

Moral logic and logical morality: Attributions of responsibility and blame in online discourse on veganism



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ABSTRACT. In this article we draw on the methods developed by conversation analysis and discursive psychology in order to examine how participants manage rules, fact and accountability in a specific ideological area. In particular, we focus on how participants in online discussions on veganism manage the problem posed by alleged health threats such as vitamin deficiency. We show how speakers systematically attribute responsibility for possible deficiencies to individual recipients rather than veganism. The analysis focuses on a conditional formulation that participants use in response to the recurrent question about supposed health problems in a vegan diet (for example: *if you eat a varied diet, there shouldn't be any problems*). This specific construction presents the absence of health problems as a predictable fact, depending on individual practices. The use of a *script formulation* together with a *modal expression* enables participants to blend morality with logic, and thereby to indirectly attribute responsibility and blame to individual rule-followers. The modal construction (including qualifications as *certainly*, *easily* and *in my opinion*) also allows speakers to display a concern for saying no more than they can be sure of, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of their accounts. It is suggested that this way of managing rules and accountability may also be found in and relevant for other (than) ideological domains.

KEY WORDS: *accountability, blame attribution, discursive psychology, ideological discourse, veganism*

Introduction

In this article we draw upon insights from discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996) and conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) to examine issues of blame and accountability in a specific ideological environment. In particular, we focus on the performative and rhetorical dimensions of a conditional formulation that is frequently used in email discussions on veganism (e.g. *if you eat a varied diet, you shouldn't have problems*). It will be shown how speakers draw

upon this construction to implicitly attribute responsibility for health to the recipient and her individual practices, thereby countering the suggestion of any causal relationship between the ideology of veganism and health problems. Furthermore, we argue that the rhetorical design of the formulation under scrutiny allows speakers to protect their attributional work from being discounted as invested or motivated (cf. Edwards and Potter, 1993). Overall, this study aims to shed light on the ways in which ideological food choice is handled as a participants' concern. In particular, it addresses the issue of how participants handle blame and responsibility in relation to possible ideological 'errors'.

MANAGING BLAME AND RESPONSIBILITY IN IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Discursive psychology (DP) is concerned with the rhetorical and interactional features of discourse (Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). Discursive psychologists analyse discourse as the social practice of everyday life, rather than treating it as a result of mental processes (for a detailed discussion on talk and cognition, see te Molder and Potter, 2005). Following conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), DP highlights the action orientation of language. Participants in conversation often routinely perform a range of interactional tasks such as complaining, attributing responsibility, and displaying neutrality (Edwards and Potter, 1992, 2001; te Molder, 1999). The accomplishment of these actions is tied to the sequential environment in which the utterances are produced, and which they at the same time help to produce (see also Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). A related analytical focus of DP is the rhetorical nature of descriptions or versions of reality. Participants' reports are designed in such a way that they are protected from being undermined through possible alternative or counter versions. It is this 'could-have-been-otherwise' quality of discourse (Edwards, 1997) that helps the analyst to understand what kind of conversational business is being implicated and attended to in participants' stories and descriptions.

A pervasive feature of participants' discourse, and therefore a core concern of DP, is the construction of reports in such a way that they avoid appearing like invested, biased or somehow motivated accounts of reality. Issues of blame and accountability are typically performed not by overt attributions, but through apparently straightforward descriptions of the 'world-as-it-is' (Abell and Stokoe, 1999; Edwards and Potter, 1993; MacMillan and Edwards, 1999). As Edwards and Potter (1992: 103) point out, 'people *do* descriptions and *thereby do* attributions'. Speakers may use a whole range of discursive devices to objectify their reports, including corroboration by independent witnesses (Potter, 1996) and extreme case formulations (Edwards, 2000; Pomerantz, 1986).

In this article, we consider how these matters are dealt with in a particular ideological context. More specifically, we focus on how speakers negotiate causal explanations and potential blaming for particular health problems that may or may not be connected to veganism as a lifestyle and ideology. Ideological

explanations, which typically emphasize a shared ideal, may raise critical questions in cases where 'reality' (or what is described as such) stands in the way of accomplishing the ideal. For an ideology to work and provide a 'natural' and 'inevitable' explanation of society or a part of society, a satisfactory form of 'error accounting' is essential. More specifically, what is at stake is how to account for possible failure without degrading or undermining the ideal itself.

Billig et al. (1988; see also Wetherell and Potter, 1992) argue that ideologies are not consistent but dilemmatic by nature. Ideologies always contain or invoke counter-ideologies, for example, when the demands of intellectual theory clash with the routines of everyday life. Participants shift alignment flexibly from one theme to another and back ('that's all very well in theory, but in practice . . .'), tailoring their ideological repertoire to the interactional business at stake (see also Wetherell and Potter, 1992). The notion of individual freedom may be drawn upon to make up for the flaws of social responsibility and collective ideals, and vice versa. In this sense, contrary themes within or between ideologies function as suitable error accounts. Rather than belonging to some ideological periphery, they are mutually implicative and therefore an essential part of how ideologies work (see also Edwards, 1997). They are not brought in just to repair the weak spots, but a basic feature of how (a part of) the world is explained.

Although current theorizing on food and health underlines the impact of ideological food-choice criteria, there is little interest in how these criteria are drawn upon in conversation, for example, in order to handle sensitive issues raised by possible ideological flaws. This article is concerned with how participants in a vegan forum actively use the notion of individual or self-responsibility in relation to health, so as to undermine a potential causal relationship between veganism as a food ideology, on the one hand, and health problems, on the other hand. In the case of veganism, health is one of the issues identified by researchers as a potential weakness of the doctrine (Davies and Lightowler, 1997; Lightowler et al., 1998). As our study will show, practitioners of the vegan lifestyle also orient to the relationship between health and veganism as a controversial and accountable matter. Participants draw on the contrary themes of individual responsibility and a shared ideal, using the former to account for potential failure of the latter. We focus, in particular, on how the combination of an if-then formulation and a modal expression permits them to handle blame and accountability without creating the impression that what they are saying is serving a particular stake or interest.

