On the one hand, she illustrates a possible – and typical – way of thinking. On the other, she makes it clear that the virtual talk is a constructed condensation, illustrating a certain line of thinking common among environmentalists. Thus, the present participants are transformed into virtual participants who are quoted hypothetically. However, since A underlines that this kind of thinking is something the present participants have learned, there is yet a more implicit, virtual participant, namely the one who has formulated the arguments that the present participants have adopted. This implicit virtual participant is likely to be the Greenpeace organisation or the environmental movement as a whole. If this were the case, the ignorant and easily manipulated public, which does not care much about nature, is positioned against the reflective and environment-friendly members of the focus group, who are used to questioning technological innovations and expressing concern about the environment, as well as about the ethical dilemmas the new technology may give rise to.

But the two groups may also represent different levels of education. While there are some people who uncritically believe in whatever they are told, there are others – like the present participants – who are educated enough in critical thinking to be able to see through those messages. Viewed in this way, the implicit, collective, virtual participant (the ‘principal’ in Goffman’s (1981) terms) giving rise to the virtual talk that the present participants animate, could be e.g. the Western educational tradition, in which critical thinking is central.

This example shows how, while providing the opportunity for several, but related, interpretations, virtual talk is a communicative resource that enables the speaker to position him/herself in contrast to others. By doing so, the speaker may present him/herself in a favourable way and also enhance group cohesion by involving the other present participants in the virtual talk, hence positioning the group as a whole as, e.g., more educated and morally conscious than other people.

In the next example, we turn back to the German data. Speaker P (the same person as in Example 2) is invited to take the floor and give his statement. He presents himself

as a would-be farmer with a conventional farming background. In his comprehensive presentation, he talks about risks and responsibilities in connection with GMO. His claims are often supported by consultations with experts, by quotations of written documents, by his contacts with authorities and key persons in science, the church and politics. Although he is presenting himself as a non-expert, in his argumentation he actually acts as an expert, as a knowledgeable person. He shows his personal experience and engagement in several unsolved problems and makes analogies to similar cases. We will look at an excerpt from his speech in which he uses analogy and virtual talk in his argumentation.

In Example 4, Speaker P makes a parallel with a rental contract when reporting about the contents of his letter exchange with a local church authority. His starting point is common sense notions of how a tenant should behave in an apartment.

Example 4

P: I wrote a letter to Mr. von M in ninety three <EA> to ask him . ah for his argument . if a lease which is somehow legally comparable with a rent contract an/maybe there are several tenants among us tonight . where one knows for sure, that one can't tear down the apartment ahm but has precise . conditions imposed in the rental contract . on how to behave as a tenant in this apartment . the same goes for a lease . where you also can't just do as you please . What I mean is . that when you take living organisms . which you cannot take back in any way .. which in case of doubt will only . reproduce themselves uncontrollably . when you have them brought into leased land . that this will not be covered by a conventional . legal lease contract . and I wanted to approach the owners of these lands in Lower Saxony . and say . *'dear leasor . can't you, being the protestant church . possibly prevent this from happening, is it all right with you'*, and then Mr von M wrote me a letter which I . have on me, saying . ahm . *'because of all the hunger in the world . we had to do it ...'* Now I have spent many years of my life in these regions we call the third world today . . of this two years alone in Bangladesh . a land said to be the poorest of the of the poor . and I must say . it really is . a . a form of maliciousness . to make use of this argument . the nutritional situation, regarding genetic engineering or even to justify genetic engineering . I could prove . the very opposite on many examples.

Everybody seems to agree on the moral consequences of a rental contract: you cannot ruin the rented apartment. Speaker P makes then a natural analogy with the devastating consequences of planting GMO into leased land. He shows his personal engagement in preventing deliberate release in these locations by quoting his correspondence with Mr. von M, who is the president of the association of monasteries in a big German town managing the properties of the protestant church. Speaker P has already quoted several written documents in the course of his presentation. He was reading aloud the exact wording of EU-guidelines, directives, declarations, letters and testimonies.

This time, he puts himself and Mr. von M on the scene and lets the two parties perform a dialogue based on their letter exchange. But this time, he does not read the letters aloud. Instead, he quotes the gist of their actual communication: He rewords his own question addressed to Mr. von M and summarises his answer in a pathetic voice: *because of all the hunger in the world . . . we had to do it*. As proof that this is the true picture of their exchange, he mentions that he has the letters with him. In fact, Speaker P reduces the argumentation of the other party to only one utterance, which he later on depreciates. He contrasts the argument of the authority with his own personal experience and thereby claims that it does not justify the use of genetic engineering.

