Aaaaack! The active voice was used! Language play, technology, and repair in the Daily Kos weblog

Anne Lazaraton*

Department of Writing Studies, 200 Nolte Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA

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Abstract

This paper analyzes repair phenomena in a bounded episode of language play that appeared in a well-known political weblog, Daily Kos. One diarist-member employed a passive voice frame to make various snarky comments about the current state of American politics as well as member behavior on the blog. This posting, along with the 863 comments it garnered, are examined to describe commenter reactions to active voice contributions that violate the passive frame ‘rule’ set out by the original diarist. The conversation analytic system of repair (Schegloff et al., 1977) provided a framework for understanding these responses. Findings indicate that commenters who did not format their contributions as grammatical passives were regularly subjected to playful repair and correction, reprimand, and even ridicule by other participants. Furthermore, the repairs were sensitive to the technological affordances of computer-mediated discourse (e.g., Herring, 1999, 2013). These results suggest that even in ludic episodes such as those present in the written weblog data, participants regularly employ repair practices that are based on spoken interaction, but ones that are shaped by the weblog medium and employed to further the playfulness that characterizes the diary itself.

Keywords: Repair; Computer-mediated communication; Language play; Digital discourse

1. Introduction

The growing prevalence of digital communication¹ in recent years has sparked scholarly interest in new media discourse across a range of disciplines, including communication studies, cognitive science, linguistics, and sociology, and an increasing number of discourse-based research studies that focus on the nature of digital interaction have been undertaken (e.g., Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger, 2008; Baym, 1995; Danet, 2001; Herring, 1999, 2013; Hutchby, 2001). Adopting a language-in-use perspective, these researchers have shed light on how structure, meaning, interaction, and social behavior are (co-) constructed by CMC language users (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2011; Herring, 2007; Myers, 2010; Stommel, 2008; Tagg, 2012). In doing so, they have successfully applied analytic techniques developed for other contexts (e.g., conversation analysis, ethnography, case study) and theoretical frameworks that delineate the organizational systems of more traditional forms of interaction, including turntaking, sequence structure, and repair, to further these efforts (e.g., Garcia and Jacobs, 1999; Jacobs and Garcia, 2013; Schönfeldt and Golato, 2003).

The purpose of the current study is to describe the repair practices constructed in one member diary posted to a well-known political weblog and to consider how the technological affordances of the blog medium shaped the repair

* Tel.: +1 612 626 9372.
E-mail address: lazaratn@umn.edu.

¹ Numerous terms appear in the literature to describe computer-mediated discourse (CMD), including computer-mediated communication (CMC), digital communication, digital discourse, Internet communication, Internet discourse, online discourse, and technologically mediated communication. I use these phrases interchangeably in this paper.

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sequences that resulted. The diary was unusual in its ludic content and structure: a passive voice frame was used by the diarist-member to make short, pointed observations about the then-current state of American politics as well as blog member behavior. An earlier study (Lazaraton, in press) detailed the ways in which commenters to the original diary were able to ‘fit’ their contributions into a passive voice frame in a humorous and, at times, unanticipated manner. In this paper I examine the ways that commenters further the playfulness of the ongoing interaction by adapting the repair practices of face-to-face interaction to deal with active voice constructions that do not ‘play along’ with passive voice frame while at the same time doing so in accordance with the constraints and affordances of the weblog interface.

To this end I begin with a brief review of the relevant literature on language play, especially in CMC contexts and consider how the technological features of CMC are implicated in digital discourse. Next, I investigate more closely the system of repair in face-to-face interaction and the ways these repair practices have been adapted to the digital environment. I conclude with a brief section on the nature of the weblog medium and political blogging more specifically.

2. Background

2.1. Language play in CMC

The creativity present in computer-mediated discourse (CMD) has been remarked on by numerous researchers (e.g., Baym, 1995; Danet, 2001; Herring, 1999; North, 2007; Tagg, 2012; Vandergriff and Fuchs, 2012; Virtanen, 2013). Danet distinguishes ‘play’ and ‘playfulness’: “whereas users occasionally engage in virtual play (such as a virtual performance of a birthday part, or of Hamlet), playfulness is an inherent characteristic of CMC of many kinds” (Virtanen, 2013, p. 158). North states “Online environments seem to foster a particularly playful interaction” (2007, p. 538). Thurlow’s (2012) basic premise of new media discourse research is this: “discursive creativity [in the new media] is often poetic, usually playful and always pragmatic” (p. 170; italics in original). Three recent studies on language play in CMD are illustrative of these points.

North’s (2007) research on linguistic creativity in an online chat dataset with 50 participants over six months found that humorous exchanges were context-dependent and that participants took advantage of the affordances of the online medium to create social and contextual cohesion in the discussion threads. The participants’ language play had a humorous effect and they engaged in it “with self-awareness, making the humor part of a form of online performance that wins appreciation from the rest of the group” (p. 548). That is, good humor builds on earlier posts, which other commenters recognize and add to; the social and textual cohesion that develops and persists advances the topics that are in play. Nicknames, spellings, puns, and “performative predications” (Virtanen, 2013), where participants textually approximate behavior (e.g., [puts hands over ears], *spews bourbon*), contributed to the wordplay she encountered. North contends that “the prevalence of humor in this textually constructed environment, and of the linguistic creativity associated with it, may partly stem from the need to keep open the channel of communication”; that is, humor “may therefore serve an additional phatic function in keeping topics ‘in play’ over a period of time” (p. 553).

Tagg’s (2012) investigation of text message discourse covered a range of topics, based on the 11,000+ messages in her British English corpus CorTxt. She found evidence of playful creativity in the repellings, grammatical usage, lexical choices, and discourse markers used by the texters. Specifically, the corpus of text messages exhibited creativity through self-expression and attention to the nature of the texting medium. Across-turn repetition and self-repetition of words and phrases, alteration of familiar idioms (“yes see ya not on the dot”, p. 161); word coinage via morphological invention (“Beerage tonight?”, p. 164), and punning (“yes obviously, but you are the eggs-pert...”, p. 165) were means by which “the affordances of texting can be exploited in creative ways according to the capabilities of the individual” (p. 167).