SCRIPT FORMULATIONS AS INTERACTIONAL RESOURCE

If-then structures can be understood as general scripting devices. Edwards (1994, 1995) introduced the term 'script formulations' for descriptions or reports that categorize events as routine or exceptional. A script formulation provides for inferences 'in which temporal sequence, causality, and rational accountability are mutually implicative' (Edwards, 1997: 288). The formulation

works to suggest that one cannot but do or believe 'the logical thing', thereby attributing accountability for doing so to recipients. Any denial of, or withdrawal from, the proposed events or actions is presented as requiring substantial explanation.

Using conditional formulations rather than references to actual events allows the speaker to present consequences that may not be in harmony with 'reality' (Potter, 1996; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). Furthermore, as a hypothetical formulation does not refer to specific events, the chance that a speaker will be asked to legitimize his or her version is significantly reduced (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). In other words, the construction enables speakers to protect themselves from being treated as directly and personally accountable for their version of events.

MODALITY AS A LINGUISTIC PHENOMENON

A related feature of the formulation under scrutiny (e.g. *if you eat a varied diet, then there shouldn't be any problems*) is the occurrence of a modal auxiliary in the 'then' part of the structure. Using a modal (like *should*) rather than a declarative formulation (*if you eat a varied diet, then you don't have any problems*) or the simple future tense (*if you eat a varied diet, then you won't have any problems*), presents the inference as less robust. An interesting feature of modals like *can*, *must*, *should* or *ought to*, is their capacity to refer simultaneously to the necessity of the event being performed by morally responsible actors, and to the speaker's assessment of the probability of the event occurring. In other words, the semantic properties of a number of modals allow speakers to blur the epistemic and moral implications of their claims.

To clarify this, we describe some of the linguistic features of modals. Modality has been described as a system by which the speaker can express a certain degree of commitment to a proposition's believability, necessity, desirability or truth. For the analysis that follows, two different categories of modality are relevant. The first is epistemic modality. This type of modality is mostly defined as an explicit qualification by the speaker of his or her commitment to the truth or believability of the proposition of an utterance (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1986). Epistemic modality can be expressed using grammatical devices such as modal adjectives (*probable*, *possible*, etc.), modal adverbs (*maybe*, *probably*, etc.) and modal auxiliaries (*can*, *may*, *must*, *shall*, *will*). Halliday (1970) defines epistemic modality as the speaker's assessment of probability and predictability.

The second main category is deontic or 'root' modality. Deontic modality refers to the degree to which the performance of actions by morally responsible actors is necessary, permitted or allowed (Lyons, 1977). This type of modality can also be expressed by modal auxiliaries (*may* as in 'be allowed to', *must* and *ought to* as in 'be obliged to'). The deontic modal *may* in 'John may go now' indicates that John is permitted to go, whereas the epistemic version of *may* indicates that the speaker evaluates John's leaving as possible. In other words, deontic

modality binds the subject to performing the activity expressed in the proposition to a certain degree. The realization of the activity depends on an external factor (sometimes the speaker) that allows, commands or forbids the realization of an event.

As Halliday (1970) points out, it is sometimes difficult to establish to which of the categories of modality speakers refer. In particular, this ambiguity can be found in hypothetical environments. For example, in the sentence 'He could have escaped, if he'd tried', the speaker's evaluation of the probability of escape and the actor's ability to escape are equally relevant, especially when no context is provided. It is precisely this type of hypothetical environment in which modal auxiliaries are used in our extracts.

DISCURSIVE MODALITY

Discursive psychologists and conversation analysts are interested in the interactional organization of social activities. The structure of language and the semantics of words are of interest as long as they visibly contribute to the accomplishment of practical social activities being negotiated in the talk (cf. Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). The semantic ambiguity of modals in conditional structures is especially suitable for delicate actions like blaming or attributing responsibility. By blurring whether the realization of an event – such as not having health problems – depends on (i) external factors or (ii) the ability of the individual actor, the speaker is able to perform complex interactional business. In the analysis presented in this article, we focus on the interactional tasks performed by speakers using a script formulation in combination with a modal construction. The ambiguity of modals, which is often considered a bone of contention in linguistic literature, turns out to be a useful discursive resource in daily interaction.

Method

DATA

The data in this study have been copied from the site of the Dutch Association for Veganism,¹ a national organization that aims to provide independent information about veganism. The site has a forum where people can communicate with each other on a range of topics. Anyone can start a 'thread' by introducing a particular topic, to which others may respond. The number of participants in a thread usually varies between two and ten.

Between September 2001 and August 2002, we collected a corpus of 45 threads from the forum. Some of the threads were taken from the archive and are thus dated earlier. The selection criteria for the material were that they involved interactions about food and health and, in order to provide a certain richness of conversation, that participants treated these issues as controversial in one way or another.

ANALYTIC PROCEDURE

We found 13 threads in our corpus on the topic of vitamin deficiency. In ten of the threads, participants (different persons each time) used formulations such as 'if you eat a varied diet, you shouldn't have problems', in response to recurrent questions about the relationship between health and veganism. We became interested in the role of this construction in the management of blame and accountability.

In our analysis we illustrate our findings by showing and analysing fragments from four threads in which the formulation is used. All names and dates in the examples have been changed. In some cases, parts of the fragments that did not have implications for the outcome of the interaction have been omitted.

Combining insights from discursive psychology and conversation analysis, we focus on the sequential and rhetorical qualities of the formulation under scrutiny. Instead of using researchers' informed guesses, the focus is first on the kind of understanding that co-participants display in subsequent turns (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). Another methodological procedure is to inspect a piece of discourse for its rhetorical quality, that is, to assess what other plausible counter-description is at issue (Edwards, 1997; see also the analytic section of this article).

It is important to emphasize that this study is not intended to be a full-scale analysis, but seeks to focus on a theoretically and empirically interesting phenomenon that may inform further analysis of a larger and different data corpus. One of the relevant questions for future research is the extent to which the discursive practice goes beyond this particular domain.

