# Flirting in Online Dating

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**Flirting in Online Dating:**

**Giving Empirical Grounds to Flirtatious Implicitness**

**Abstract**

Various fields have examined the activity of flirting, predominantly based on experimental and reported data; the interactional workings are therefore often overlooked. Based on emails and chats from two Danish online dating sites, this article investigates how users negotiate romantic connections through the flirting strategy of 'imagined togetherness', linguistically constructing imagery of a shared future. Using the notion of the chronotope (Bakhtin 1981), turn-by-turn analysis demonstrates how users, embedded in the activity of getting to know each other, tenuously communicate romantic interest by alluding to future points at which they might be together. Central to the strategy is a sequential pattern of avoiding closure and thereby preserving the imagery's implicitness. The article concludes by arguing that while imagined togetherness functions to probe as a way of probing interests and thus protects oneself from potential rejection, it also draws on fundamental dynamics of fantasy in nourishing the excitement of romantic possibility.

**Introduction**

Research on the subject of flirting has been conducted in various fields from evolutionary science (Herz and Inzlicht, 2002), to psychology (Sprecher et al., 2008), to economics (Fisman et al., 2006). Due to the experimental and reported nature of such studies, the micro-level dynamics of what people actually say to each other in the process of forming potential romantic relationships remains under-examined. Work within the field of language and sexuality has drawn attention to the key role that language plays in individuals' constructions and negotiations of desire (e.g., Cameron and Kulick, 2003; Harvey and Shalom 1997). However, linguists dedicated to empirical methods

encounter difficulties when attempting to study the features of intimate language. Assembling empirical evidence that is not from public conversations but from private spontaneous interaction is bound with practical obstacles and ethical challenges. Thus romantic interpersonal communication has been termed a "black box" in language and interaction research (Stokoe, 2010). Yet with the past 15 years' development of the romantic market, which has made the Internet a significant context for people seeking romantic and erotic partners, new ways into the empirical black box are being opened. Online dating in particular provides a rich source of insights for the study of linguistic constructions and negotiations of desire since much of user interaction is carried out through exchanges of written texts, thus establishing language as a central domain. Based on email and Instant Messaging (IM) correspondence from users of Danish online dating websites, this article approaches flirtation as ways of interactively constructing and communicating romantic interest and offers a study grounded in real-life spontaneous interaction.

Implicitness has been suggested to be definitional of flirtation (Cameron and Kulick, 2006: 5; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013: 107-08). However this literature has tended to discuss flirting as part of larger theoretical issues within language and sexuality and therefore do not offer empirical grounds for understanding such implicit workings. This article provides an empirically grounded framework for analyzing the discursive manifestations of flirtatious implicitness. By focusing on how users, embedded in the activity of getting acquainted, tenuously construct imageries of a shared pleasurable hetero-romantic future, this study examines how such *imagined togetherness* works as a subtle way of negotiating romantic interests. It is further demonstrated how imagined togetherness is interactionally left unsettled by neither rejecting the imaginative scenario directly nor progressing towards practical planning of a romantic date. The article concludes by arguing that this interactional design plays an important role in maintaining potentiality, ultimately creating fruitful conversational grounds for affective dynamics of excitement and shared fantasy construction.

## Flirtatious implicitness

Within language, gender, and sexuality research, incipient attempts have been made to define flirting. Such efforts have mainly been theoretical in nature due to the lack of existing comprehensive empirical studies; they are generally characterized by being rather open-ended, suggesting that flirting as a linguistic and interactional feature eludes conclusive definition. According to Cameron and Kulick, flirting can be viewed as a way of constructing, expressing and negotiating desire; it consists of: "a combination of linguistic, paralinguistic and non-verbal features (these may include innuendo, 'personal' questions and references, frequent smiling and laughter, speaking softly, holding and periodically breaking eye-contact, etc.)" (Cameron and Kulick, 2006: 5). Comparable to the implicitness, which Cameron and Kulick list as "innuendo", Eckert and McConnell-Ginet emphasize the intangible quality of the phenomenon: "flirting by its very nature is inexplicit, deniable, and in some important sense playful, not 'serious'" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013:107). Along the same lines Kiesling places the tacit aspect centrally in his definition by drawing on politeness theory's (Brown and Levinson, 1987) conceptualization of implicit communication: "[…] an off-record negotiation and recognition of interpersonal desire" (2013:106). As a rare example Kiesling offers one instance of empirical evidence. However the analysis focuses on strategies of interactional alignment, leaving the off-recordness as such largely unexamined.