6. Virtual talk as polyphonic chorus

The next excerpt, from the later parts of the German debate, is an example of how several voices that stem from different places and different moments in time can be combined to form a virtual polyphony of voices. Speaker C starts out by referring to the statement of Speaker R who comes from an organic farm that is endangered by a deliberate release in her neighbourhood.

Example 5

C: I still have the words . . . of . . . Mrs R ringing in my ears, her consternation as an affected organic farm, . . . who as you said *'well we can't do anything against this anymore . . . there it is . . . within three kilometres distance'* and so on . . . and back then in Z . . . ah, at this public hearing it was also said *'well, you have to understand, now we are only going to discuss preliminary results, you'll just have to get used to the idea, one percent'* . . . this was not necessarily a statement you made but you have also quoted it . . . *'one percent or two percent contamination with genetically modified material . . . you just have to tolerate, or allow it . . . so . . . ah this would be discussed right now, that would be it, . . . end of affairs'* . . . Ah I ask myself . . . facing this background . . . why does the whole of Germany have to be covered with these experiments?

In the first instance of virtual talk, a real person present at the meeting is animated. Although Speaker C turns to her and introduces explicitly the switch between his own and her voice (as you said), the contents are rather a rewording or a resumé of the speaker's actual words. This time, virtual talk illustrates the resigned attitude of the former speaker in this matter: they have to accept the situation, there is no way out.

Then Speaker C goes back in time and refers to a public hearing that took place in another town. This time, he lets another virtual voice appear – an authoritarian and powerful one. In the beginning, this voice is anonymous (it was also said "Well, you have to understand, now we are only going to discuss preliminary results, you'll just have to get used to the idea"). Later on, it becomes a voice of a real person: in the middle of his quotation, Speaker C turns to a concrete person in the room (probably the representative of the Federal research institute that is taking part in the permitting procedure). He admits that the speaker might have used slightly different

wording in his original talk (this was not necessarily a statement you made but you have also quoted it).

Then he refers to another authoritarian source . *one percent or two percent contamination with genetically modified material . you just have to tolerate, or allow it . so . ah this would be discussed right now, that would be it, . end of affairs* but he is not revealing the original (written or spoken) source. Instead, he presents it as a quotation of something that somebody else has quoted on another occasion. Last in his contribution, he explicitly introduces his own voice and poses a rhetorical question: Ah I ask myself . facing this background . why does the whole of Germany have to be covered with these experiments? And towards the end of his contribution, Speaker C explicitly turns to Mr. N, representative of the federal research institute that is taking part in the permitting procedure, and wonders whether the releases could not be concentrated to a smaller area in order to minimise the risks.

From this example – as well as from the other examples – it is clear that reported speech is not as much reported as constructed (cf. Bakhtin 1981; Tannen 1989). In the Swedish data set, consisting of focus group discussions, it was often the case that quotations were not only constructed, but jointly constructed by the participants of the group. The following is an excerpt from a group consisting of four young Greenpeace activists, who continuously made analogies between genetic modification of food and environmental problems. In the example, the participants talk about advertisement campaigns in the field of environmental issues.

Example 6

- 1H: but there is a campaign that I don't know where it comes from actually that I find clear and right to the point and that's clean water or whatever it's called (D: um) where they have there is some guy with a text over him like this 'well I'll pour some paraffin in the'
- 2B: yeah right isn't that a good one isn't that a good one
- 3H: it's extremely
- 4D: what wait what did he say?
- 5B: 'well some petroleum spirit in the sink can't be the whole world' he says
- 6H: xxx no right and then you see I don't know if there are several pictures or something like that (B: right) (D: yes) or there is some text underneath 'this is what fifty thousand Swedes think' or something like that
- 7D: then there is a small picture of everybody then
- 8B: yes and it's it's so good when he says 'that's not the whole world' and then it really becomes the whole world the same
- 9D: yeah yeah
- 10A: I haven't seen that one
- 11D: it's actually good

Before this happens, the participants have had quite an extended discussion about the problem of information. They claimed that there is an abundance of information in our society, which makes it essential for people to choose which information to

take seriously and which to disregard. From this, the participants went on to discuss which type of information is the easiest to grasp. They suggested that information should be different, shocking and that it should make people react. This gave rise to a discussion about how environmental problems are presented in marketing contexts. One advertisement campaign that the participants considered successful was the one mentioned in the excerpt, i.e. the advertisement for clean water.