Thus far, discursive psychology has predominantly been applied to face-to-face conversations. In this article, however, we present an analysis of online data. To a large extent, theories on computer-mediated communication (CMC) still proceed from an individualistic and cognitivistic framework, thereby disregarding the profoundly social nature of CMC (for an overview and critique, see Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003). In this study we analyse online conversation *as* everyday talk-in-interaction (for an example of a rhetorical analysis of Internet discussions about health and vegetarianism see Wilson et al., 2004). However, it is also acknowledged that more in-depth research is required into the methodological consequences of studying written, delayed internet communications, in contrast to transcribed and taped dialogue on which discursive psychological research tends to be based.

TRANSLATION

The data were analysed in Dutch and subsequently translated from Dutch into English with the help of a native speaker and professional translator. Translation is not simply a technical process; it is also an analytical one. This means that translation is necessarily designed to reveal those features of the dialogue that, consciously or otherwise, are perceived as significant by both researchers and translators (see also Notes 1 and 3).

Analysis

We consider five typical extracts in which participants talk about health problems in relation to veganism. The analytical focus is on the sequential and rhetorical aspects of *if-then* structures in combination with particular modal auxiliaries.

THE SEQUENTIAL ORGANIZATION OF RESPONSIBILITY ATTRIBUTIONS

In the first extract, Anne presents herself as a novice who requires information. She asks questions about the vegan diet (more specifically: what a vegan should eat for breakfast) and about veganism in relation to nutritional deficiencies.

Extract 1: Breakfast

Date: August 29

From: Anne

- 1 [...11 lines omitted. . .]
- 2 What does a vegan have for
- 3 breakfast? To be honest, I
- 4 haven't got a clue! And what can
- 5 you do about the nutrients you
- 6 miss out on by not eating certain
- 7 things?! Can anyone help me?!

Date: August 29

From: Anne

- 1 [...11 lines omitted. . .]
- 2 Hoe ziet het ontbijt van een
- 3 veganist eruit? Ik heb eerlijk
- 4 gezegd geen idee! En hoe zit het
- 5 verder met de voedingsstoffen die
- 6 je door bepaalde dingen niet te
- 7 eten niet binnenkrijgt?! Kan
- 8 iemand mij helpen?!

For the purpose of the analysis, we focus on Anne's question in ll. 4–7, in which she asks what you can do about the nutrients you miss out on by not eating certain things. Note how Anne defines the issue as a general problem for which she carries no specific individual responsibility. The formulation of her question (*And what can you do about. . .*) presupposes a factual problem which is known to other vegan participants. She also uses the definite article *the* when referring to *the nutrients you miss out on* (ll. 5–6), as if recipients are already aware of the existence of these nutrients. Anne thereby packages the issue as a recognizable problem that requires no further elaboration, and to which she does not contribute on an individual basis.

Furthermore, Anne describes *missing out* on nutrients as something that may happen to her rather than a process that she is or may be actively involved in. Pomerantz (1978) shows that the absence of an actor-agent is a recurrent feature of sequences in which participants attribute responsibility for 'unhappy events'. As Pomerantz points out, these initial reports are often oriented to by recipients as unfinished by eliciting more information about the event, which subsequently allows for transforming it to a position of 'acted upon', or 'consequence'. Although 'only' a possible future event is involved here, Brian's reply to Anne's message indeed reformulates the 'standard problem for vegans' into a 'matter of bad, individual practice'. In doing so, he implicitly attributes responsibility for missing out, or potentially missing out, on nutrients to individual rule-followers like Anne:

Extract 1a: Reply to Breakfast

Date: September 01
From: Brian

8 [. . .23 lines omitted. . .]
9 All nutrients, vitamins and
10 minerals are present in vegetable
11 products in a very useful form,
12 often much better than those in
13 animal products. By mixing
14 vegetables, fruit, pulses,
15 cereals and nuts, it's almost
16 impossible to lack anything, and
17 you don't have to pay special
18 attention. [. . .41 lines omitted. . .]

Ontbijt
Date: September 01
From: Brian

9 [. . .23 lines omitted. . .]
8 Alle voedingsstoffen, vitaminen
9 en mineralen komen in heel
10 bruikbare vorm voor in
11 plantaardige voedingsstoffen,
12 vaak veel beter als in dierlijke.
13 Door te variëren met groenten,
14 fruit, peulvruchten, granen en
15 noten, kun je zonder er speciaal
16 op te letten haast geen tekort
17 oplopen van wat dan ook. [. . .41
18 lines omitted. . .]

In ll. 13–16, Brian suggests that nutritional deficiencies are virtually impossible,² as long as *vegetables, fruit, pulses, cereals and nuts* (ll. 14–15) are combined. The formulation *by doing X, it's almost impossible to get Y* is comparable with an *if X, then Y* construction. Conditional structures such as these can be used to describe circumstances or activities as having particular consequences. Y – here: not lacking anything – is offered as a rational inference (cf. Edwards, 1997). Formulations of events as having a predictable pattern, or so-called script formulations, construct the event as factually robust and as knowable in advance, which reduces the need to 'prove' their occurrence (Edwards, 1994, 1995, 2003).

By contrast, the failure to perform the activity (i.e. eating a variety of vegetables) logically suggests the possibility of deficiencies. In other words, this construction allows the speaker to imply that the recipient is accountable for the predictable consequences. In this sense, logic is drawn upon to present a normative orientation as well: when things routinely happen in a particular way, they also *should* be happening that way.

One feature of attributions of responsibility is the transformation of negative events (or *future* negative events) to products or consequences of a prior, neglected activity (cf. Pomerantz, 1978). In his response, Brian treats *missing out on nutrients* as a consequence of not performing the activity of combining vegetables and other food items, rather than something that just exists. He thereby undermines the status of *missing out on nutrients* as a problem 'out there', as proposed by Anne in her message.

