

# Two Patterns for Conversational Closings in Instant Message Discourse

Joshua Raclaw

*University of Colorado*

This paper investigates the methods used by speakers to end conversations in instant message discourse. The analysis describes two distinct patterns of closing sequences – expanded archetype closings and partially automated closings – used to make a closing relevant to the interaction. The structure of these patterns are demonstrated to be reliant upon speaker orientation to various social and technological aspects of the medium, such as online presence and program-created automated messages. The analysis concludes that the ways in which speakers close conversations are similar in structure to spoken closings in face-to-face interactions, though contoured specifically to the online medium in their application.

## 1. Introduction

Research on the interactional aspects of talk occurring in computer-mediated environments has often focused on those communicative features that the medium has shaped in some way. Within only the past few years, Markman (2006) has shown that the persistent nature of conversation in certain formats of computer-mediated discourse (hereafter CMD) can affect speaker orientation to the turn-taking mechanism, and Schonfeldt and Golato (2003) have demonstrated how the order that transmissions are received within synchronous formats of the medium may shape how speakers repair utterances or correct errors. Earlier research by Garcia and Jacobs (1999) has discussed how the separation of the message composition and message transmission processes found in “quasi-synchronous” forms of CMD may affect both the allocation of speaker turns and various forms of error correction, while Rintel et al. (2001) looked more narrowly at speaker orientation to automated messages in chatroom discourse during opening sequences. Though this focus on the medium is arguably widespread throughout many studies of the sociolinguistic aspects of CMD, it is especially prevalent within work that makes use of research methodologies that scholars have traditionally used to study spoken interaction, such as the conversation analytic framework (hereafter CA; see e.g. Sacks 1992) used in the work cited above.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of contemporary scholarship in this area has incorporated discussions of medium-dependent features alongside empirical analyses of data from online interactions. This has resulted in a growing field of research that

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<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps due to the somewhat marked status of computer-mediation within these types of studies.

might be more accurately described as *informed by* the theories and methods of CA rather than strict examples of them, as more “traditional” applications of the framework generally focus solely on speaker interaction rather than the nuances of the communicative mode (see Rintel et al. 2001).<sup>2</sup> While this type of analysis is increasingly prevalent within the contemporary CMD literature, there are still many interactional features of computer-mediated talk that research has yet to describe using this or any other framework, a number of which have already been widely documented within conversation analyses of spoken discourse.

The present study is a discussion of one such aspect of online interactions, the *conversational closing*, which entails the various methods that speakers use to leave an interaction. The analysis looks specifically at closings within instant message (hereafter IM) discourse rather than the chatroom styles of talk most prevalent within similar studies of CMD. Through a discussion of speaker orientation to aspects of the medium, such as online presence and platform-provided automated messages, I identify two patterns for closing sequences. The first of these, the *expanded archetype closing*, closely follows the structure of spoken closings but contains features unique to the medium and exhibits a slightly different preference structure based on speaker accountability within the online sphere. The second and less common pattern, the *partially automated closing*, replaces what would be entire turns at talk in spoken closing sequences with features specific to the medium, such as automated messages.

## 2. Spoken Archetype Closings

As Schegloff and Sacks (1973) first illustrated, conversational closings are intimately tied to the larger system of turn-taking that speakers employ during talk-in-interaction, though the structures of closing sequences tend to follow distinct patterns that remain relatively constant. The most prominent of these patterns, described by Button (1987) as the *archetype closing*, involves the exchange of two sets of adjacency pairs between speakers. An adjacency pair is any unit of conversation where two consecutive turns are exchanged from one speaker to another, and the content of each turn is pragmatically related to the other so that the first part of the pair generally invites the second, as would occur in a question-answer pair. In the case of the conversational closing, we are concerned with the *pre-closing* pair and the *terminal exchange* pair. Within a telephone conversation, these might look like the exchange in Excerpt 1.

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<sup>2</sup> One partial exception may be research on telephone conversations, especially work on opening sequences where speakers are shown to orient to the telephone ring as a summons. Even in this body of work, however, the focus is largely placed on speaker interaction.

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- (1) Excerpt 1  
1 Joshua: okay,  
2 Mom: okay.  
3 Joshua: bye Mom.  
4 Mom: goodbye.

As defined within the archetype closing, the pre-closing consists of a pair of topically-neutral utterances that effectively “passes” the speaker’s turn to the interlocutor. The first pair part of this action invites a temporary suspension of the turn-taking mechanism of talk, an otherwise infinite loop of sorts in which speakers either keep or exchange turns with one another based on the interactional relevance of such an action (see Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). The second speaker has two choices at this point in the interaction. They may align with the suspension, as by responding with a similarly topically-neutral utterance, therefore shifting the frame of the interaction towards a closing. Alternatively, they may disalign with the suspension by continuing the conversation, either through the introduction of a new topic or through anaphoric reference. It should be noted that either choice may occur regardless of whether the second speaker recognizes it as such. It is not intention that is strictly important within a conversation analytic discussion of the closing sequence, but rather whether speakers notably align or orient to various aspects of the talk by providing, or not providing, a *preferred* or otherwise “expected” response.