In the first turn of the extract, H makes a statement about an advertisement campaign that he regards as successful. He briefly describes what it looks like and introduces the protagonist of the commercial, quoting his thoughts as they, according to H, are presented in the text underneath the picture. B then interrupts him with an enthusiastic comment ("yeah right isn't that a good one"), which shows both that B knows what H is talking about and that he agrees with H's opinion; in other words, B's comment helps create mutual understanding and consensus between the two boys. This could have been the end of quoting the advertisement, but as D asks further about what was said in it, the virtual talk has to continue. This time, B makes a claim about what the protagonist actually says. Thus, his version of the virtual talk differs from H's, both in wording ("petroleum spirit" instead of "paraffin"), and in form (virtual talk rather than a textual presentation of virtual thought). Nevertheless, H immediately continues to describe the advertisement: it consists of several pictures with a text underneath, a text which he quotes, but frames with a marker of uncertainty: "or something like that", i.e., he presents the virtual talk in a condensed form, rather than with the exact wording. By this time, D has realised what advertisement the boys are talking about, and she further explains what the advertisement looks like: there is "a small picture of everybody".

In Turn 8, B repeats the quote from Turn 5, but this time he does not use it to describe the advertisement, but to make a value judgement of it: the advertisement works – it is good – because of the pun that makes one reflect. According to Tannen (1989, p. 97), repetition is "a resource by which conversationalists together create a discourse, a relationship, and a world. It is the central linguistic meaning-making strategy, a limitless resource for individual creativity and interpersonal involvement." By repeating his words about "the whole world", B explains how he interprets the meaning of the advertisement, that he grasps the pun, and that he agrees with H on the appreciation of the commercial. The excerpt ends with D further establishing consensus by agreeing with the boys, and A admitting that she really doesn't know what they are talking about. This causes D to pursue her agreement somewhat further by partly repeating B's words ("isn't that a good one") but adding the word "actually" ("it's actually good"), which may indicate that she, after having listened to the boys, remembered which commercial they were talking about, and that she agrees with their evaluation of it.

In short, in a situation of this kind, where participants in a focus group discussion jointly negotiate meaning and try to define, understand and describe the issue-in-focus, they are also likely to jointly construct virtual talk. They help one another to remember what was said, and to explain it to the members of the group who are not familiar with the quotes.

The following example is taken from a focus group discussion between decision-makers and wholesalers in the food industry. It demonstrates how virtual talk is an important resource not only in presenting an opinion, but also in forming one. Often, people do not 'have' opinions that can easily be 'tapped off' by an analyst. Rather, opinions are dynamic and (at least aspects of them) can be challenged, modified and sometimes rejected in interaction. Speakers try out counter-arguments, explore topics and sometimes contradict themselves (for a similar discussion, see Billig 1996). Thus, the bringing in of virtual participants is a communicative resource, which may help the speaker when trying to understand and argue about a certain topic.

Example 7

In the sequence preceding the excerpt in Example 8, the participants have discussed how new body parts might be produced by means of gene technology. One of the members presented this as opposed to genetically modified food, which he claimed to be less acceptable, since it might give rise to ecological problems. At this point, the topic of discussion shifted from genetically modified food to medical applications of gene technology. The remark about genetically modified body parts gave rise to speculations about the possible appearance of humans some hundred years into the future, and further to the statement that certain bodies are already altered by means of surgery. This sequence, which has a rather humorous character, is interrupted by D.

D Then then then it doesn't need to genetic modification can also be foetal diagnostics where you can abort a pregnancy (B: That's right) if you notice that there is something wrong about the foetus (B: Um) and sort of actually on the one hand you could say *'but naturally if you see that a baby is gonna be born that will suffer from...* (C?:Yeah yeah) *whatever water on the brain or whatever then it cannot be sensible to continue'* (C: No). On the other hand you could say *'but but look at the possibility opening up to refine the human race'* (B: Yeah yeah) (A?: Um) which which is frightening (B: Um)... in a way, I mean

He overlaps with the previous speaker, introducing a topic that has not been discussed earlier, namely foetal diagnostics. As an illustration of the moral dilemma the technology may give rise to, D introduces two anonymous virtual participants who voice two opposing standpoints. The pronoun used to introduce these virtual participants is the third person "you". One interpretation might be that the virtual talk is used as a resource to illustrate a certain line of argument, rather than as a representation of what a specific person or group of people might say.