To reiterate, the formulation *By mixing vegetables. . . , it's almost impossible to lack anything* predicts the absence of deficiencies as the result of a varied diet. Formulating the impossibility of deficiencies as a sequential and logical outcome of the activity of combining vegetables and other food items implies that this activity routinely means that deficiencies cannot possibly occur. Logical and

moral responsibility for not missing out on nutrients is thereby indirectly attributed to the recipient. At the same time, the scripted nature of the attribution protects Brian from being accused of having a stake in his version of events: by presenting a logical, recognizable pattern, he is merely offering the present or future world-as-it-is.

If the activity of combining vegetables has been performed and deficiencies still occur, Brian may be held accountable for performing the attribution *and* for presenting his epistemic inference. In this respect, it should be noted that the expression ‘almost impossible’ reduces both the attributed responsibility *and* the accountability of the speaker for the generalized character of the claim. The term *almost* suggests that there can be exceptions to the rule: with a varied diet it is almost, but not completely impossible to suffer from deficiencies. At the same time, the guaranteed kind of scripted consequence is carefully preserved. The combination of *almost* with *impossible* is particularly relevant here: although maintaining most of the automatic nature of the script, it allows for some untypical actor to get it wrong (compare it for example with *unlikely*, which makes the outcome far less certain, and which also cannot be modified with *almost*).

TURNING RESPONSIBILITY INTO POTENTIAL BLAME

In Extract 2, a script formulation is again used for ascribing responsibility to the recipient for staying healthy.

Extract 2: Osteoporosis

Date: March 17

From: Melanie

1 Does anyone know where I can find
2 info about a possible link between
3 veganism and osteoporosis. I've
4 been a vegetarian for twenty
5 years, six of them as a vegan. I
6 now have symptoms which might
7 possibly indicate osteoporosis
8 (but that hasn't been established
9 with certainty yet). I am
10 wondering if my eating pattern may
11 have something to do with it.
12 [... 5 lines omitted. . .]

Date: March 17

From: Melanie

1 Wie weet waar ik info kan vinden
2 over of er verband is tussen
3 veganisme en botontkalking. Ik
4 ben ong 20 jaar vegetarier
5 waarvan 6 jaar veganistisch. Ik
6 heb op dit moment klachten die
7 mogelijk op botontkalking wijzen
8 (maar dat is nog niet met
9 zekerheid vastgesteld). Ik vraag
10 mij nu dus af of mijn eetwijze
11 daar misschien iets mee te maken
12 kan hebben.
13 [... 5 lines omitted. . .]

Whereas Anne (Extract 1) did not put forward a ‘real’ health problem, Melanie reports having symptoms that might indicate osteoporosis, and suggests a possible relationship between this fact and her vegan eating patterns (ll. 9–11). Again, note the absence of an actor–agent in the report of the ‘unhappy incident’ of having symptoms (cf. Pomerantz, 1978).

By suggesting a relationship between her eating habits and symptoms, Melanie is identifying veganism as a possible cause of osteoporosis (see also ll. 1–3). Let us consider Sandra's reply to Melanie:

Extract 2a: Reply to Osteoporosis

Date: March 18

From: Sandra

Date: March 18

From: Sandra

13 If you ensure that you get enough
14 calcium in your food (sesame
15 paste, for example), it's
16 impossible for a problem to occur,
17 in my opinion . . .

14 Als je in je voeding zorgt voor
15 goede bronnen van calcium
16 (sesampasta bijvoorbeeld), kan er
17 volgens mij geen probleem zijn. . .

In her message, Sandra orients to the absence of an actor–agent in Melanie's report of having symptoms. Her response (*if you ensure that you get enough calcium in your food, it's impossible for a problem to occur*, ll. 15–17)³ presents the impossibility of a problem as a sequential and logical outcome of ensuring a sufficiently high calcium intake. In comparison with the construction *by mixing vegetables. . . , it's almost impossible to lack anything* (Extract 1a), the use of an *if–then* structure suggests more strongly that the recipient must perform a particular action in order to avoid problems. The *if–then* formulation transforms the event into a consequence of a prior neglected action (ensuring that you get enough calcium in your food), but it also constructs Melanie as the one who neglected this action.

The script formulations in Extracts 1a and 2a not only allow Brian and Sandra to attribute responsibility in an indirect way, they also enable them to reduce the risk of being treated as having a stake or interest in presenting their version of events. It is difficult to discount an apparently logical reasoning pattern as interested or biased in a particular way (cf. Edwards and Potter, 1993). By presenting a factual relationship between health problems and eating habits, Brian and Sandra avoid talking as vegans (who obviously have a possible stake in fudging the relationship between health problems and veganism).

Note how the ambiguity of the modal description *it's impossible* (ll. 15–16, see Notes 2 and 3 for an explanation of the translation) is used by participants to protect their attribution from being undermined. *It's impossible* not only allows Sandra to talk about the probability of having problems (or not) but also to refer indirectly to the *recipient's ability* (that is, to not have these problems) to avoid them. The construction invites the recipient to conclude that she could have avoided her symptoms by ensuring that she had enough calcium in her food.

It's impossible thus suggests that problems *will* not occur but also, and more implicitly, that they *should* not occur. In this sense, modality works together with the script formulation as a device for indirectly attributing both logical and moral accountability to the recipient (see for a similar combination, Extract 1a). In doing so, Sandra undermines Melanie's suggestion of a direct relationship

between veganism as a doctrine, on the one hand, and health problems (i.e. osteoporosis), on the other hand.

Notice how Sandra limits the scope of what she is saying to her own individual point of view by adding the subjective restriction *in my opinion* (l. 17) (cf. Pomerantz, 1984). Sandra's formulation leaves the door open to problems, however unexpected, caused by veganism as a doctrine, and in that sense she places a limit on her accountability for the claim as an irrefutable statement. The subjectivity of the modal description (*it's impossible for a problem to occur* rather than *there is no problem*) strengthens this effect. However, it is by reducing the general validity of her advice that Sandra enhances the credibility of what she is saying. Having just produced a rather technical and factually grounded advice about particular sources of calcium in food, Sandra suggests that she knows what she is talking about without wanting to make excessive claims. In doing so, she fends off the impression that she is being dogmatic about her advice, or willing to say more than she knows.