In the case of alignment with the first pair part of the pre-closing, the suspension of the transition relevance occurring after the first turn makes relevant an end to the conversation as the speakers cease the exchange of turns that form the backbone of active conversation. This exchange is illustrated in line 1 of Excerpt 1 where Joshua’s “okay” serves as topically-neutral in relation to prior turns at talk. Mom’s orientation to line 1 as a pre-closing can be seen in her use of a similarly topically-neutral utterance as her response. This allows Joshua to begin the remainder of the closing sequence on his next turn. Following a successful pre-closing the first speaker may then initiate a terminal exchange pair, what one might commonly think of as an exchange of goodbyes. This part of the closing can be seen in lines 3 and 4 with Joshua’s “Bye Mom” and Mom’s subsequent “Goodbye,” and in the case of the telephone call from which the data sample originated, is followed by both parties hanging up. The original research by Schegloff and Sacks notes that the format of the archetype closing may be expanded in any number of ways, and in practice this is often the case. For example, speakers commonly make use of additional pre-closing sequences prior to beginning a terminal exchange, and they may provide accounts of why they are leaving the conversation or arrangements for making future plans with their interlocutor. These elements will be covered further in the discussion of conversational closings within computer-mediated contexts.

### 3. Closings and Openings in CMD

While conversational closings have received generous attention in work on spoken language, language and communication scholars have conducted little research on their occurrence in online interactions. Oftentimes any mention of closings is done as an aside within a larger discussion of interactional strategies rather than as the focus of the work, such as Werry's (1996:53) description of addressivity in "expressions of greeting and farewell" on Internet Relay Chat (hereafter IRC) or Herring's (1996) and Hård af Segerstad's (2002) citations of variation in email salutations within discussions of formality in the medium. Work by researchers such as Vallis (1999) fills this gap to some degree with analyses that look specifically at the management of closings in CMD, though these too are typically part of a larger study of other aspects of the talk. For example, Vallis draws on the CA methodology to describe the frequent use of accounts in closings within IRC. In her discussion she attributes any lack of a "formal" closing sequence offered by speakers leaving the program to server problems or a general lack of involvement with the chat room. However, even these more focused findings are a minor aspect of a larger study of opening sequences, accountability and recognition work.<sup>3</sup>

A more substantial literature may be found on opening sequences in CMD, and these are often relevant to some degree to discussions of closing sequences based on interactional similarities between the two. Rintel et al. (2001) make use of CA to provide descriptions of speaker orientation to automated messages provided by the IRC program, neatly contrasting the ways that speakers manage the opening of conversations in chatroom environments with those in spoken discourse. Within this discussion, Rintel et al. introduce a structured description of opening sequences that progress from what they term *Channel Entry Phases*. Due to the structure of IRC, these necessarily begin with automated messages sent to both the entering user and the other users of the chatroom to announce (or confirm) the new user's arrival into the chat. As Rintel et al. demonstrate, speakers may notably orient to these messages by directly responding to them and, in doing so, shaping their opening sequences accordingly. As IRC and numerous other synchronous formats of CMD also make use of automated messages when speakers leave the program, it is logical that speakers will similarly orient to them during closing sequences in ways similar to those described in the literature on openings. While currently unexplored, this orientation is perhaps hinted at in Vallis's previous recognition that these automated messages may serve as the only closing announcement for speakers who do not make use of more "formal" closing sequences. However, the influence of these particular aspects of the medium will be different in practice when speakers leave, rather than enter, the discourse environment, as conversation will

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<sup>3</sup> Though still a notable contribution to work on closings in CMD, Vallis only devotes a paragraph of her article to this phenomenon.

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already be in progress in the former case. Additionally, as the one-on-one chat format of instant messages ensures that speakers do not consistently experience the Channel Entry Phases (or Channel Exit Phases) of multiple users as in IRC, both entry and exit strategies will likely differ between the two formats of CMD.

#### 4. Data Collection and Methods

The present analysis makes use of data taken from a corpus of conversations held using the AOL Instant Messenger (hereafter AIM) program. AIM is a freely downloadable messaging program used widely in the USA (where the research occurred) and numerous other wired societies, and its use is especially prominent among teenage and college-aged youths. Data collection occurred in 2005 and involved compiling the chatlogs of interactions held between a cohort of 17 undergraduates at the University of Colorado. Each participant contributed multiple conversations to the corpus, and there were a total of 58 conversations containing a closing sequence. (The term is expanded here from its original definition in the CA literature to include closings that make use of both user-initiated closings and, in certain circumstances, automated messages from the AIM program). Permission was obtained by each user prior to the analysis, and each individual's screen name, or handle, was anonymized. The gender of the speakers was retained, as were their ages, though no other demographics were noted. Ten females and seven males contributed to the corpus, and all participants were aged 18-21.