The implicitness of flirting was pointed out almost a century ago by sociologist Simmel in his essay on *coquetry* (Simmel, 1984 [1919]). Coquetry is described as an unstable game between denial and consent, detached from common value norms in a thrilling contraction of positive and negative, of yes and no. By its indefinite nature and embedded lack of closure it creates an open-endedness that lays out pathways of possibilities. Simmel's thoughts are founded in

simplifying difference-based understandings of gender in arguing that women are exclusively the performers of coquetry, thereby not paying attention to the interactivity of the phenomenon nor the underlying gendered power structures that may tie into sexuality. However, Simmel's text offers a useful description of the implicitness and unsettling nature that is central to flirtatious interaction. In Simmel's understanding it is precisely the intermediate stage between having and not having that is alluring. Similar dynamics are at work in cruising practices surrounding gay adult theatres. In these contexts there are large sections of time when no sexual activity can be observed, but crucially the excitement of the possibility is always there (Douglas and Tewksbury, 2008). Comparably, online dating provides a context in which numerous profiles are laid out for members to cruise through, carrying the possibility that any of them may turn in to offline romantic experiences. Based on these observations I take implicitness to be a key aspect of flirtation; this will serve as the leading motivation for this empirical examination.

The implicit nature of flirtation is a resourceful, cautious strategy for handling the high risk of potential personal rejection, which is an inherent part of initial romantic encounters. However, I want to suggest that the implicit workings of flirting might also serve another function above that of politeness, namely that of nourishing what I term the *excitement of possibility*. As will become evident in the analysis, the participants put a lot of work into postponing the fulfillment of the pleasurable imagined togetherness that they jointly construct. By suspending concrete arrangements for offline dates, I argue that the participants create a tantalizing and playful space for fantasizing.

Prior empirically based studies on the micro-level of intimate romantic interaction draw on data from such different settings as couples counseling, speed dating, online dating, and casual friendship talk. Common to all of these studies is that none of them takes on the implicitness of flirting as their focus. Studies on established couples' communication focus on collectively produced narratives offering perspectives on self- and other- positioning (Edwards, 1995),

collaborative building of couple categories (Mandelbaum, 1987, 2003; Pomerantz and

Mandelbaum, 2005), and courtship memories (Tainio, 2002). Interactional research on the initial

phases of romantic relationships focus on such various issues as alignment and affiliation (Kiesling,

2011), interactive humor/play (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006; Straehle, 1993), authenticity (Del-Teso-

Craviotto, 2008), embodiment (Adams-Thies, 2012; Jones, 2005; King, 2011), organizations of

partner preference talk (Korobov, 2011a), relationship history talk (Stokoe, 2010), resistance to

stereotypical gender categorization (Korobov, 2011b), and perceived heteronormativity (Kiesling,

2013), suggesting that intimate talk and relationship formation consist of a broad range of linguistic

and interactional strategies[1].

Despite the numerous issues examined in the literature on flirtation, none of the

referred studies offers analytical conceptualizations or empirical manifestations of implicitness.

Hence, the field is in need of empirical data as well as applicable theoretical concepts to address

and examine the subtle implicit workings of flirting. Through interactional analysis of five excerpts

the following analytical section will explain the sequential patterns and linguistic features of

constructing and negotiating imagined togetherness. The analytical approach taken in this study

consists in a combination of interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1999) and critical theory (cf.