BLURRING FUTURE EVENTS WITH AGENCY

The next construction is comparable with those used in Extracts 1 and 2, but it draws on a modal with an explicit future orientation.

Extract 3: Beginning vegan

Date: May 05

From: Jesse

1 [...] But..., who can give me tips,
2 recipes etc. to avoid risking any
3 vitamin deficiency or the like.
4 I've already read about vit. B12
5 and different sorts of
6 supplements, you name it, but I
7 want to know which brands are best
8 and where I can buy/order them.
9 [...]

Date: May 05

From: Jesse

1 [...] Maarrrrrrr, wie kan mij helpen
2 aan tips, recepten en wat dan ook
3 om geen vitaminegebrek e.d. te
4 riskeren. Ik lees al over vit. B12
5 en verschillende soorten
6 supplementen, noem maar op,
7 maar wil weten welke merken ik het
8 beste kan nemen en waar ik deze
9 kan kopen/bestellen. [...]

Jesse presents vitamin deficiency as a feature of veganism by asking who can give her tips to avoid it. Vitamin deficiency is thus presented as a problem that is recognizable to vegans.

Extract 3a: Reply to Beginning vegan

Date: May 05

From: Paul

10 You can buy vegan B12 pills under
11 the Solgar brand, but check that
12 suitable for vegans is written on
13 the jar. I use the 100 mg. tablets
14 which I buy from the healthfood

Date: May 05

From: Paul

10 Veganistische B12 pillen kan je
11 kopen van Solgar, er moet wel op
12 het potje suitable for vegans op
13 staan. Ik gebruik die van 100 mg.
14 (deze pillen koop ik bij de

- 15 store. You can get D3 by being

16 outside regularly. (sunlight). By

17 just ensuring you have a varied

18 diet you won't easily run the risk

19 of any other vitamin deficiency.
- 15 reformwinkel) D3 kan je tot je

16 krijgen door regelmatig buiten te

17 zijn. (zonlicht). Door gewoon

18 gevarieerd te eten zal je aan

19 andere vitamines niet snel te kort

20 komen.

In ll. 16–19, Paul presents a varied diet as a condition for not risking vitamin deficiency, using the script formulation. Again, the negative event of ‘risking vitamin deficiency’ is reformulated into a consequence of neglecting certain behaviour, rather than something that is inherent in veganism. Instead of offering tips or recipes that contain specific instructions, eating a common, varied diet is constructed as predictive for the absence of vitamin deficiency. This construction not only opposes a relationship between vitamin deficiency and veganism but also undermines the notion that it is difficult to prevent vitamin deficiency.

Notice how the future orientation of *won't easily* (l. 18) is difficult to distinguish from its reference to the recipient's ability to perform the required action. Paul suggests that not running the risk of vitamin deficiency will (almost) logically follow from ensuring a varied diet. This expectation, however, also attends to the ability and therefore the rational ‘obligation’ of the recipient to prevent deficiencies by following the proposed guidelines. In this respect, the formulation *won't easily* permits speakers to conflate future events with acts of agency (cf. Edwards, 2002).

As in Extracts 1 and 2, the construction restricts the speaker's accountability for any general implications regarding the claim. *Won't easily* presents the absence of a risk of vitamin deficiency as a matter of likelihood rather than certainty (cf. Sweetser, 1990). It is the adverb ‘easily’ that allows for a deviation from the general rule (compare Extract 1: ‘it's *almost* impossible’ and Extract 2: ‘impossible, *in my opinion*'). However, rather than reducing speaker-credibility, the formulation increases it by avoiding unwarranted claims and being precise about what *can* be expected from varying one's meals.

Other than in Extract 2, there is no concrete example of a health problem to which the construction responds. This reinforces its character as a generalized prediction and reduces its direct blame orientation.

MODALITY AND VARYING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN FACTS AND NORMS
In the next extract, an *if-then* structure is used in combination with the modal *should*, which projects slightly different implications for the issue of responsibility.

Extract 4: Almost a vegan

- Date: June 02

From: Grace

1 About a week ago I announced the

2 Fact that I was ‘almost a vegan.’

3 [. . .13 lines omitted. . .]
- Date: June 02

From: Grace

1 Ruim een week geleden heb ik een

2 berichtje geplaatst over het feit,

3 dat ik ‘bijna veganiste’ was. [. . .13

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 4 | The more information I collect | 4 | <i>lines omitted. . .]</i> Hoe meer |
| 5 | About veganism and the more I look | 5 | informatie ik verzamel over |
| 6 | Around in green/biological stores, | 6 | veganisme en hoe meer ik rondkijk |
| 7 | the more veganism I'm able to | 7 | in bv.groene/biologische winkels, |
| 8 | incorporate into my life. | 8 | hoe meer veganisme ik leer |
| | | 9 | toepassen in mijn leven. |

In this extract, Grace does not discuss any problem relating to vitamin deficiency or health. However, in his subsequent reply Victor formulates a script (ll. 15–20) that is comparable to the previous constructions.

Extract 4a: Reply to Almost a vegan

Date: June 03

From: Victor

- 9 Hi,
 10 I do hope you found good info
 11 About a healthy diet as well.
 12 Veganism and a healthy diet are
 13 certainly not mutually exclusive.
 14 [. . .20 *lines omitted. . .]*
 15 And if you have a glass of
 16 fruit syrup(without added sugar)
 17 with every meal, or
 18 another source of vitamin C, then
 19 there shouldn't be any problems,
 20 certainly not with iron or zinc.

Date: June 03

From: Victor

- 10 Hoi,
 11 Ik hoop wel dat je ook goede info
 12 over een goede samenstelling van
 13 je voeding hebt gevonden.
 14 Veganisme en een volwaardige
 15 voeding zijn zeker niet aan elkaar
 16 tegengesteld.
 17 [. . .20 *lines omitted. . .]*
 18 En als je dan elke maaltijd
 19 vergezeld laat gaan van een glas
 20 roosvicé (zonder toegevoegde
 21 suiker) of een andere vitamine C-
 22 bron, dan zou er zeker wat ijzer
 23 en zink betreft geen probleem
 24 hoeven te zijn.