The mock performative “hereby” is the focus of Virtanen’s (2013) research based on messages on discussion boards devoted to beauty and fashion. Virtanen characterizes “hereby” as a “discourse transformer” that “signal[es] a shift to a play mode” (p. 156), the use of which allows participants to take on the role of an institutional authority in scripted, stereotypical situations. For example, an awards ceremony script is invoked when a participant states “I hereby award you the *Master MA* certificate! That is excellently done and shown” and the ‘recipient’ parodies an acceptance speech with “Oh my goodness! this is such an honor to receive this award. I would like to thank all those little people that i had to step on to get to this place...” (p. 161). Virtanen claims that the jointly-produced language play initiated by mock performatives like “hereby” can be explained by a discourse-pragmatic model that incorporates phenomena such as structuring and linking at the levels of form, discourse functions, and micro/macropragmatics (p. 165).

What technological factors are thought to account for this playfulness? Years of research on the nature of computer-mediated communication has shed light on salient features of the digital environment that have been identified as central to understanding digital interaction. For one, Danet (2001) points to the “objective features of the medium itself, particularly its interactive, dynamic, immersive nature” (p. 362); this fact itself may explain the “online performances” that North detected in her data. Another way to understand Danet’s point is to conceptualize CMD as providing the user a range of affordances – “aspects of the environment that we see in terms of their use” (Myers, 2010, p. 21). Scholars
imminent changes (e.g., Wellman et al., 2003) have investigated the impact of technology on community, particularly how “current and imminent changes” in it – such as broader bandwidth, globalized 24/7 connectivity, and wireless access – have “create[d] possibilities – social affordances – for how the internet can influence daily life” (Technological changes create social affordances, para 1). I maintain that the affordances of the digital environment of the website under consideration lead to social affordances for participants who engage in range of pragmatic behaviors – insulting and reprimanding, for example – that would likely be dispreferred in more traditional forms of interaction because of their face-threatening nature.

A second factor is the disrupted adjacency inherent in many forms of CMC. Herring (2013) claims that disrupted adjacency is one important challenge that online communication presents. In face-to-face interaction turns at talk are organized into sequences consisting of adjacent, related parts. She observes “relevance or relatedness across speaker utterances is a basic normative ideal of conversation,” specifically spoken communication “in which logically-related utterances tend to occur adjacent to one another in temporal sequence. In text-based CMC, in contrast, related utterances are not reliably adjacent” (p. 245). This ‘loosened relevance’ and ‘disrupted adjacency’ is no longer viewed as problematic in the CMC environment; in fact, “it has attained normative status” (p. 252). Herring reasons that “disrupted adjacency may lead to incoherence that has advantages, including fostering playful communication” (p. 250). In addition, “the creative play that arises from loosened relevance online can be viewed as users ‘making the best’ of what is in essence a limited communication medium” (p. 263).

A third notable feature of CMD is the textual record of talk. The persistence of text on the screen allows users to think about and craft responses to digital discourse-in-use; in fact, it is the persistence of text that renders CMC “cognitively manageable” in spite of its visual manifestation as “incoherent” and “dysfunctional” (Herring, 1999). In contrast to spoken interaction, CMD participants can consciously consider the text, which, according to Herring, “facilitat[es] a heightened metalinguistic awareness” (Conversational persistence, para 2). Such consciousness is likely vital for the production of and reaction to humor and language play in CMC. The written record is meant for others to see; this fact lends credence to North’s claim that online interaction constitutes a public performance. “Masked identity” is another feature of CMC that may predispose participants to act in ways they might not in other contexts (Danet, 2001). The absence of clues about user identity that are unavailable for inspection and consideration by others may account for behaviors that are far less likely to occur in face-to-face contexts (e.g., flaming; see Danet, 2013).

These factors undoubtedly underlie the varieties of playfulness that are present in CMD. The particular form of language play investigated in this study, however, has not, to the author’s knowledge, been discussed in regards to CMC: the use of conversational repair strategies to deal with problematic contributions in a systematic, yet playful way.

2.2. Repair

2.2.1. Repair in conversation

The system of repair in conversation is one of the most studied aspects in discursive interaction, dating back to the foundational repair framework proposed by conversation analysts (Schegloff et al., 1977). The framework they sketched out has proven to be extremely resilient over time and flexible enough to explain other interaction types that go beyond conversation. In simplest terms, the conversation analytic (CA) repair framework delineates a set of participant actions that are undertaken to deal ‘problems’ of speaking, hearing, or understanding in talk. These “trouble-sources” consist of words, clauses, or utterances that conversationalists consider to be problematic. A variety of techniques to pinpoint a trouble-source are employed; once located, it is signaled or targeted for repair initiation. Finally, participants endeavor to solve the problem arising from the trouble-source in orderly ways. This is not to say that all trouble-sources are repaired – efforts to do so may be abandoned or never undertaken – or that all ‘repairables’ are in fact trouble-sources – repair can occur when there are no obvious problems of miscommunication.

Conversation analysts have argued that there is a strong preference for self-repair in talk-in-interaction, so that trouble-source speakers have and take the first opportunity to remediate themselves. At the same time, repair by others is often delayed or softened. Schegloff et al. detail four sequential locations where repair may occur: (a) within the speaker’s turn containing the trouble-source; (b) in the transition space between turns when the trouble-source speaker attempts repair just after the first possible completion point of the turn-so-far that includes the trouble-source; (c) third-turn repair occurs when the trouble-source speaker attempts repair in the third turn relative to the trouble-source, even though an intervening turn by another participant does not display a problem with the prior turn. Finally, third-position repair occurs when the trouble-source speaker attempts repair based on the next speaker’s response that displays a possible misunderstanding of the trouble-source turn.

2.2.2. Repair in CMC

Although the number of studies on repair in CMC specifically is still small, several themes have emerged from this work. For example, Harrison (2003) analyzed repair in email discussions by using the Schegloff et al. framework as it applies to institutional talk. Her data consisted of 360 emails (60 consecutive emails from six publicly available discussion lists). She
found that in self-initiated self-repair, writers offered an explanation or apology just after the trouble-source message. These corrections targeted technical problems, including blank messages, missing attachments, and server problems, which are not, strictly speaking, problems in hearing or understanding. She also created a category for “deviant cases” – these included entries that look like repairs but were actually part of a flame war (a heated argument where individuals attack each other personally rather than keeping to the topic under discussion).