The use of chatlogs, the text file records of an interaction created through a program after the conversation has taken place, has both merits and faults when used as the basis for any type of linguistic analysis. For those making use of a framework like conversation analysis, which is notorious for its narrow attention to detail within the transcription of the talk under scrutiny, this issue is a prominent one. Despite the historical use of detailed transcripts, the majority of research that turns the principles of CA to computer-mediated talk has instead used chatlogs as a source of data. Notable exceptions to this include Garcia and Jacobs (1999) and Markman (2006), who both developed transcription methods of their own based on video recordings of chat interactions. The use of original transcription practices was done out of sheer necessity, as the current set of transcription standards (such as Jefferson's method) were clearly developed to capture spoken discourse. They often focus largely on capturing phonetic or extralinguistic aspects of the talk that are either missing completely, or represented differently, in text-based forms of discourse. The current transcription systems are also designed to capture gaps or silences within the discourse, as these typically occur in microseconds in spoken conversation. They are thus ill-suited for recording not only pauses that may often occur in lengths of minutes or even hours, but especially for those gaps in the separate message composition and message transmission processes that are significant to the organization of the

interaction. This lack of a standard for text-based transcription is a notable impediment not only for allowing more analyses of transcribed data into research on CMD, but in performing work on the medium that can only be adequately accomplished with narrow transcription of the talk with details obtained by watching the conversation unfold from each user's perspective.

However, as researchers such as Rintel et al. (2001) have suggested, the use of narrow transcription may not be absolutely necessary for interactional analyses of CMD, even those making use of the CA framework. They defend the use of what they term *single-point logs*, so named because they capture the entirety of the conversation from a single computer, by arguing that more “naturally occurring” data can be obtained from speakers chatting in their homes rather than in the research setting necessary for video observation.<sup>4</sup> Issues of practicality also surface within this discussion, as somehow shuffling each user into a room together and subsequently transcribing the experience of each user is a difficult and certainly arduous prospect. While these caveats make immediate sense for work on formats such as IRC where dozens of speakers may be conversing within a single channel at once, it remains applicable even when examining the one-on-one interactions of formats like AIM. This is due to the numerous aspects of IM interaction that are unique to more “spontaneous” uses of the program rather than the necessarily planned conversations held within a lab. For example, while these interactions do not feature the frequent joining phases of multiples users that speakers on IRC experience, they can be shaped significantly by the online presence of a user and their peers through the AIM program's buddy list feature (this will be covered shortly in a description of the program). Additionally, the unique type of online presence afforded by the use of an away message, as shown by Baron et al. (2005), may also affect the course of a particular conversation. Each of these features would be difficult, if not impossible, to witness or to capture if all speakers were in a lab setting.<sup>5</sup> The use of chatlogs within the present analysis is motivated to some degree by all of these concerns, although the researcher remains open to, and has used in more recent collections of data, both methods for the study of IM interaction.

## 5. Transcription methods

Although the data samples used in the present analysis are largely taken directly from the chatlogs, any gaps or silences between message transmissions

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<sup>4</sup> Current screen capture programs make the use of video cameras unnecessary for capturing online interactions, and arguably produce a better quality capture for producing the transcription. However, having each participant make use of these programs, which are often expensive, outside of a laboratory setting carries with it its own problems.

<sup>5</sup> The unfortunate paradox here, of course, is that these features of online presence can only be adequately captured through a video capture of the interaction, and thus a middle ground that researchers have not yet hit upon is necessary.

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have been manually inserted by the researcher. These take the form of numbers within parentheses representing the number of seconds between the transmission on that line and the one following. Thus, the following excerpt would illustrate a 6-second gap between the transmissions on lines 1 and 2.

## (2) Excerpt 2

1 elliott: you guys have your own blog. (6.0)  
2 girlbot: it's precious

Each measurement in seconds also includes a decimal place followed by the number of deciseconds in each gap. This is meant to emulate the transcription systems of spoken discourse, and is used despite the fact that the timestamp from the chatlog only records gaps in 1-second intervals. However, as the present analysis contains data samples with gaps measuring over a minute in length, the use of the decisecond place holder is meant to prevent any confusion for readers familiar with CA transcription. Measurements of gaps longer than a minute will thus record the minutes, seconds, and deciseconds of the gap (transcribed as M:S.DS), so that the following excerpt would illustrate a pause of 1 minute and 23 seconds between the transmissions on lines 1 and 2.

## (3) Excerpt 3

1 metonym: so yeah that was kind of lame. (1:23.0)  
2 metonym is away

The transmission on line 2 of this excerpt also illustrates the automated message created by the AIM program when a user sets an away message. This appears as the user's screen name without a colon, followed by the message "is away." A similar message occurs when a user signs out of the program, and similarly appears as the user's screen name without a colon, followed by the message "has signed off." All other lines of transmissions containing a screen name followed by a colon are utterances sent by that speaker to the instant message box.

## 6.Features of the AIM Program

The AIM program allows for text-based discourse that is most accurately described as *prototypically synchronous* (Raclaw 2006). That is, conversations occur within an environment designed for the near instantaneous transmission and reception of messages between speakers, though in actual use communication may occur asynchronously due to relatively large gaps between speaker

transmissions.<sup>6</sup> This can be contrasted with a format designed for asynchronous communication, such as email, where speakers must first manually open threads before reading and then replying to transmissions rather than doing so instantaneously as they would while instant messaging. In practice, however, users may exchange emails rapidly enough so that it seems synchronous. The prototype descriptor thus allows for the potential disparity between design and use that exists in most text-based information and communication technologies.