By making the topic of vitamin deficiency relevant without being asked for advice on it, Victor orients to the assumption that vitamin deficiency is a problem for vegans. While doing so, he also provides a pre-emptive account (cf. Buttny, 1993). In ll. 15–19, Victor mentions drinking a glass of fruit syrup as a condition for avoiding problems. Again, the absence of problems is presented as a logical consequence of following particular individual eating habits, and the recipient is therefore constructed as accountable for her own health.

Victor constructs problems as both unnecessary and unlikely by using the script formulation in combination with the modal auxiliary *should*. However, *should* projects a different emphasis in accountability than the modal descriptions *it's almost impossible* (see Extracts 1a and 2a) and *won't easily* (Extract 3a). In comparison with these latter descriptions, *should* focuses more on a lack of necessity than of likelihood. This emphasis implies that it is possible to *prevent* problems. The nature of Victor's attribution may well be explained by the fact that it was not occasioned by a reported negative event or reference to a potential problem as in the previous extracts. The risk of it being understood as a blaming may be reduced in that case (for a contrast, see Extract 2b later), which permits usage of a construction with a more obvious normative focus.

Note that Victor – in the same way that Brian did with *it's almost impossible* (Extract 1a), Sandra with *impossible, in my opinion* (Extract 2a), and Paul with *won't easily* (Extract 3a) – reduces (the accountability for) the general character of his assertion by restricting the claim to the substances iron and zinc (*certainly not with iron or zinc*, l. 20). Again, the writer's displayed concern for being very specific about what he can be sure of, that is, an orientation to saying as much and no more than is properly warranted, makes the generalized advice all the more credible.

In Extract 5, the script formulation is used in combination with the modal *ought to*.

Extract 5: Eating

Date: April 06

From: Mariah

1 I am a girl of nearly 18 who will
2 soon be leaving home. I then want
3 to become a strict vegan [. . . 1 line
4 omitted. . .] and would like to know
5 what I can and cannot eat/use.
6 [. . . 4 lines omitted. . .]

Date: April 06

From: Mariah

1 Ik ben een meisje van bijna 18 en
2 binnenkort ga ik op mezelf wonen.
3 Ik wil vanaf dan compleet
4 veganistisch gaan leven [. . . 1 line
5 omitted. . .] en nou vraag ik me af
6 wat ik allemaal wel en niet
7 mag/kan eten/gebruiken.
8 [. . . 4 lines omitted. . .]

Mariah introduces herself as a novice and asks what she can and cannot eat or use. She does not specify her question but it is obvious that she is referring to products that are compatible with a vegan lifestyle.

Extract 5a: Reply to Eating

Date: April 07

From: Buck

7 [. . . 5 lines omitted. . .]
8 If you eat a varied diet of
9 vegetables, fruit, nuts and seeds,
10 and something like tahoe or tempe,
11 that ought to be sufficient.
12 [. . . 7 lines omitted. . .]

Date: April 07

From: Buck

9 [. . . 5 lines omitted. . .]
10 Als je gevarieerd eet en je
11 voedsel bestaat uit o.a. groente,
12 fruit, noten en zaden, en iets van
13 tahoe of tempe, moet dit voldoende
14 zijn.
15 [. . . 7 lines omitted. . .]

Buck responds by naming products that *ought to be sufficient* (l. 11). Like Victor in Extract 4, he implicitly displays an awareness of a potential health issue and resolves it before Mariah has reported or referred to existing or potential health problems.

Referring to products as *sufficient* suggests some minimum goal to be accomplished. Although this goal could be 'living like a strict vegan', the reference to *food* products rather than cosmetics or clothes invokes the idea that Buck is refer-

ring to the goal of staying healthy. In doing so, Buck treats the matter of ‘what to eat’ as inextricably linked to potential deficiency problems.

By using the *if-then* formulation, Buck presents the sufficiency of certain food items to prevent problems as a logical and sequential result of eating a varied diet. A difference from the other extracts is that Buck does not transform an actual or potential unhappy event – getting or having health problems – into a consequent event. The presented consequence of eating a varied diet is the sufficiency of this activity to prevent health problems rather than its sufficiency for the actual absence of problems. However, as in the previous extracts, the presentation of this highly plausible scenario indirectly allocates responsibility for preventing deficiencies to the recipient.

Like *should*, the modal auxiliary *ought* to potentially leaves more scope for the co-participant than the modal expressions *it’s almost impossible* or *won’t easily*. ‘That ought to be sufficient’ (l. 11) suggests that ‘external factors’ should and will make it happen. However, there is no guarantee: this ought to be true (and is highly likely) but might prove impossible. This formulation not only reduces the speaker’s own accountability for the statement and its potential general implications, but also that of the recipient for realizing the script. If Mariah meets the condition (i.e. a *varied diet*), then Buck evaluates it as probable, but not certain, that she will not suffer from health problems.

By contrast, the construction is hearable as advice, and more so than in the previous extracts, by telling the recipient how to prevent deficiencies. Again, its ‘obvious’ moral rather than epistemic inferential nature may have to do with the absence of concrete health problems being referred to and therefore the reduced risk of a response being attended to as managing a particular stake for the speaker. The next series of extracts provides some evidence for this explanation.

TOWARDS A MORE DIRECT FORM OF ATTRIBUTION

In the last part of the analysis, we demonstrate how a script formulation is used to perform a more direct attribution of self-responsibility. This attribution is the only example in our corpus to which the initial participant replies by refuting the attribution, which may be explained by the direct character of the attribution and the explicit undermining of a relationship between a health problem and veganism. Let us return to Extract 2 on osteoporosis. Melanie describes having symptoms of osteoporosis and suggests that these may be related to her vegan eating patterns.