The repair practices found in chat CMC have been explored by Schönfeldt and Golato (2003) in their investigation of the organization of repair in German web chats with a focus on repair initiation position and trouble-source type. First, turns in their chat room data show up as completed units; they argue that “repair initiations are put, and the ways these uses construct social identities and communities” (Puschmann, 2013, p. 83). Puschmann describes blogs as “a form of mediated language use that affords its users a range of communicative options. Blogs dynamically combine characteristics of speech and writing due to their format, mode of production, and the communicative situation they create via the encoding of metadata” (p. 102). According to Bruns and Jacobs (2006), blogs consist of “the reverse-chronological posting of individually authored entries that include the capacity to provide hyperlinks and often allow comment-based responses from readers” (pp. 2–3). What all blogs have in common is that discourse content is structurally sequentially and chronology is the key to cohesion across blog entries (Puschmann, 2013, p. 91). Furthermore, Myers (2010) characterizes blogs as “genres of texts defined not so much by their form or content as by the kinds of uses to which they are put, and the ways these uses construct social identities and communities” (p. 15).

Schmidt (2007) stipulates that blogs are “relatively underdetermined” (Code, para 3) in that the routines and expectations of users are constantly shifting. But because blogs “are a highly variable form of self-expression” (Puschmann, 2013, p. 88) and have become so differentiated and specialized, one cannot talk about blogs without reference to a specific context, such as political blogs. Bahnisch (2006) asserts that political blogging began in the early 2000s (see Marshall, 2009, for an informative early history on this topic). In this short period of time blogging has made contributions to the political process and civic engagement because their “interactivity . . . makes them more attractive to a public increasingly distrustful of formerly authoritative sources of information” (p. 140). Users have become enamored by blog commentary because it is more appealing “than the increasingly ritualized and often hackneyed commentary of old media” (p. 140). Blogging also allows users “to engage directly with readers and generate continuing and iterative conversations” (p. 144). Although a political weblog may seem to be a strange context in which to study language play,
Myers (2010) reminds us that “bloggers are playful, even on serious topics, and the readers have at least the chance of having fun” (p. 46).

2.4. Context of the study

An earlier paper (Lazaraton, in press) analyzed a bounded episode of language play in one diary posted to a well-known political weblog, Daily Kos. A passive voice frame was adopted by the diarist-member to make short, pointed observations about the then-current state of American politics as well as blog member behavior. She begins her diary as follows:

This snark is brought to you today in honor of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Accounts were f-ing requested to be deleted. Kos.

This ‘dedication’ and title are followed by 44 sentences, 43 of which were written in the passive voice, including blogrolls were trimmed, comments were made, names were called, eyes were rolled, candidates were trashed, and tears were shed (see Appendix for the complete diary). In response, commenters produced 1318 sentences, two-thirds of which were written in the passive voice. It was evident that commenters were quite skillful at passivizing existing lexical and syntactic forms as well as creating new words and phrases in order to produce passive (or passive-like) structures. The creative production of new passive forms and structures instantiated and furthered the language play in the diary.

One trend that emerged from the earlier study were instances where commenters self-correct their own contributions and correct, reprimand, and even ridicule others who did not conform to the play frame by using active voice constructions. It is this phenomenon that I focus on in this paper, framed by two questions:

(1) Given the passive voice grammatical frame modeled by the original diarist and subsequent commenters, how do posters respond to comments constructed in the active voice?

(2) How are these responses influenced by the general features of CMD and those specific to this particular digital environment?

3. Method

3.1. Data source

The data examined in this study comprised one diary on the weblog Daily Kos (www.dailykos.com), one of the "A-List" (Bruns and Jacobs, 2006) political blogs in North America. It was posted by the member “BG” on Wednesday, March 14, 2007 at 10:28 AM. The complete diary, which consisted of 13,035 words, engendered 863 comments from 289 different posters over the 12 h and 33 min it was active (until 11:01 PM that same day). I then downloaded the entire diary and all the comments made to it the next day.

The Daily Kos website is open access: it can be viewed without a password and it is publicly archived. Use of these data is consistent with the conditions set out on the Daily Kos webpage:

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Site content may be used for any purpose without explicit permission unless otherwise specified

It was not possible to gain the informed consent of all 289 commenters who participated in the original diary; as result, to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, all author identifiers (except the original diary author GB, an initialization of her Daily Kos username) were removed from the data before publication. Likewise, as the diary writer and subsequent commenters are anonymous, it is not possible to reliably describe their demographic and ethnographic information. Nevertheless, my understanding, based experiences as a regular Daily Kos member/reader since early 2007, is that Daily Kos participants span the age range from teenagers to senior citizens who identify with center to far left politics and who are seemingly well-educated.

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2 There is a DKos-historical significance in the active version of this diary title, Delete my fucking account, Kos. Suffice it to say that blog members use the frame Delete ______ fucking ______, Kos regularly for a variety of purposes.

3 The blog contains diaries by its founder, Markos Moulitsas, as well as a number of Contributing Editors, which are prominently displayed on the left two thirds of the screen, from most to least recent. Diaries by individual members appear with titles in a column on the right side of the screen. These member diaries are grouped into a recommended list (based on member ratings) of ten, and then a chronological list of the 75 most recent diaries. Comment entries within a diary are displayed from least to most recent.
3.2. Data formatting

The comments in their original form contained information about ratings and recommenders that was deleted, leaving just the comments themselves. Text produced by the same commenter is shown with the same identifier (A, B, C, etc.) within an example; the indented, nested appearance of Daily Kos comments is preserved to show the layout of the comments and the responses to them by others. Bolding indicates turns of interest; the transcript source is given in the lower right of each example. The final form of each example is as shown in (1):

(1)  
A: Suckers threw punches.  
B: “Suckerpunches were thrown...at suckers” n/t  
C: Suckers were sucked by sucky suckers? Said submission probably sucks.  
D: Lifeblood of Liberty was sucked with succor by the biggest Suckiest Suck on the planet (8:101-106)

3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis method utilized in this study is often referred to as Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA; Herring, 2004). Herring’s framework is intended to “describe online phenomena in culturally meaningful terms, while at the same time grounding [their] distinctions in empirically observable behavior” (p. 338). Several methods have been used to analyze CMD, including genre analysis (e.g., Myers, 2010), ethnography (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2008), and conversation analysis (e.g., Garcia and Jacobs, 1999). The analytical orientation of this study is closest to CA in its use of the CA repair framework to locate repair sequences (as in Schönfeldt and Golato, 2003). More generally, as Jacobs and Garcia point out, CA’s “utility for studying the process of interaction has been well demonstrated” (2013, p. 568) in its explication of the fundamental mechanisms of conversation (turntaking, repair, sequence structure, and the like) in such diverse settings as classrooms, police interviews, and medical communication.