The first argument implies that if certain diseases or disabilities can be diagnosed, pregnancy might be aborted, since it would not be "sensible to continue". The other argument focuses instead on possible, far-reaching consequences of implementing the technology, such as refinement of the human race. D comments on this last perspective, that it is "frightening". Both these virtual lines of argument were

supported by other present participants. However, the latter (the “risk of refinement argument”) was articulated also in the continuation of the sequence. Thus, the issue of GM food was turned into an analogy to the issue of medical applications of gene technology: what frightened the present participants about gene technology as a whole was their suspicion that a technology developed for improving plants, might in the future also be used to improve humans, thus creating an élite society.

7. Forms and functions of virtual talk

We have presented examples and analyses of sequences of virtual talk in the two data sets from Swedish and German discussions about gene technology in the context of food production. Our analyses were performed on all sequences found in the data, but in this article we wished to concentrate on some of the forms and functions found in our seven examples.

First, we found examples of different relationships between the speaker and the virtual talk constructed by him/her regarding the true/false and the typical/atypical dimensions. These relationships could be describes as follows. (X stands for a particular instance of virtual talk.)

- a) The speaker makes a claim (implicitly or explicitly) that the virtual participant said (or thought or wrote) X. By doing this the speaker suggests that X is actually what the virtual participant said (or thought or wrote) in a fairly literal, or condensed, form. (Examples 2, 4, 5 and 7)
- b) The speaker makes a claim (implicitly or explicitly) that the virtual participant in fact did not say (or think or write) X.
- c) The speaker makes a claim (implicitly or explicitly) that the virtual participant could have said (or thought or written) X. By making this hypothetical claim, the speaker suggests what is a typical utterance of the virtual participant. (Examples 3, 4, 5, and 8)
- d) The speaker makes a claim (implicitly or explicitly) that the virtual participant never will say (or think or write) or could have said (or thought or written) X. By doing this the speaker suggests what is an atypical, or even unthinkable, utterance of the virtual participant (Example 1).

All these forms of virtual talk present claims. Claims that someone said something particular – or did not. Claims that something said is typical – or atypical – of certain speakers. These claims serve a purpose. Using virtual talk as a communicative resource to illustrate different lines of arguing was common in much of the focus group discussions about genetically modified food in which the participants did not always have a clear opinion about the topic. Virtual talk was used for more clearly argumentative purposes in the German debate in which people with firm opinions were involved in the discussions.

Earlier analyses of the focus group discussions on genetically modified food suggest that a chorus of voices from virtual participants is needed to do justice to complex

matters and to manage and motivate the speakers' uncertainty. Many topics in modern society, such as gene technology, are complicated, and it is not always an easy task to form a clear opinion. Earlier analyses suggest that many of the participants in the discussions felt an obligation to present a clear opinion – to be for or against (Adelswärd, *forthc.*; Wibeck, *forthc.* a and b). Virtual talk was a communicative resource used in this kind of discursive work.

Instead of presenting a clear opinion, the participants in the discussions used virtual participants as a step towards forming an opinion, towards arriving at certainty. Virtual talk was presented in order to demonstrate complexities and contradictions and to depict an ongoing, rather chaotic discussion. One way to solve the communicative dilemma of having to talk about things with which you are not familiar is to stage a chorus of hypothetical voices. In this way, the speaker can play with different possible interpretations and, by collaborating with virtual participants, present a web of different views. The virtual participants helped the actual ones to collaboratively manage not making a commitment.

Tannen claims that virtual talk, or in her own words, “casting ideas as dialogue rather than statements is a discourse strategy for framing information in a way that communicates effectively and creates involvement.” (Tannen 1989:110.) In their studies of reported speech in communication between teenagers, the Swedish scholars Eriksson (1997), Kotsinas (1994) and Nordberg (1992) have all pointed out that, in this particular context, the main function seems to be precisely that – to create involvement and drama.

And as we saw in the first two examples, Speaker G and Speaker P were incorporating other voices into their own talk in the form of quotations, but they did not quote utterances that had actually been uttered. They rather created virtual talk to dramatise and illustrate thinkable or unthinkable tendencies.

But there are many other functions of virtual talk. Vincent and Perrin (1999) have analysed sequences taken from French sociolinguistic interviews. They focused on the non-narrative function of reported speech and found three main functions. Virtual participants are used to underline evaluative and emotive aspects of the speaker's claim, to support the point of the utterance/story and to strengthen an argument.