Extract 2: Osteoporosis

Date: March 17

From: Melanie

Date: March 17

From: Melanie

- 1 Does anyone know where I can find
- 2 info about a possible link between
- 3 veganism and osteoporosis. I’ve
- 4 been a vegetarian for twenty

- 1 Wie weet waar ik info kan vinden
- 2 over of er verband is tussen
- 3 veganisme en botontkalking.
- 4 Ik ben ong 20 jaar vegetarier

5 years, six of them as a vegan. I
 6 now have symptoms which might
 7 possibly indicate osteoporosis
 8 (but that hasn't been established
 9 with certainty yet). I am
 10 wondering if my eating pattern may
 11 have something to do with it.

5 waarvan 6 jaar veganistisch. Ik
 6 heb op dit moment klachten die
 7 mogelijk op botontkalking wijzen
 8 (maar dat is nog niet met
 9 zekerheid vastgesteld). Ik vraag
 10 mij nu dus af of mijn eetwijze
 11 daar misschien iets mee te maken
 12 kan hebben.

In his reply to Melanie (Extract 2b), posted *after* Sandra's reply (see previous analysis of Extract 2a), Ronald performs a direct attribution of responsibility.

Extract 2b: Second reply to Osteoporosis

Date: March 18

From: Ronald

12 As far as we know there is no
 13 link between veganism and
 14 osteoporosis. Osteoporosis occurs
 15 mainly in western countries,
 16 where a lot of dairy products and
 17 protein-rich foods are consumed.
 18 With a good vegan lifestyle you
 19 won't get osteoporosis. [. . .]
 20 Osteoporosis is thus a luxury
 21 'disease'; if you have symptoms,
 22 I'd say they were probably caused
 23 by your vegetarian lifestyle.
 24 Vegetarians eat far too many
 25 dairy products, like cheese.[. . .]

Date: March 18

From: Ronald

13 Voor zover bekend is er geen
 14 verband tussen veganisme en
 15 botontkalking. Botontkalking komt
 16 het meest voor in de westerse
 17 landen waar men veel zuivel en
 18 eiwitrijke voeding gebruikt. Bij
 19 een goede veganistische leefstijl
 20 zal je geen last van botontkalking
 21 krijgen.
 22 Botontkalking is dus een
 23 welvaarts 'ziekte', als jij daar
 24 last van hebt, zou ik zeggen dat
 25 dat veroorzaakt is door je
 26 vegetarische eetwijze. Vegetariers
 27 gebruiken overmatig veel zuivel en
 28 kaas. [. . .]

In this second reply to Melanie, Ronald suggests that there is no link between veganism and osteoporosis, but he limits the general implications of this claim by using footing (*As far as we know* in l. 12). He then provides external evidence (ll. 14–17) for the suggestion that there is no link between osteoporosis and veganism. Again, the writer is presenting himself as a knowledgeable person while being careful to say no more than he really knows.

In ll. 19–20, he uses a formulation that is largely comparable with those used in the other extracts: *With a good vegan lifestyle, you won't get osteoporosis*. The absence of osteoporosis is presented as a future consequence of living a good vegan lifestyle. *Won't* suggests that this inference is highly probable.

However, the attribution of responsibility and potential blame is done in a much more direct manner. By presenting osteoporosis as impossible when leading a *good* vegan lifestyle, Ronald almost directly accuses Melanie of not having followed the rules. Note that Ronald refers to *leading a good vegan lifestyle* rather than to more general or neutral actions like *eating a varied diet* or *ensuring enough*

calcium, as was the case in the previous extracts. In response to Melanie's suggestion of possibly having osteoporosis, Ronald suggests that Melanie has not behaved as a satisfactory member of the category 'vegans'. In a much more direct sense than other participants, Ronald is undermining a causal relationship between veganism and health problems.

It is interesting to see that in l. 21, Ronald presents Melanie's symptoms as hypothetical, using *if*. This conditional formulation allows him to accuse Melanie of suffering from a *luxury 'disease'* (ll. 20–21) and at the same time to give her the chance to rephrase her diagnosis. Also note how Ronald attributes Melanie's problem to her vegetarianism (ll. 21–23). Melanie describes herself as having been a vegetarian for 20 years, 6 of them as a vegan. By selecting the category *vegetarian*, offered by Melanie herself (ll. 3–5) as the cause of her problem, Ronald enables Melanie to externalize the responsibility for osteoporosis to a former lifestyle rather than constructing the disease as something she is presently and actively involved in. Note how blaming vegetarianism for causing osteoporosis seems to construct vegetarianism rather than meat-eating as the most relevant rhetorical opposition, i.e. rival lifestyle.

Interestingly, in this case Melanie, the initiator of the thread, replies to Ronald's message and treats his contribution as an attribution of responsibility.

Extract 2c: Reply from initiator Osteoporosis

Date: March 19

From: Melanie

26 Hello Ronald,
27 Thanks for your reaction. The
28 point is that I have eaten hardly
29 any dairy products most of my
30 life, and the last six years have
31 been virtually dairy-free. I know
32 the alternative attitude to
33 osteoporosis and I support it –
34 that's why I'm a vegan. However,
35 my complaints have forced me to
36 take everything into account. The
37 attitude that you can't get
38 osteoporosis from a vegan diet,
39 well, at this moment I'd like to
40 know how and on whom that
41 actually has been tested.

Date: March 19

From: Melanie

29 Hallo Ronald,
30 Bedankt voor je reactie. Het punt
31 is dat ik voor het grootste deel
32 van mijn leven zuivel-arm heb
33 gegeten waarvan de laatste 6 jr
34 zo goed als zuivelloos. Ik ken de
35 alternatieve kijk op botontkalking
36 en ik onderschrijf die. Daarom eet
37 ik ook veganistisch. Door mijn
38 klachten echter voel ik mij
39 genoodzaakt overal rekening mee te
40 houden. De opvatting dat je juist
41 geen botontkalking krijgt van een
42 veganistische voeding, wel, ik zou
43 op dit moment bijv. wel willen
44 weten op welke wijze en bij wie
45 dat daadwerkelijk onderzocht is.