To use the AIM service a speaker must first log in to the client, after which their screen name becomes visible to all users who have the entering user on their buddy list. The entering user's buddy list similarly shows the screen names of those acquaintances who are currently also signed in to the service, and uses graphic symbols attached to a user's name on the list to show whether a user has entered an idle state or has set an away message.<sup>7</sup> An away message is any message that a user sets for automatic transmission to anyone attempting to contact the away user. A user that is away can receive and read messages from others, but if they respond to these, or message anyone else through the service, their away status is cancelled by the program. Though Baron et al. (2005) and Nastri et al. (2006) have previously discussed their numerous social uses, away messages may be typically described as a courtesy when leaving the computer or making oneself otherwise unavailable to converse with others through the program. With this decade's recent explosion in the availability of broadband and other ubiquitous internet connections, users are increasingly leaving their accounts logged in to the AIM service at all times rather than signing out of the program when they have finished using it. As Baron (2004) has shown, this constant online presence is especially common among college students, the demographic of the present study. This presence plays a significant role in how these types of users leave, and likely how they open, conversations held through the program.

## 7. Conversational Closings in CMD

The closing sequences of conversations from the IM corpus follow two general patterns. The first of these is shaped similarly to the archetype closing described earlier, though it is often expanded through multiple sequences rather than single exchanges of pre-closings and terminal exchanges. These expansions typically contain features such as accounts, arrangements, prefaces, hedges, or palliatives; their use within closings will be discussed shortly. With few notable

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<sup>6</sup> However, this is far from a clear distinction. The AIM program is shaped in many ways to allow for synchronous interactions, through features such as the ability to set an away message or shift into an idle state are more likely oriented towards asynchronous communication.

<sup>7</sup> A user enters an idle state when they have been inactive in the program for a set amount of time, typically 10 minutes. Each user has the option of making their idle status public or private in regard to whether it shows on the buddy lists of others.

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differences, the expanded archetype sequences closely follow the models for conversation closings described in analyses of spoken discourse. The second pattern involves the use of automated messages provided by the AIM program as part of the closing sequence. These often occur within the position of the terminal exchange, appearing after a single pre-closing sequence or after a significant pause or silence. While these partially automated closings follow the basic structure of the archetype closing to some degree, their interactional uses are notably different from expanded archetype sequences occurring in both spoken and computer-mediated forms of talk.

### 8. Structures of Expanded Archetype Closing Sequences

Expanded archetype closings begin with an utterance designed to serve two primary functions: it must alert one's interlocutor of the speaker's intention to close, and it must shift the frame of the conversation towards the termination of the interaction. Both occur by introducing a first pair part of a pre-closing sequence that makes the idea of closing somehow relevant to the conversation. In the majority of IM conversations, this was accomplished through the use of *accounts*, explanations or justifications for why the speaker initiated the closing. These were often followed by *arrangements*, or plans made with the other speaker to talk again at a later date. These sequences are then followed by the terminal exchange between both speakers, after which a user typically sets an away message or signs out of the program.<sup>8</sup> This action will be referred to here as the *trigger*, as it generates an automated message both within the instant message box and on the buddy list, and its position within the discourse as the *post-closing*. The following excerpt demonstrates an extended archetype closing sequence that makes use of these sequences and features. Here, metonym brings the conversation to a close after a long stretch of talk with pudding.

#### (4) Excerpt 4

- 1 metonym: so i should like, probably start writing my paper (11.0)
- 2 pudding: yeah i should probably go to bed (8.0)
- 3 metonym: so i will talk to you tomorrow, jah [yes]? (7.0)
- 4 pudding: jah [yes] (6.0)
- 5 pudding: good luck writing!!! (2.0)
- 6 metonym: thanks! (2.0)
- 7 pudding: latahz [i'll talk to you later] (3.0)
- 8 pudding: haha, bye (9.0)
- 9 metonym is away

<sup>8</sup> While it is common for both speakers to eventually set an away message or sign out of the program at some point after an interaction, only the first of these actions is considered here to be interactionally relevant as subsequent triggers occur after the first user has already made themselves in some way "unavailable."

Metonym begins the closing by providing an account of why he intends to leave. While his utterance is not topically neutral, as pre-closings are described to be in the archetype closing model, the account still makes the closing relevant to pudding by introducing another activity that cannot be done while continuing the conversation. The confirmation of this relevancy can be seen in pudding's orientation to and alignment with metonym's pre-closing in line 2, where she provides an account of why she has to leave as well. The exchange of accounts is followed by an arrangement by metonym and an agreement by pudding in lines 3 and 4. This can be described as a general arrangement, since it does not specify a specific time or location for the future interaction to occur. Among the larger collection of IM conversations, general arrangements were as common as more specific arrangements, though specific arrangements universally involved meetings occurring offline rather than through AIM or some other computer-mediated environment. An example of the latter type of arrangement can be seen in Excerpt 5 below.