Two basic distinctions in the CA repair framework are (a) who does the repair – self or other – and (b) where the repair occurs – same turn/entry as the trouble-source or at some next opportunity. These distinctions then result in four possible repair types in this study:

1. Self-initiated self-repair in same entry:

(2)  
A: English teachers … were my favorite people in the world  
(to submit to the end of the passive voice and be more accurate; ARE my favorite people in the world! ☺) (1b:121-122)

2. Self-initiated self-repair at next opportunity:

(3)  
A: Dood Abides “ruled” and “made days” n/t  
A: Excuse me, days were made and dkos was “ruled” (1b:132-133)

3. Other-initiated repair at next opportunity:

(4)  
A: I’m verklempt. Discuss amongst yourselves…  
B: Verklemption was experienced. (6:75-77)

4. Other-initiated repair at some other next or future opportunity:

(5)  
A: Passive Voices were raised to protest an active in the list.  
Diarists wrote meta.  
Sorrow was expressed that such a delightful concatenation of passives had been so thoroughly soiled. Correction was requested. (11:6-10)

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4 The original format of textual data is shown below. The actual text produced is placed on the left; my explanations of each line are given on the right:

“Suckerpunches were thrown...at suckers.” n/t (2+ / 0−)  
Comment title (recommends)  
List of recommenders  
Recommended by: TBM, FR  
By P2 on Wed Mar 14, 2007 at 12:45:57 PM CDT  
[Reply to This | Recommend]  
Author, date and time stamp  
Reply link [Recommend link]

5 This example is explained further on p. 9.
All entries in response to the original diary were studied to see where corrections were requested and/or made; each was examined in context to locate instances where repair initiations and/or corrections occurred. The analysis was inductive and iterative – multiple inspections of the 62 repair sequences pointed to relevant characterizations, suggested additional characterizations, and prompted a gradual fine-tuning of these characterizations. When I was satisfied with the characterizations of repair phenomena, I then considered the technological features of CMC in general and particular features of the Daily Kos weblog interface to select the examples I report on below.

Findings at an aggregate level in the form of frequencies and percentages for the categories in the data were also tallied.

4. Findings

4.1. Numerical data

A total of 62 repair sequences were located in the dataset (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repairer</th>
<th>Same entry</th>
<th>Next entry</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
<td>55 (89%)</td>
<td>62 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The large majority of the repair sequences constituted instances of other-repair (51/62, 82%) rather than self-repair (11/62, 18%). This finding contrasts with Schegloff et al. (1977) and their claim that repairs in conversation are overwhelming undertaken as self-repairs; I propose that aspects of CMC technology is at least partially responsible for this disparity, which I take up below.

Of these 62 repair sequences, 85% (53/62) targeted active voice constructions; 15% (9/62) responded to errors in spelling, computer code, and the like (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repairer</th>
<th>Active voice use</th>
<th>Other errors</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>51 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>53 (85%)</td>
<td>9 (15%)</td>
<td>62 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preponderance of repairs that target active voice usage contrasted with other error types points to reparative actions that have additional discursive purposes. In other words, “sometimes a repair is just a repair”; at others it can be deployed “in the service of interactional action of the task at hand” (Kitzinger, 2013, p. 241; italics in original). I return to this topic later in the paper.

4.2. Textual data

4.2.1. The performativity of self-repair

Self-repairs accounted for 18% (11/62) of the repair sequences in the data, the majority of which (7/11, 64%) consisted of commenters correcting their own active voice contributions (rather than other infelicities in their entries) to conform to the passive voice frame of the diary. Because any one entry can always be modified before it is posted using the Daily Kos interface, within-entry self-repairs indicate an explicit awareness of the ‘rules’ for diary participation as well the creative performance being constructed in the diary:

(6) A: hee hee You is asking a good question. (a good question was asked) (1a:38-39)

(7) A: me’s were too’d. Never laughed harder at a diary. This had tears rolling down my cheeks, or - cheeks were beteared. (11:50-53)
In both cases, the self-corrections are marked with symbols or expressions that indicate “thinking” or “reconsideration” – parentheses in (6) and or-in (7). In this way, commenters can signal what follows as an approximation of transition space repair as it is present in face-to-face conversation; actual within-entry corrections (which are not visible to readers after posting) cannot.

Self-corrections also occurred in next entry. After an active voice comment was posted the participant realized the ‘mistake’ and corrected it at the ‘next’ opportunity (i.e., next entry). Example (8), like (6) and (7), also depicts reconsideration, where Excuse me serves as a repair initiation:

(8)  
A: Dood Abides “ruled” and “made days” n/t
A: Excuse me, days were made and dkos was “ruled” (1b:132-133)

Finally, a commenter can initiate self-repair without providing the correction. In (9) the commenter notes that an error was made his/her the previous entry (March Hares went mad as hatters):

(9)  
A: March Hares went mad as hatters. tea was drunk.
A: passive voice was neglected. Omission was noted.
Contrition was observed. (1b:94,104-106)

In line 2, the error type is noted (passive voice was neglected), pointed out (Omission was noted) and apologized for (contrition was observed), although no correction takes place. In each of these four examples the original active sentence is perfectly understandable, albeit framed incorrectly as per the diary ‘rules’. The fact that the commenters point out and/or correct their ‘errors’ shows a desire on the part of participants to conform to the passive voice frame used in the diary as well as to engage in a playful performance that is an observable, public construction mediated by the nature of the weblog interface.