In ll. 35–36, Melanie foregrounds her complaints as the agents that forced her to take everything into account, thereby downplaying her will or agency in suggesting a link between veganism and osteoporosis. Also note the extreme case formulation *everything* (Pomerantz, 1986), which suggests that even the most unlikely option has been considered before she allowed herself to reach the conclusion that veganism and osteoporosis might be connected. As well as externalizing her

reasons for looking into this delicate matter, her account also draws attention away from a particular motive that she might be suspected of, and that may disturb her objective view of the matter. By attributing her inquiries into the possible link between veganism and health problems to a need and right 'to know the facts' (ll. 34–41), Melanie counters the alternative explanation of being biased now that she has complaints herself.

Extract 2d

Date: March 25

From: Ronald

42 (URL)

43 For more information (in English)

44 just click on the link.

Date: March 25

From: Ronald

46 URL: (link)

47 Meer informatie kun je vinden

48 (engelstalig) als je op de link

49 klikt.

In his last reply, Ronald refers to a URL. By constructing his message as a direct response, he makes it hearable as not having had to put any effort into coming up with this link and thus with information that supports his claim. By only providing the external link, rather than replying to Melanie's defence, he also makes available the inference that the facts speak for themselves.

Discussion

In this article we have examined how participants manage issues of causation and blame in a specific ideological domain. More particularly, we have shown how participants in an online forum on veganism present possible health problems as sequentially and logically connected to particular individual practices, thus leaving recipients to conclude that the problems can only be caused by their own actions and not by the shortcomings of veganism as such. This 'repair work' is performed through a formulation that uses both scripting and modality as interactional resources. As we have seen, it is precisely its design as a factual prediction, and the hidden normativity of the modal construction therein, that permits speakers to do their attributional work in an unmotivated manner.

If-then formulations, and script formulations, more generally, offer predictable and recognizable patterns that reduce the need to provide an explanation. They not only provide an account of certain events, they also work as an account for those events (Garfinkel, 1967). By predicting that a varied diet *routinely* produces the absence of health problems, participants also show a normative orientation as to how health problems *should* be prevented. The rationality of the construction allows the speaker to project himself as 'doing description' rather than managing self-interest. It *can* be heard as an attribution of responsibility or blame, while avoiding associations with the need to disguise ideological weakness or to protect one's lifestyle against threats from outside.

The modal construction used in the *then*-part of these script formulations not

only predicts that a varied diet will result in 'not having problems' but also formulates the recipient as being able and thus with the obligation to prevent these problems. It is precisely the blurring of the epistemic implications, on the one hand, and the recipient-related moral implications, on the other hand, that enables speakers to do their attributional work while softening its blame-implicative nature.

We also showed how participants, as a part of these modal constructions, systematically avoid fashioning their claims about the prevention of health problems as having a general validity. They do so by inserting qualifications such as '*certainly not* (with iron or zinc)', '(won't) *easily*', or '(it's impossible. . .) *in my opinion*', or through the subjective scope brought in by the modal itself ('that *ought* to be sufficient'). In demarcating their 'certain' knowledge and being very specific about what they can be sure of, they depict themselves as speakers who do not make unwarranted or excessive claims. This makes their (generalized) advice all the more credible.

It is interesting that these modal constructions are used in a rhetorical environment that is already oriented to denying something (cf. Edwards, 2002), i.e. the assumption that veganism is ideologically flawed. Normative expectations (you should [be able to] solve these problems yourself) are contrasted with the current state of affairs, thus turning the hypothesis of veganism as the cause for ill health into a disputable or doubtful claim. The fact/norm ambiguity of modal constructions perfectly suits a counterfactual context in which claims have to be defended against undermining. Also note that the forum participants talk about *preventing problems*. Individual practices either serve to protect health against possible risks or to solve problems such as vitamin deficiency, but they are never referred to as a means of 'upgrading' one's health. Being healthy is 'negatively' constructed as being free from problems or risks. Interestingly, in orienting to health in terms of possible problems rather than ideals, participants demonstrate that health is a sensitive issue for them (for an account of the way in which health is treated as an issue in these data, see Sneijder and Te Molder, 2004).

By allocating blame and responsibility for health problems in an indirect way, participants also *mark* this act as potentially delicate (cf. Silverman, 1997). It can be seen from the one case in which the formulation attributes blame in a more explicit manner, and evokes a defensive uptake, that the descriptive and therefore largely implicit character of the construction is of importance in terms of interactional effect. Although it can be taken as blame, it is not directly available as such, thus protecting the speaker from the need to elaborate on the motives for his action.

The combination of script formulations and modality may be a useful way of managing issues of accountability in a more general sense, too. An interesting avenue for future research would be to establish to what extent these devices have validity beyond the domain of the study. This also applies to the way in which veganism is defended as a matter of principle. The analysis shows how potential discrepancies between ideological ideas and 'lived' reality are explained

by referring to practical and individual factors. Similar 'contingent' accounts can be found, for example, in science and gender issues (cf. Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Wetherell et al., 1987). The similarities and differences between these sets of error accounts are worth exploring more systematically.

Interestingly, by establishing its problem-free status, and doing so in a way that emphasizes its factual and therefore taken-for-granted nature, participants also construct veganism as an ideology. Referring to individual practices as an explanation for (future) negative events defines veganism as unproblematic when carefully practised. The suggested practice, a common varied diet, underlines this natural character by showing its integration in the mundane life of participants.

More generally, this study illustrates that managing and handling 'major' themes in society, such as protecting and sustaining (food) ideologies without coming across as overtly defensive, is often done through fine-grained discursive constructions that are hardly recognizable as doing the important business that they do.

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NOTES


1. The use of data from this website is authorized on condition that the source is given (as explicitly mentioned on each page, including the forum page).
2. In the original Dutch fragment, the participant uses a modal auxiliary (*kunnen/can*) instead of the phrase 'it's almost impossible. . .'. However, since a literal translation would not connect with our analysis and also result in awkward English, we have opted for the current formulation.
3. Again (see Note 2), a modal auxiliary (*kunnen/can*) is used in Dutch.

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