(5) Excerpt 5

- 1 girlbot: hey babes ive got to eat (13.0)
- 2 fingers: i'm pretty hungry too (5.0)
- 3 fingers: maybe go out for pizza (7.0)
- 4 girlbot: okay :) (2.0)
- 5 girlbot: meet me here for brek [breakfast]?(5.0)
- 6 fingers: yeah def [definitely] (6.0)
- 7 girlbot: okay see yaaaa (3.0)
- 8 fingers: see ya!! (27.0)
- 9 fingers has signed off

This preference for offline arrangements may be attributed to a growing preference for CMD to serve as a supplement to other forms of interaction rather than serve as a singular vehicle for social relationships, as in Squires's (2003) analysis of what she has termed *multimedia relationships*.

In Excerpt 4, Following the speakers' exchange of the general arrangement and the anaphoric references to the initial account in lines 5 and 6, the terminal exchange occurs in lines 7 and 8. Metonym sets his away message a short time after this sequence, an action that "finalizes" the closing beyond the terminal exchange by framing him as unavailable for future conversation. Setting an away message in these contexts may thus be considered a final turn at talk, as it shares information with one's interlocutor that is potentially interactionally relevant, similarly to how a transmission sent directly from the user might. Although this relevance will be more closely examined within partially automated closing sequences, the ability of an away message to convey a sense of unavailability to a speaker is still notable within the expanded archetype closing. As long as pudding's message box was still open when metonym set the away message, she

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received the automated message seen in line 9 and could interpret it as metonym no longer being available as an interactant within the conversation.

In lieu of setting an away message a user may sign out of the program, an action that is interactionally relevant in ways similar to the setting of an away message (though in the latter case the user is slightly “more” available as they may still receive messages from other users). Alternately, a user can elect to leave the conversation without performing either action. Of these possibilities, the setting of an away message as a post-closing occurred most often, happening in 44 of the 58 conversations in the corpus. Signing out of the program occurred in 12 of the remaining conversations, and using neither trigger occurred in only 2 of the conversations. The preference for either of the former options likely lies in the accountability that comes with the continuous online presence afforded by the AIM program. When a speaker sets an away message or signs off, it is generally to let other users know that they are not immediately available to talk.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a speaker signed in to the program without an away message may be viewed as conversationally ready, an appearance that speakers who have just closed a conversation often may not seek to convey. The general preference in the post-closing for setting away messages rather than signing out of the program is likely due to the previously noted increase in ubiquitous Internet connections, but may also stem from a desire to be somewhat more available to other speakers (as users can still receive messages while their status is set to away) than signing out would allow.

Post-closings were used far more frequently by the speaker initiating a closing sequence, occurring in 39 of the 56 closings within the corpus. In cases where second speakers initiated post-closings, there was typically a larger gap separating the terminal exchange from the post-closing than when first-speakers made use of them, as can be seen in line 8 of Excerpt 5 where there is a pause of 27 seconds between finger's second pair part of the terminal exchange and the point at which he signs out of the program. It is notably more difficult to measure “significant” silences objectively in IM discourse than in spoken discourse, as pauses of a minute or longer may be the norm during certain exchanges within the former mode while pauses of a second or longer in the latter are typically worth noting. This difficulty is of specific concern when using a framework, such as CA, that attributes so much potential meaning to a gap between speaker turns. The present discussion thus considers the possible significance of larger silences within an interaction based on their contrast to gaps between prior turns at talk. The 27-second pause occurring in Excerpt 5 is thus considered notable due to the range of pauses from 2 to 13 seconds during the remainder of the closing sequence. The tendency for larger gaps to occur between the actions of lines 8 and 9, and in similar actions occurring throughout the corpus, is perhaps due to an expectation that the speaker closing the conversation is the one who will also leave the

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<sup>9</sup> This is, of course, a generalization to some degree; as Baron et al. (2005) discuss, away messages can also serve as invitations to speak rather than messages of strict unavailability.

program. If this is the case, second speakers may then wait for the first speaker to use a post-closing before they themselves leave the program. The greater tendency overall for first speakers to use a post-closing, however, is more likely due to the fact that second users may simply not be finished with the program at the end of the conversation.

In addition to the accounts and arrangements common to expanded archetype closings, speakers also made frequent use of features such as prefaces, hedges, and palliatives. Prefaces and hedges are markers that index uncertainty to some degree, such as *um*, *well*, and *maybe*. Palliatives are any portion of an utterance used to show appreciation or apology, often to soften a blow of some sort, such as a refusal in *you're a really nice guy, but no thanks*. An example of these features within online closings can be found in Excerpt 6.