4.2.2. Block quotes and retrieved repairables

A second feature of the Daily Kos interface employed by commenters to initiate repair is the block quote tool. Block quotes allow commenters to retrieve and highlight previous text for current consideration by setting it off in a gray box. Examples (10)–(12) demonstrate how block quotes are used to recall an active voice sentence in the original diary that is temporally and sequentially distant from the repair sequences. In (10), Commenter A1 reprimands the original diarist by exclaiming “Ack Active voice invader!” and quoting the trouble-source sentence:

(10)  
A1: Ack Active voice invader!
Diarists wrote meta.
B: Ahem. Mistakes were made.
A1: Apology is accepted.
C: Active Apology Acceptance (AAA) not accepted.
D: apologies were accepted.
E: Diaries writ(ten) meta? I’m just curious if that’s more appropriate.
F: mo ‘betta meta? n/◽
G: Meta was written. Diarists were to blame (1b:153-187)

In this case, Commenter B (the original diarist BG) acknowledges this error without actually correcting it in line 5; “Mistakes were made,” according to William Safire, is “[a] passive-evasive way of acknowledging error while distancing the speaker from responsibility for it” (2008, p. 431) and has been used by various politicians who are vilified by Daily Kos members, including Alberto Gonzales in reference to the firing of U.S. attorneys in 2007. The fact that BG dedicates the diary to him (This snark is brought to you today in honor of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales) and responds to A1’s repair with a passive actually used by Gonzales reveals her ongoing engagement in the diary – she did not just “post and run.”

Two additional commenters also initiate repair on “Diarists wrote meta” in example (10). Commenter E provides a candidate correction for the trouble-source (although the replacement only changes the verb “wrote” to the present participle “writ(ten)”) and expresses uncertainty about this correction as shown by the question mark and the hedge “I’m just curious.” Commenter G provides a second candidate correction to A1’s repair initiation in line 10. Although Commenter A1’s use of the block quote retrieves the trouble-source for his or her own purposes, its retrieval also benefits Commenters E and G, who do not have to re-retrieve it in order to initiate their own repairs. The fact that these repairs occur visually after B’s repair reflects the way that the Daily Kos platform displays “concurrent” entries; this point is taken up further below.
Some two hours later Commenter A2 targets the same trouble-sources as A1’s by pointing out the error type and then blocking quoting it in (11):

(11) A2: Active voice...
      ...was spotted.

Diarists wrote meta.
I’m reminded of Life in Hell after Bongo broke something a,nd cowered in the corner..."Mistakes were made."  (9:8-10)

Then, four hours after A2’s repair, Commenter A3 initiates another repair on the original trouble-source, again shown in block quotes in (12):

(12) A3: Passive Voices were raised to protest an active in the list.
      Sorrow was expressed that such a delightful concatenation of passives had been so thoroughly soiled. Correction was requested.  (11:6-10)

The claim that follows the block quote, “sorrow was expressed...thoroughly soiled,” conveys a pedantic sense of disappointment with the original diarist. This sequence occurs near the end of the comments to the diary, about as distant from the trouble-source as possible; the block quote allows the commenter to approximate next entry repair.

These three examples demonstrate how a technological feature of the weblog interface allows participants to retrieve repairables from prior talk in order to initiate repair locally; i.e., in the same entry or at some next opportunity. This construction of intertextuality is both a discursive and a technological achievement facilitated by the block quote tool. It is apparently effective in Excerpt (10) where trouble-source commenter B acknowledges the error just after the block quote containing the trouble-source (“Ahem. Mistakes were made.”).

Segment (13) is informative in several ways. The sequence begins with Commenter A’s Oh, the humanity!, a trope from Herman Melville used regularly by Daily Kos writers as a (faux) cry of despair:

(13) A: Oh, the humanity!
    B: Melville was quoted.
    C: Ishamel was called. Possessed was a Nantucket man of an organ too big for his hand. So pleasure was had for this clever young lad by moving it up just a tad.
    C: Names were misspelled. Ishmael was called.
    Harpoons emerged. Limericks discarded.
    D: standing ovations were performed! Hooting and hollering was heard.
    E: The humanity was ohed.
    B: oops, right! Melville ahed [sic] the humanity. (2:79-93)

In line 2, Commenter B’s notes the source of the expression (constructed in the passive voice), followed by the trouble-source phrase from line 1 in block quotes. Commenter C continues this topical talk by mentioning one of Melville’s characters as a preface to a limerick. Poster C’s second, subsequent entry in line 7 contains a self-repair prefaced by the error type and then the correction of the misspelled Ishmael in the previous entry (to wit, not an active voice error). Commenter D’s appreciation for the limerick takes the form of two passive constructions in line 10. Visually, the Commenter C–D sequence in lines 7–10 appears sequentially adjacent to B’s entry, while in fact it took place about four hours later. That is, the C–D’s entries were posted after E and B’s entries in lines 11–12. This disrupted adjacency is apparent in other parts of the diary (see examples 15 and 16).

Commenter E, in response to A’s entry in line 1, makes a humorous correction to the Melville phrase by producing a creative passive construction, one that is prescriptively impossible as there is no verb in the original phrase. The humanity was ohed turns the trouble-source quote into a reported speech event, a strategy that other commenters in the diary employed in similar situations (see Lazaraton, in press). While E’s entry is in response to A’s (as is indicated by its indentation from the entry it responds to), Commenter B shows an understanding of the correction as (also) applying to his block quote in line 2. Commenter B acknowledges the “error” in line 12 with “Oops” and an agreement token “right”, followed by an active voice restatement of E’s correction!

Each of these examples demonstrates how participants are able to use one of the technological features of the Daily Kos web interface – block quotes – to retrieve earlier trouble-sources and to initiate repair on them in a ‘local’ same or next entry space. The particular technological affordance of the web medium thus paves the way for the construction of a
familiar repair sequence that approximates its occurrence in verbal interaction. Even so, this intertextual achievement would not be possible without the existence of the weblog textual record, the topic of the next section.