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[1] Researchers have suggested that flirtatious strategies are heavily influenced by gender norms and

are thus played out differently depending on participants' gender positions (Kiesling, 2013; Kulick,

2003). In the empirical material that forms this study there is an overall tendency towards men

initiating more general interaction and specifically flirtatious interaction. However, the data sample

is not large enough to draw any conclusions. Important here is that both men and women engage in

flirtation. This article does not set out to investigate the gendered dynamics of flirting, but is rather

concerned with investigating *how* flirtatious implicitness is composed linguistically and negotiated

in interaction, while still acknowledging that heteronormative structures tie into these issues.

Cameron and Kulick, 2003:106-14). As such the analysis takes its vantage point in close examination of the linguistic details in email exchanges and further draws on the theoretical concepts from critical theory as a framework for interpreting the functions attached to the applied linguistic features.

**Imagining offline romance in online interaction**

The data informing this article derives from two Danish dating sites: www.elitedaters.dk and www.dating.dk. This means, naturally, that the results of this study do not necessarily apply to other cultural context than that of Danish society. The data set was assembled with the help of seven "participatory data collectors" who collected email and IM data from their online dating activities. The data collectors were active online daters and engaged personally in the interactions. Before donating interactional material, these participants secured informed consent from their interlocutors and all identifying data has been anonymized. For elaboration on ethical concerns related to this method see Mortensen (2015a). Collecting this type of naturally occurring delicate material proved to be extremely difficult since most users asked found it too personal to donate their private interaction to a research project. In total, the data set consists of 13 email and IM interactions, seven from www.elitedaters.dk and six from www.dating.dk.

Whereas the data examined in this article are in many ways comparable to chat room data (del-Teso-Craviotto 2006, 2008; Jones 2005; King 2011) and cybersex data (Adams-Thies 2012), they differ in that the format inherently targets offline relationships. Both sites feature specific geographic information on the proximity of interacting users, thus providing relevant information for setting up physical meetings. Additionally, dating.dk features user testimonials of couples who met through the website and are now sharing offline lives, documented through textual

and photographic descriptions of heteronormative, monogamous, and reproductive couple events: engagement, marriage, children.

In line with this, the majority of the interactions I investigate contain negotiations of offline meetings. Hence, the offline meeting becomes an important potential future event for the participants to point to and negotiate. However this is not done explicitly, but rather in subtle and implicit ways, which will become apparent in the following analysis. To grasp this phenomenon, I draw on Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the *chronotope* – a term that describes an imagined world or context brought into existence through a fusion of spatiotemporal indicators. Along these lines, the chronotope can be understood as "[…] one way actors make available times and spaces that otherwise would not be phenomenologically accessible" (Dick, 2010: 276). Through the characters that inhabit the chronotopes and the plot that they are playing out, the chronotope additionally makes sociocultural values evident. Linguistic anthropologists have adopted the theoretical concept of the chronotope as a way of describing configurations of time and space in specific cultures and the attachment of social values to such configurations (Lempert and Perrino, 2007; Silverstein, 2005). In the online dating data, constructions of imagined togetherness appear as a chronotope that tenuously opens up the potential of being together at some future point in space and time. The construction of the chronotope of imagined togetherness projects the participants forward in time and binds them together through some envisioned future shared activity that is experienced through the framework of hetero-romantic offline fusion. Based on this possibility of transgression from the online to an offline context, imagined physical togetherness becomes meaningful to the participants.