(6) Excerpt 6

- 1 fishfood: so like, i love you and all, but i should probably start  
 2 my homework :/ (9.0)  
 3 granola: blech, thats stupid (13.0)  
 4 fishfood: haha homework IS stupid (5.)  
 4 granola: yet makes you unstupid (3.0)  
 5 granola: OR DOES IT (5.0)  
 6 fishfood: haha (3.0)  
 7 fishfood: okay, i'll see you tomrrow (6.0)  
 8 granola: ok see you then (3.0)  
 9 fishfood: later! (2.0)  
 10 granola: byeeeeeeeeee  
 11 fishfood is away

Fishfood begins the pre-closing sequence in lines 1 and 2 of this excerpt with the preface “so like” followed by a common palliative structure, a clause containing a positive utterance, here a compliment, that is contrasted with what follows in the next clause using the conjunction *but*. What is contrasted here is the account, and thus the termination of the conversation that is indexed by the account's function as a pre-closing. The account itself additionally contains hedging with the inclusion of “i should probably” before the announcement of the specific account activity, and the use of a “slanted mouth” emoticon (:/) that may be interpreted as conveying dissatisfaction or sadness. Granola's response in line 3 is in alignment with fishfood's initial framing of the pre-closing activity as something negative, as it potentially insults both the act of doing homework and the initiation of the closing sequence. What the response does not do, however, is clearly align with fishfood's initial attempt at closing in lines 1 and 2, and it is not until fishfood's use of an arrangement in line 7 that granola is seen to orient to the closing during his response in line 8. Returning briefly to the matter of accounts and arrangements, Excerpt 6 demonstrates that second speakers do not universally orient to accounts as pre-closings. It might then be argued that one reason for the

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frequent use of both features together within a closing is to provide multiple chances to secure the second speaker's alignment with the act of closing.

Another potential function of using both features in closing sequences lies in the conversation analytic notion of preference (e.g. Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987). Within adjacency pairs, such as the question-answer pair cited earlier, recipients of the first pair part of the sequence are generally limited to sets of responses that will be pragmatically relevant or otherwise make sense within the context of the interaction. Posing a question to one's interlocutor thus generally limits their response to a sensible answer, if they know one, or a clear acknowledgment if they do not. These second pair parts may also be significantly shaped by whether they align or disalign with the first pair part. Those in alignment are, with few exceptions, considered to be preferred, while those in disalignment are dispreferred. This conceptualization of preference does not refer to the more common understanding of psychological preference within a response, but rather the relationship between the various parts of a conversational sequence. Thus, whether a first speaker truly desires an answer to their question is irrelevant. As providing an answer aligns with the earlier act of asking the question, it is thus a preferred response to the first pair part. As an alignment with a first pair part is generally framed to be somewhat "expected," they are typically unmarked in their use. Dispreferred actions or utterances, however, are marked by elaboration or explanation, long gaps or pauses between the first pair and second pair parts, and features that serve to mitigate their dispreferred nature. Structurally, these mitigations often include the addition of features such as prefaces, hedges, palliatives, and accounts (Schegloff 2007).

Returning again to the frequent use of accounts and arrangements in IM pre-closings, there is the possibility that their inclusion is intended to mark some dispreferred action within the discourse. Researchers such as Cameron (2001) and Coppock (2005) have suggested that the frequent inclusion of these features within closing sequences indicates that speakers may view closing sequences in general as somewhat dispreferred. This attachment of dispreference is discussed by both sources as a reaction to the possible face threat to one's interlocutor that comes with ending a conversation. Because of this, it may be the obligation of the first speaker to assure the second that they are free of any fault for the first desiring to leave. The account accomplishes this action by stating the reasons behind the closing, while the arrangement allows the first speaker to ensure their interlocutor that future contact is desirable, thus saving face for the second speaker.

Due to the frequent use of not only accounts and arrangements, but numerous other marks of dispreference such as prefaces, hedges, and palliatives, it is likely that there is another motivating factor for closings in IM discourse to be oriented to as if dispreferred. For example, it is possible that the continuous online presence afforded users of the AIM program also gives the impression of a continuous availability for interactions. To end a conversation is to directly remove oneself from this availability, an action that may thus be viewed as

dispreferred. This idea of accountability in opting out of continuous availability may be supported by the practice of returning accounts with other accounts, as discussed earlier. This is seen in Excerpts 4, where metonym initiates the pre-closing by stating that he has to begin writing a paper, and pudding aligns with his account by admitting that she needs to go to sleep. Both speakers imply that they need to leave the conversation, which thus absolves the first speaker of any responsibility for leaving the conversation by framing this as a mutual necessity. Considering the initiation of closing sequences to carry accountability also explains the first exchange in Excerpt 6, where granola provides a negative assessment of fishfood's pre-closing. The type of explicit reaction seen here, where speakers outwardly critique or object to a closing, only occurred in two interactions, however. It was far more common among the interactions in the corpus for speakers to make use of the more subtle markers of dispreference seen in previous examples.

## 9. The Structure of Partially Automated Closing Sequences

The second pattern of closing sequences observed in the IM interactions may be described as *partially automated closings*, so named because the automated message provided by a trigger serves a central role in the closing sequence. This may be contrasted with the use of triggered messages as post-closings in expanded archetype closings, as their use in these sequences can be better described as “supplementing” the closing sequence already provided by the speakers. Within partially automated closings, these automated messages can be more accurately seen as replacing, either in part or as a whole, the exchange of turns leading to the termination of the interaction. As with other closings, these sequences first require an action that invites a suspension of the turn-taking mechanism and allows the closing to be seen as relevant to the conversation. These were consistently accomplished through the occurrence of one of two sequences throughout the corpus. In the majority of partially automated closings, first speakers made use of a pre-closing sequence similar to those seen in earlier examples, often employing an account to shift the conversation towards its termination. In the interactions shown in Excerpt 7 and Excerpt 8, neither speaker initiates a concrete pre-closing sequence, but rather a significant pause occurs between the last exchange of turns and the use of the trigger.