4.2.3. The textual record and locatable repairables

The presence of a textual record in the Daily Kos weblog is a third technological feature that interacts with the repair apparatus to promote other humorous sequences, such as those found in (14):

(14) A: Diary was recommended.
B: Indeed. Like vomit that was by a dog returned to.
C: LOL. How gross! Wiping tears from my eyes!
D: Laughing was out loud? n/t
E: Laughing was outlawed?
D: Only laughs were had by outlaws
F: Questionable punning was engaged in by people of otherwise higher than average intelligence. punning
G: brilliant punning was questioned
H: Laughs were had only by outlaws. Adverbs were placed correctly. Pedants were pleased.
D: Correction was approved. Possessions other than laughs were acknowledged to have been accorded to outlaws.
I: Rolling on the floor, asses glottises were made to expel laughs
J: floors were rolled on while glottises were made to expel laughs

This series of entries involves nine different commenters who co-construct a playful repair sequence based on the internet meme ‘LOL’. After commenter A notes that the diary is commendable and recommended, Commenter B agrees by claiming “indeed”, and then producing an unusual, if not ungrammatical construction in line 2 “Like vomit that was by a dog returned to.” Perhaps s/he is suggesting that one cannot stay away from the spectacle in this diary. Commenter C shows her appreciation of B’s entry in line 3 by ‘laughing’ via LOL, assessing the visual image invoked by B’s comment as “gross”, and indicating just how funny it is by claiming that s/he is “wiping tears from my eyes.” Although the last part of the entry is written in active voice and is thus potentially repairable, it is the meme LOL that is targeted for repair (here and elsewhere in the diary).

Commenter D makes a first attempt at passivizing LOL with ‘laughing was out loud?’ in line 4. Assuming this was a proposed correction of LOL (as indicated by the rising intonation signaled by the question mark), we note that it not a passive but an expansion of the acronym. Commenter E both builds on and repairs D’s attempt by creating a punny passive with the verb “outlaw.” This strategy is notable because the substitution of the verb “outlaw” for the adverbial “out loud” creates a true grammatical passive that contains a different vowel sound ([a]) with a different (but plausible) meaning. It is difficult to imagine how the commenters could proceed from here without a textual record to react to prior entries.

In response, Commenter D ‘plays along’ with E’s repair in line 7 by using different forms of the same words to create a new passive: “only laughs were had by outlaws” with the apparent meaning being outlaws were restricted to laughs. After Commenters F and G take issue with D’s and E’s punning as questionable and/or brilliant in a side sequence in lines 7–9, Commenter H then corrects D’s entry in line 6. The repair consists of the correction itself, a mention of the error type, and then a comment on the correction, one that ‘pedants’ (perhaps Commenter H him or herself) would approve of. In fact, H’s correction is not directed toward active voice usage but to D’s placement of the adverbial ‘only’, and in moving it, the meaning of D’s entry in line 6 (i.e., outlaws were restricted to laughs) is changed: laughs were restricted to outlaws. In response and playing along yet further, Commenter D voices approval for H’s correction in lines 12–14 and then wordily paraphrases it in a creative (and ostentatious) fashion, thus showing alignment with H’s pedantry.

Meanwhile, Commenter I reacts to D’s “laughing was out loud?” in line 15 by playing off another related meme, ROTFLMAO (rolling on the floor laughing my ass off) to produce “rolling on floor, asses off.” In response, Commenter J then initiates a fifth repair in the extended sequence by producing the creative passive “asses were rolled on while glottises were made to expel laughs” in lines 16–17. The textual record allows multiple commenters to locate, reread, and react to prior comments in a relatively orderly fashion.

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6 Different fonts are used here to represent the different commenters in this sequence and in example (15).
The textual record is also implicated in another extended repair sequence shown in Example (15):

(15) A: God I hate the passive voice. Had I the power, I would insist that style guides be changed so that whenever a politician hid behind the passive voice to avoid responsibility, said politician would not be quoted directly but would rather be paraphrased so that the responsibility would fall directly on his or her shoulders. B: someone troll-rate this hater. My TU status is down as usual. C: That should be “Passive voice was hated”. D: Passive voices were hated. Passive voicers were loved.

E: Earlier post was corrected. Power being had, it was insisted that style guides be changed so that, politicians hiding behind the passive voice, avoiding responsibility and not being quoted directly, were paraphrased so that the responsibility was falling directly on his or her shoulders. The passive voice was hated. A: you go to hell! God, that hurt to read. ☺ F: Hell was visited. E: Hell was gone to, as per request, ... requests ancestors were encountered, partied with, Fun was had.

G: Hell was frozen over – couldn’t get in (4:6–40)

Lines 1–6 contain Poster A’s original comment, which is constructed with a mix of active voice (God I hate the passive voice; I would insist that…; the responsibility would fall…) and passive voice (style guides be changed; said politician would not be quoted directly but would rather be paraphrased). B’s active voice comment in line 7 does not directly respond to the voice frame of A’s turn but suggests that A’s comment is somehow problematic, thus (facetiously) deserving a troll-rating. C’s entry in line 9 includes a hedged frame correction of A’s comment, prefaced by that should be. Commenter D makes an additional observation in line 10, that one can hate the voice but not the voicer, thus disputing B’s claim that Poster A is a hater. While D’s response in line 10 occurs visually after C’s in line 9, it occurs temporally after F’s entry in line 17, thus exemplifying another instance of disrupted adjacency.

E’s entry in lines 10–14 goes further by correcting all the active voice elements in A’s initial comment, beginning with the repair initiator “earlier post was corrected”, and replacing “I would insist” with “it was insisted.” The second and third clauses are rephrased in other ways, and first sentence in A’s original comment is changed to “the passive voice was hated.” This last correction is nearly an exact restatement of Commenter C’s correction of A’s initial comment in line 9. In this case, Commenter E might not have seen C’s contribution before posting her own entry in lines 11–15 because they are posted at the same hierarchical level, and second, because of the fast pace with which comments are written and then posted.

In response to the active voice corrections suggested by E, A tells E “you go to hell!!” in line 16, another active voice sentence that reads as a (faux) nasty imperative, but is shown to be “joking” by A’s addition of “God, that hurt to read ☺.” Once again, A’s active voice directive “go to hell!” is responded to by three posters, each one a snarky, ‘playing along’ reply in itself. Commenter F’s passive voice contribution in line 17 claims that A’s imperative was followed: “hell was visited.” Commenter E, who has already corrected A once, extensively, also reports a visit to hell in a passive construction, one that contains a faux ‘insult’ about A’s relatives, as well as additional commentary about what happened on this visit in lines 18–19. Commenter G has the final word in this sequence by noting that a visit was not possible because “hell was frozen over.” This comment has a passive voice surface structure and it alludes to the common idiom when hell freezes over; however G’s active voice second clause (“couldn’t get in”) occurs at the end of this particular thread, almost three hours after E’s last entry, and is not responded to (and perhaps not even read).