Holt (1996) claims that direct speech is a useful resource because it frees the speaker from having to rephrase or sum up what was said. It also gives the listener an opportunity to experience for himself what was said and thereby assess the utterance in a seemingly objective way. Direct quotations are also used to subtly show the quoted person's attitude and to generate affiliation (Holt 1999).

Our analyses show that speakers use virtual talk in order to construct effective arguments. They need virtual participants as their allies and supporters. But virtual participants can also be cast as opponents in order to provide a more indirect – and sophisticated – form of support. If we let virtual participants voice arguments against our own position, we are given an opportunity to refute these counterclaims.

We also need virtual participants as shields to hide behind. Some topics are sensitive – or rather constructed as sensitive – and some opinions not proper to air in all contexts. This accounts for the communicative dilemma of speakers' needs to distance themselves from an utterance or an opinion, while at the same time bringing it to the floor. In a study of talk on ethnic identity, Holsánová (1998a and b) has demonstrated how speakers discursively manage sensitive topics such as complaints about immigrants or negative views on people of other nationalities. It was less threatening for the speakers to express evaluations of other ethnic groups by presenting such evaluations as quotations; quotations make the quoted person appear to be the principle speaker, and thus the party responsible for the utterance. So, in the context that she studied, there were people who had strong opinions, but who let virtual participants express them.

Introducing virtual participants is a communicative resource that can be used to solve a number of different communicative tasks. Some of these tasks may be more typical of certain genres or activity types than others. For instance, there is an interesting difference in how virtual participants seem to be used in pure narrative contexts as compared to more argumentative ones. In narratives, the virtual participants are often introduced in order to increase dramatic intensity and the feeling of immediacy. In argumentative discourse, such as academic debates, virtual participants in the form of authoritative references are more often used to reinforce chosen opinions or to present a mental opponent whose opinions are to be questioned and undermined.

Greg Myers (1999) seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion when he says that virtual talk, or in his words 'direct represented discourse', "allows one to qualify it, to enact tensions or contradictions, to bring out underlying motives, to acknowledge or elicit the likely responses of others. Using represented discourse in a thought experiment allow others to join in." (587)

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Appendix

Example 1

G: Hier wird es aber auch KEINE demonstration durch unsere stadt geben *'wir wollen unbedingt GENTechnisch behandelte . WEIzen oder ZUCKerrübensorten haben'* A:ber, . wenn es denn zur verFÜgung steht' . dann werden in VORträgen' . werden in verANstaltungen diese Sachen VORgestellt . und dann wird der ein oder andere das nach=und=nach . EINsetzen, da geh ich eigentlich von Aus.

Example 2

P: Wenn wir sehen wie . die GRUNDwassergefährdung . ä=äh zum bEispiel . n Ungelöstes problem is ich hatte eine diskusSION mit dem jetzigen landwirtschaftsminister . bei einer anderen freisetzungsfläche(? in ...) äh WO er sachte . *'GRUNDwasser ist ein psychologisches probleM,* . das grundwasser war ACHZICH zentimeter . unterhalb . es war eine tallage, . unterhalb der freisetzungen, . man muß sich vorstellen . das nennt ein minister . ein psychologisches problem . das=is in einer LIFesendung gesendet worden also . insofern kontrollierbar

Example 3

A: men om man inte kan... så JÄTTEMYCKET om biologi och kemi och man men man kan så pass mycket att man vet att *'okej DNA'* att typ *'och det sitter i en spiral'* och så tänker man så fattar man *'okej, man tar bort en del så stoppar man in en del och sen så kanske påverkar egenskapen så blir det större bättre och vackrare eller rödare'* eller vad det nu blir, men... jag menar i och för sej man kommer fram till att det är ett visst tänkande som man som vi har kanske LÄRT OSS, förstår ni vad jag menar, som vi som sitter här i rummet kanske tycker att *'det är SJÄLVKLART man måste ifrågasätta, det är självklart man måste ha trettio år till av forskning, det det är etiskt fel å det är man inte bara göra som man vill med naturen'*