### (7) Excerpt 7

- 1 sonorant: hey i have to go shower before i go out tonight. (5.0)
- 2 prettygirl: okay. (3.0)
- 3 sonorant is away

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## (8) Excerpt 8

- 1 leetdood: hey, I should probably go to bed. (11.0)  
 2 paperdoll: Sweet dreams, hun (8.0)  
 3 leetdood has signed off

As in examples of expanded archetype closings, accounts were frequently used within first pair parts to introduce an action or responsibility that necessitated the end of the interaction. However, in each example within the corpus these accounts stood on their own as the pre-closing rather than being expanded through multiple sequences. In Excerpts 7 and 8, line 1 presents an account from the first speaker that the second speaker aligns with in line 2. In line 3 the first speaker then initiates a trigger that serves as the final turn of the interaction, after which the conversation ends. The second speaker's alignment with the first part of the pre-closing consistently appeared throughout the partially automated closings, and each occurred prior to the trigger. However, given the somewhat unsure nature of the organization of utterances in most synchronous forms of CMD (e.g. Garcia and Jacobs 1999; Markman 2006), it is certainly possible for the second pair part of the pre-closing to fall after the trigger within these sequences. Additionally, it is possible that the alignment with the first pair part may not occur at all, though this is likely to be infrequent given the inherent preference for receiving a response to one's utterance.

The choice of whether to set an away message or to sign out of the program in the final turn of these interactions is likely affected by the previous notions of individual internet connection and online presence, though further motivation may occur in the nature of the account provided within the pre-closing. In Excerpt 7, sonorant's account still leaves him potentially available to talk later that night, either after his shower but prior to going out or after returning from going out. His use of an away message in this context is thus in alignment with this potential for future interactions that night. Conversely, leetdood's account in Excerpt 8 implies that he will be asleep for the remainder of the night and therefore unavailable to talk. In signing out of the program, leetdood's choice of trigger similarly aligns with the unavailability that his account provides. Similar comparisons could be drawn between the remaining examples of pre-closings from the corpus. For example, one speaker set an away message when leaving the computer to eat, while another signed out of the program when leaving for work. The argument for consistent alignment with the form of trigger and the nature of the account is notably reliant upon the multimodal relationships (Squires 2003) that the college-aged speakers likely held, and it should thus be noted that they may not be applicable to all interactions.

As Excerpts 7 and 8 illustrate, using a trigger is a viable final turn in this pattern of closing. However, within these examples it is difficult to place the role of the trigger within the closing sequence. Though it occurs after a pre-closing and serves to end an action, similar to the terminal exchange seen in expanded archetype closings, the trigger is organized asymmetrically rather than as part of

an adjacency pair. As Excerpt 9 illustrates, however, speakers may also orient to the triggered message as if it was a first pair part of a terminal exchange.

(9) Excerpt 9

- 1 wicket: damn im gonne [gonna] be late to class! (6.0)
- 2 element: haha aight [all right] (3.0)
- 3 wicket is away (8.0)
- 4 element: see ya
- 5 auto-response by wicket: in class :( [wicket's away message]

In line 1 of the excerpt, wicket first begins the pre-closing with an account that element aligns with in line 2. Wicket sets her away message shortly after this alignment during line 3, and element provides a goodbye during line 4. His utterance initiates the transmission of wicket's away message in line 5, which is designated as such by the AIM program using the preface “auto-response by wicket.”

Due to the organization of the interaction, it is possible to interpret the trigger as falling under either the pre-closing or the terminal exchange. The former interpretation is plausible only if element's goodbye is seen as the first pair part of the terminal exchange, a reading that also requires wicket's automated away message in line 5 to serve as the second pair part. However, it is difficult to assign interactional relevancy to this type of message as speakers do not appear to orient to them within these types of closing sequences. Further, even in doing so, this interpretation would require the message in line 5 to be interactionally relevant in the present excerpt but not in Excerpt 7 or 8 where it does not appear. It would also require that element would orient to the auto-response in line 5 as a second pair part to the terminal closing despite the fact that it was not sent from wicket. Finally, it is also statistically unlikely that element's utterance in line 4 served as the first pair part to the terminal exchange as he was the second speaker within the original pre-closing. The majority of first pair parts of terminal exchanges were initiated by the first speaker throughout the corpus, with exceptions occurring in all but three closings due to significant gaps of over 20 seconds between the exchange and the final part to the pre-closing. A silence of this nature did not occur between lines 3 and 4 of the present excerpt. It is therefore unlikely that element's use of a goodbye in line 4 is simply his initiation of a terminal exchange. It is more plausible for the triggers in Excerpts 7, 8, and 9 to be interpreted as a *terminal transmission* that may or may not be taken up by the second speaker as a terminal exchange. As Excerpts 7 and 8 both illustrate, the second speaker is not obligated to return the terminal transmission, and this is likely because the first speaker has made himself in some way unavailable to talk through the trigger and has thus removed himself from the turn-taking mechanism. However, the option to orient to the terminal transmission as the first pair part of a terminal exchange is still viable, and thus the use of a trigger in

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partially automated closings may be seen as akin to the role of the terminal exchange in expanded archetype closings.