To summarize, without a written record of previous entries, commenters would find it difficult, if not impossible, to initiate repair on a previous entry, and certainly not on entries that are not adjacent. The residual text not only supplies readers with a location to make a comment but lessens the demands on short-term memory to recall what was just said.

On the other hand, the layout of the textual record can suggest ‘overlapping’ talk when in fact the entries are sequentially arranged. The overlap is not necessarily temporal, although it can be, but visual, allowing for multiple corrections on a trouble-source.

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Troll ratings (now called Hide ratings) occur when a Daily Kos member finds a comment objectionable enough to merit deletion from the thread. When a comment receives a certain number hide ratings, it becomes hidden from other readers.
In Example (16), four commenters initiate repair in an ‘overlapping’ fashion on Poster A’s active voice entry “I don’t get it”:

(16)  A: I don’t get it.
      B: Get it you don’t
      C: Teh passive voice was used.
      D: It was not gotten.
      E: Reply was missed.  n/t

Commenter B’s repair, “get it you don’t” approximates a passive-like structure by switching the constituents in sentential object position with those in subject position and changing the pronoun. This response not only corrects the trouble-source entry, but confirms A’s statement, that s/he, in fact, does NOT get it. Commenter C’s entry is not a direct correction per se, but perhaps points out that “teh [sic] passive voice was used” by the diarist and subsequent commenters. Commenter D provides a correct passivization of the trouble-source entry in the past tense (“it was not gotten”), which, although not an exact replacement, is correct in the sense that at the time of D’s entry (about 75 min after A’s) it WAS in the past. Finally, Commenter E provides the exact correction with the present tense (“it is not gotten”), but after posting the entry s/he saw that Poster D’s comment is essentially equivalent, at least in terms of passive voice. Once again in this example of disrupted adjacency, E’s account “reply was missed” visually follows D’s correction, but it occurs temporally after E’s comment in line 6.

To review, the performativity of self-repairs, the use of block quotes to retrieve distant repairables, and reference to the textual record to locate repairables, are indicative of the ways in which commenters exploit CMC features to accomplish interactional goals -- co-constructing playful discourse, regulating and demonstrating rule adherence to the game -- rather than to deal with problems of speaking, hearing, and understanding. Yet to be explained are instances where commenters initiate repair by reprimanding and insulting active voice posters.

4.2.4. Reprimands and insults as other-repair

Earlier in the paper I referred to Danet’s ideas about the anonymity of CMC. On Daily Kos, anyone can view a person’s username, but it quite difficult (and often impossible) to link the user name to an actual person, unless that person has chosen to reveal his or her identity. One result of this CMC feature is that commenters can engage in behaviors (like flaming) without concern for being identified or sanctioned. Some of the more interesting examples of repair in the Daily Kos data involve commenters ridiculing and reprimanding others for active voice errors and other infelicities (two instances of which are shown in earlier examples (10) and (12)).

Example (17) depicts A’s passive voice reprimand (to an earlier entry active voice entry, not shown), who is then ridiculed by Commenter B for being pedantic:

(17) A: The passive voice should never be used! Active sentences are always preferred. And, snarks should always be indicated.
      B: Poindexter is identified. Failure to go with the flow for the sake of comic relief as a problem is suggested.

The grammatical structure of Commenter A’s entry in lines 1–2 directly contradicts its import – the first and second clauses, formatted as passives, claim that active, rather than passive sentences are always preferred. B’s response, also formatted in the passive frame, ‘insults’ Commenter A by suggesting that s/he is a nerd like Poindexter – a way-back-when cultural reference to one of the original Barbie doll suitors. In fact, B’s entry cannot be a criticism of A’s use of an active grammatical frame – it is formatted as a passive – but A’s sense of humor (or lack thereof). In other words, comic relief (at least in this diary) requires the use a passive voice frame.

Commenters also piggyback on others’ reprimands, as can be seen in fragment (18):

(18) A: Passive voice. There are legitimate reasons to use the passive voice. Usually, however – almost always in political discussions – it is used to hide or evade responsibility. Legitimate reasons: 1) To emphasize the activity, rather than the actor. 2) When the actor is unknown or in dispute. 3) Actually, in this case, it isn’t the question of who made the mistakes. It is the question of who approved politicizing the entire DoJ.
      B: Or to soften bad news.
      C: reprimand was considered. Post was not in tune.
      D: Concurrence was afforded. Lack of ability to play well with others was documented.
As was the case in previous examples, (a different) Commenter A both explains the use of the passive voice and puts forward a serious comment that relates the politicization of the DOJ (Department of Justice) in lines 1–8. B’s comment in line 9 suggests another reason for using the passive, formatted in the active voice, as is A’s comment. Commenter C in line 10 scolds A (and possibly B): reprimand was considered; Post was not in tune is ambiguous about the nature of the error: is it A’s active voice entry, or the seriousness of the comment about the DOJ? Commenter D’s passive voice agreement with Commenter C in lines 11–12 (concurrency was afforded) is followed by a snarky ‘insult’ of A (and (again, possibly B) with a phrase that sounds a lot like an elementary school teacher rebuking a young student’s behavior: lack of ability to play well with others was documented.

The ‘riffing’ in this sequence suggests several things. First, if repair is only used to correct active voice contributions, then C’s and D’s criticisms are not necessary linguistically. However, they are important interactionally as they allow the commenters to ‘play along’ for humorous effect. This playfulness can be seen as evidence of the Kos space serving as more than just a place to share information, but also a locus for playful back and forth between community members.

4.2.5. Ignoring active voice statements: let it pass

As was mentioned earlier, not all active voice contributions in the diary were targeted for repair by commenters. In fact, the majority of active voice contributions in the diary and the resulting comments were not repaired. I had hoped that there would be a identifiable and systematic pattern of active voice comments that are ignored by other posters, but there are many exceptions. Nevertheless, the data did yield these trends:

- The six riddles that occur in one sequence are all written in active voice.
- Non-sequiturs were not only left to stand as active sentences but ignored altogether (e.g., a partridge in a pear tree, apropos of nothing that precedes or follows it).
- Questions and complaints about how the Daily Kos website operates were routinely formatted as active voice comments, which appear as side sequences to the ongoing form and content of the diary and its comments.
- Other sorts of side sequences were present – for example, a discussion about a popular book author, a long sequence regarding a cookie recipe, and one instance of troubles telling, where a poster discusses a recent bout with cancer.