Example 4

P: Ich hab diesem herrn' . von M einen brIEf geschrieben dreiundneuenzich, um ihn zu frAgen . äh nach äh SEInem argument . ob ein PACTvertrag der ja irgendwo juristisch vergleichbar ist mit einem MIETvertrag un/vielleicht sind etliche MIETer unter uns heute abend . wo man genau WEIS man kann die wOhnung nicht Abreißen' äh sondern man hat genaue . MIETvertragsrechliche AUFlagen . wie man sich als MIETer in dieser wohnung zu verHALten hat, . NIchts anderes äh gilt im Pachtverhältnis, . wo man Auch nich tUn und lassen kann was man WILL . ich MEIne . dass wENN=man lebENDige organISMen, . die man nicht=me:hr zurÜckholen kann . . die sich im zweifelsfall NUR . . Unkontrolliert vermehren' . in ein Pachtland setzen läßt . . dass das von den pacht/von den

KONventionellen . juristischen pachtvertrag NICH geDEckt wäre, . und ich wollte an den EIgentümer dieser ländereien in X herangehen und sagen . 'lieber verPÄchter, . kannst DU als evangelische kirche, . das nicht vielleicht verHINdern, ist Dir das Recht' und da hat herr von M mir nen brIEf geschrieben den ich . dabeI hab in dem steht ähm ähm . 'wegen des WELThungers, . mußten wir das tun' Nun war ich SELbst . VIEle Jahre . meines lebens in Dem was man heute dritte welt nennt, . zwei jahre davon allein in bangladeSCH . einem Land wo man sagt das ist das Ärmste der Armen, . und ich MUS SA:gen, . es ist wirklich . eine eine NIEderträchtigkeit, . DIEses arguMENT, . der ernÄhrung im Hinblickauf GENTechnik oder gar zur rechtFERTigung von gentechnik zu nutzen, . das genaUE Gegenteil . könnt ich an VIElen beispielen . belegen.

Example 5

C: Mir is doch so die betroffenheit . von . frau R eben so als benachbarter biolandbetrieb im ohr . die wie sie sachten 'JA wir können uns jetzt gar nicht mehr dagegen WEhren . SO es findet stAtt . mit dreikilometer distanz' und so . und in Z damals . äh auf dieser öffentlichkeitsveranstaltung wurde ja eben auch gesacht 'na JA . ihr müßt verstehen jetzt werden nur noch SCHNELLwerte diskutiert ihr müßt euch eben damit Abfinden ein prozent' . war jetzt (nichunbedingt n ausspruch von ihnen?) sondern sie haben den AUch zitiert, . 'ein prozent oder zwei prozent verunreinigung mit gentechnisch verändertem material, . müsst ihr eben dulden oder zulassen . so äh das würde im momEnt so diskutIert so wärs wohl . stand der dinge' . äh DA frag ich mich . vor diesem hintergrund . warum muß eigentlich die gesamte bundesrepublik mit diesen verSUCHen überzogen sein

Example 6

- 1H: men det finns ju en kampanj som jag inte vet varifrån den kommer faktiskt som jag tycker är klar och rak och det är ju rent vatten eller vad det nu kan tänkas heta (D: mm) där dom har det står nån kille å så tänkbubbla så här 'ja jag håller ut lite fotogen i'
- 2B: ja just det visst är den bra visst är den bra
- 3H: den är väldigt så där så att
- 4D: vad då vänta vad sa han?
- 5B: 'ja lite lacknafta i vasken kan väl inte va hela världen'
säger han
- 6H: xxx nä precis å sen så ser man jag vet om det är flera bilder

eller nåt sånt (B: jo) (D: ja) eller det står nånting under
'*så tänker femtitusen svenska*' eller nånting

7D: så är det en liten bild på alla sen

8B: ja å det det är så bra att han säger *det kan ju inte va hela världen' å sen så blir det verkligen hela världen likadant

9D: jaa jaa

10A: den har inte jag sett den den

11D: den är faktiskt bra

Example 7

D Sen sen sen behöver det ju inte genmodifiering kan ju också
va fosterdiagnostik där du kan avbryta graviditet (B: Ja just
det) om du ser att det är nåt fel på fostret va (B: Mm) och
liksom som egentligen då man kan å ena sidan kan man säga
'*men det är klart om man ser att det ska födas ett barn som
kommer och behöva behäftat med ... (C?: Ja ja) vad vattenskalle
eller vad som helst'* (C: Mm) så så kan det inte vara vettigt
att fortsätta (C: Nej) Å andra sidan kan man då säga '*men men
titta vilken möjlighet som som då öppnar sig och förädla den
mänskliga rasen*' (B: Ja ja) (A?: Mm) vilket vilket är ju då
kusligt (B: Mm)... på sitt sätt, så jag menar