The nature of the accounts used in pre-closings occurring prior to terminal transmissions may help to further explain their viability in these closing sequences. In many accounts the first speaker implies a sense of urgency in the explanation of why they have to leave the interaction. These often take the form of an *immediacy account*, such as in Excerpt 9 where wicket needs to terminate the interaction because he will otherwise be late to class, and Excerpt 10 below. Here, fingers provides an urgent account explaining how he needs to visit the library before they close.

## (10) Excerpt 10

- 1 fingers: shit ive got to get to the linary [library] like NOW befor
- 2           they close
- 3 girlbot: that sucks! its freezing out!!!
- 4 fingers is away
- 5 girlbot: call me when you're back!

Both Excerpt 9 and Excerpt 10 express their urgency through the use of curses (damn, shit) as prefaces to the accounts, while Excerpt 9 additionally features an exclamation point at the end of the account and Excerpt 10 features the temporal reference “NOW” in all capital letters (perhaps implying it to be read as if yelled). The sense of urgency often seen in these pre-closings may explain why there is only one sequence exchanged prior to the terminal transmission rather than the multiple sequences seen in other forms of closings. It may also explain the lack of features such as hedges within the accounts, as providing some uncertainty as to whether the first speaker truly needs to leave would likely detract from the sense of immediacy being conveyed. Partially automated closings do not follow the “full” structure of closing sequences that is typically conceptualized in the expanded archetype sequence. Therefore, in creating a sense of urgency speakers can mitigate the use of this shortened sequence, as well as the use of an automated message, to conclude an interaction.

The use of a terminal transmission was also evident in conversations that did not otherwise appear to contain a pre-closing or other recognizable portion of a closing sequence. Within this type of interaction the terminal transmission occurred directly after a significant gap in the discourse, such as the over six minute pause occurring in Excerpt 11 (below) between fishfood's utterance in line 5 and his trigger in line 6.

## (11) Excerpt 11

- 1 granola: i'm the indie kid who hangs out and listens to deathcab  
 2 (8.0)  
 3 fishfood: i liked postal service better (12.0)  
 4 granola: blech (5.0)  
 5 fishfood: haha (6:25.0)  
 6 fishfood is away

Like the other closing sequences discussed in this analysis, this pattern of the partially automated closing requires the suspension of the turn-taking mechanism in order to make a closing relevant to the interaction. However, this is accomplished here through a literal cessation of turn-taking rather than through the pre-sequences used in every other closing sequence. Rather than describing the interaction as featuring no distinct closing, it is more accurate to describe the silence between lines 5 and 6 as serving the role of the pre-closing, as the use of a more formal pre-sequence is rendered unnecessary due to the already present suspension of the turn-taking mechanism. Moreover, the trigger in line 6 is best described as the final turn that terminates the interaction. This interpretation remains valid regardless of whether the speaker intentionally used the trigger to close the interaction, as it sends a message to the second speaker that the conversation can no longer continue. This is due to the previously cited focus in CA on speaker orientation rather than intention. Additionally, as previous examples of both expanded archetype and partially automated closings have shown, speakers typically orient to triggers as if they were part of the closing sequence, and this is what occurs here. As stated earlier, this pattern of partially automated closings occurred far less frequently than those containing a more concrete pre-sequence, and Excerpt 11 was in fact its only occurrence within the corpus. However, the structure used in this example has occurred with relative frequency in interactions that the researcher has both participated in and observed casually. The closing is thus included here and discussed as a viable component of IM discourse.

## 10. Conclusion

This article has examined two patterns of closing sequences available to users within IM discourse. The expanded archetype sequence discussed here has been shown to closely follow the structure of closings found in spoken discourse, but also makes use of a post-closing sequence in the form of a trigger and often contains various markers of dispreference outside of the accounts and arrangements typically found in spoken closings. These markers were attributed to the possible accountability of a user to retain a specific type of availability in the constant online presence afforded by the program. Future work on closings in other formats of CMD would be valuable in seeing whether this accountability

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carries over into other types of interactions. The partially automated sequence introduced here shows that automated messages can serve a more focal role within a closing sequence than those seen in the expanded archetype sequences, and that concrete pre-closing sequences may not be necessary for an interaction when prior gaps in the interaction have already suspended the turn-taking mechanism. These sequences also demonstrate the interactional relevancy that medium-specific aspects may hold for speakers in CMD. Like Rintel et al. (2001) have shown with opening sequences, these sequences show how speakers may orient to these aspects in ways that uniquely affect the sequential organization of the talk. Finally, because speakers were shown to orient in numerous ways to various aspects of the medium throughout the discussion, this work serves to encourage future work to continue the tradition of examining the effects of the medium on interaction in conjunction with analyses of how speakers react to these medium-specific features throughout the discourse.

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