It seems, therefore, that entries that appear as tangential to the gist of the diary – playful use of language for ludic purposes – can be written in the active voice without sanction from others. This topic deserves more attention in future data analyses.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study indicate that the repair practices that have been explicated for conversation are also employed in this particular digital environment, but for different purposes Commenters engaged in self-initiated self-repair as well as other-initiated other-repair, both of which were located in similar positions that are documented in conversation: the repair space of the trouble-source speaker and a subsequent space for that speaker and/or one or more listeners. Even though a true turn transition space does not exist in an environment in which interaction is constructed through completed entries rather than in-progress turns, self-correctors were able to approximate this position by placing their repairs at the end of their entries, after the trouble-source that is targeted. Unlike conversation, self-repair was much less frequent than other-repair; this phenomenon can also be accounted for by the entry vs. turn contrast. Unlike turns at talk, self-corrections can be accomplished before an entry is posted and others can view it. I have argued that the fact that any self-repairs occurred in this CMC environment is indicative of the performance aspect of digital discourse in general and in the Daily Kos diary examined in this paper in particular.

The Daily Kos web interface is implicated in other commenter repair practices. Block quotes were used to retrieve repairables from prior talk in order to construct the repairs as a local, contextual practice; the textual record of CMC, of course, makes the use of block quotes possible in the first place. The written record of the diary allowed commenters to inspect their own contributions before entry, thus reducing the number of self-repairs that occur. Likewise, the textual record allowed commenters at least some amount of time to produce playful discourse and to respond to “errors” in that discourse in a similarly playful way. Disrupted adjacency was evident in the diary, but commenters did not appear to have trouble locating entries to which their repairs were directed. Of course, the nested structure of the comments on Daily Kos made locating and retrieving prior talk much less problematic than it might be in a digital context where this hierarchical representation is absent. In any case, this is not to say that the interface determined the repair practices, but that the repair sequences reflected an awareness of the technological particulars of the website.

For the most part the repair sequences in the data were directed at comments that violated the passive voice frame implicitly set out by the original diarist. Nowhere did these rule violations appear to engender miscommunication through problems of speaking/writing, listening/reading, or understanding. That is, the repair practices in the data are structurally
similar to conversation, but they are used for purposes that go beyond miscommunication to deal with participation rules and they do so in accordance with those rules, i.e., the repairs themselves are formatted as passives.

But why repair as a means to construct and continue language play? The majority of repairs that occurred targeted grammatical constructions albeit ones that are contrary to the passive voice frame enacted in the diary. The repairs are not based on potential or actual miscommunication, but on contributions that are not playful as per the diary rules in a context where they should be. Perhaps we should consider the repairs as a marker of in-group identity, targeting a construction that is correct under in-group norms though it is non-standard following out-group norms. In other words, repair is a familiar interactional device that, in the Daily Kos context, constitutes a playful technique for maintaining group identity. Furthermore these repair practices provide evidence of not just intertextuality, but ‘intercreativity’ – “the process of making things or solving problems together” (Meikle, 2010, p. 363) – as well.

One cannot claim from this small study that its findings would apply to other Daily Kos diaries, much less other digital contexts. Whether the findings in terms of the frequency, structure, and purpose of the repair actions resonate with those reported by other researchers remains unclear. The uniqueness of the particular diary is a limiting factor, as is the fact that there were a limited number of repair sequences to analyze. Additionally, some might object that I am imputing motives or intentions to the commenters in the diary. However, the fact is that I was first and foremost a participant in this diary and the details described in this paper are the ways in which I understood what was happening as it unfolded. My role as an analyst began much later, specifically when I had the time to return repeatedly to the textual record and to consider in a systematic way how language play, technology, and repair were co-implicated in the resultant diary.

The Daily Kos weblog itself provides a multitude of possibilities for other sorts of analyses on the discursive construction of blogging. Future studies that focus on the deployment of repair practices in other sorts of diaries – those discussing serious issues, those aimed at community-building, and others that are playful – as well as on the particular configurations of turntaking, sequence structure, preference structure, and topical organization in this and other digital environments promise to extend our understanding of CMC itself and in comparison with conversation and other forms of talk-in-interaction.

Appendix A. Original diary

Accounts were f-ing requested to be deleted, Kos

Wed Mar 14, 2007 at 10:20:28 AM CDT

This snark is brought to you today in honor of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales.

Accounts were f-ing requested to be deleted. Kos.

Blogrolls were trimmed, progressives were slighted. Community was frustrated, posters were confused. TV show appearances were booked. Tempers were short. Statements were made. People were upset. Friends were sympathetic. Diarists wrote meta. Comments were made. More comments were made. More comments were made. More comments were made. More comments were made. More – the picture was gotten. UIDs were thrown around. Troll ratings were given. Users were banned. More meta diaries were posted. Diaries were recommended. Pooties were posted. Names were called. Metajesus was made to cry. Conspiracies were theorized. Accusations were hurled. Documentation was overlooked. Lieberman was blamed. The DLC was accused. Candidates were trashed. Voting records were invented. Republican talking points were used. Wayne Madsen was cited. Eyes were rolled. Good diaries were missed. Issues were not discussed. Democrats were not supported. News was not made. Elections were not won. Legislation was not passed. Tears were shed.

Accounts were f-ing requested to be deleted. Kos.

Permalink | 853 comments | Post A Comment |

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Anne Lazaraton is an associate professor in the Department of Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota, where she teaches first-year composition for ESL writers and courses in English language analysis at both the graduate and the undergraduate level. Her research interests include applied linguistics research methodology, conversational practices as used in digital discourse, language play, and oral proficiency assessment. Her work has appeared in Language Assessment Quarterly, Modern Language Journal, Research on Language and Social Interaction, and TESOL Quarterly. She is the author of A Qualitative Approach to Validation of Oral Language tests (Cambridge University Press, 2002).