**Online dating as organized flirting**

When interacting through an online dating site, the site itself functions as a frame that invites and legitimizes romantic interaction. This is different from other settings such as a party context in

which constructing and negotiating interpersonal desire with other guests may be part of participating in the party, but are not the explicit or sole purpose. The context of the online dating site works as a constant backdrop that endorses romantic and sexual advance. King argues that users become sexualized subjects when entering the space of online gay chat rooms (2012:107). Accordingly their bodies are gazed at and approached differently than in other social spaces. Hence, the social space impacts how specific speech acts and bodies are interpreted. Based on this dynamic, one can potentially conclude that simply by interacting within the social space of an online dating site – e.g., visiting somebody's profile, viewing the displayed photos, and emailing back and forth – users are inherently flirting. However, as I will argue, this is not the case since the email correspondences in the data set contain long stretches of interaction that can best be characterized as rather non-romantic 'getting-acquainted talk' (Svennevig 1999).

Stokoe (2010) finds in her study of speeding dating interaction that flirting does not occur between the participants and suggest that this may be due to participants having no need to make romance relevant. According to Stokoe, "a key function of flirting is to make romance relevant where it might not already be; since romance is "programmatically on the agenda" in speed dating contexts participants have no need to act romantically. Correspondingly, one might anticipate that flirting would not occur in an online dating context, in which, similar to speed dating, romantic intentions are explicated in the activity frame. In this article, however, I demonstrate that participants make use of certain strategies to delicately demarcate their romantic interests in the ongoing activity of exchanging more 'neutral' biographical information. Thus I argue that not all acts in an online dating context can be regarded as flirtatious in nature, but that careful micro-oriented turn-by-turn analysis reveals how flirting is incorporated as recurrent sequential passages.

**Imagined togetherness in interaction**

Svennevig (1999) demonstrates in his study of how people get acquainted in initial interactions that lack of common ground is handled through extended self-presentational sequences that provide the interlocutor with biographical information. Similarly self-presentation is essential in the online dating correspondence used in this study since participants possess limited fact-based knowledge of each other[2]. All of the correspondence is characterized by longer reciprocal self-presentational sequences that appear as both volunteered and prompted. Embedded in these sequences are constructions of imagined togetherness that subtly hint at prospective scenarios of being together. This is the case in nine out of the 13 instances of correspondence. In such constructions the participants who play out the imagined scenario can be more or less specific, either referring directly or indirectly to the interlocutors. These imaginative insertions are responded to in ambiguous manners by the interlocutors not providing closure to the future possibility that has been laid out. By leaving the imagined togetherness unsettled, the sequences continuously nurture the excitement of possibility. After such sequences the participants return to the activity of self-presentation.

*The sequential pattern of imagined togetherness*

Extracts 1 through 3 illustrate some of the ways in which imagined togetherness is established in interaction. The first example serves as a straightforward introductory case of how a point of future shared activity is set up following a self-presentational sequence in which Jonas has – prompted by

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[2] It varies largely how much knowledge users have access to depending on the dating service. Both dating.dk and elitedaters.dk offer photographic, textual, and fixed category-based options for self-presentation. The amount of information provided differs among users. Analysis shows that the photographic presentation plays a central role in readers' profile evaluation (Mortensen, 2015b).

a question from Maria – provided information about his work with photography. The extract comes

from an IM interaction on dating.dk.


Extract 1

```
Maria    01   XXX favorit-motivet?            XXX favorite motif?

Jonas    02   uha, det lyder nok kedeligt, men  Oh, it probably sounds boring,
         03   det er 'døde                      but it's 'dead things', so
         04   ting', altså bygninger og sådan.  buildings and the like.
         05   Jeg er ikke så meget til          I'm not that keen on portrait
         06   portrætfotografi..                photography..
         07   ikke kun bygninger også mere      not just buildings also more
         08   skæve ting –                      quirky things –
         09   mer snap shots agtigt, hvis du    more snapshot like, if you
         10   forstår..                         understand..

Maria    11   Javel. Tror jeg forstår.         Yeah. I think I understand

Jonas    12   Hehe                              Hehe
         13   Godt                              Good
         14   så behøver jeg ikke forklare      then I won't have to explain
         15   nærmere, det er                   further, I'm not so good at that
         16   jeg ikke så god til :-)           :-)

Maria    17   hehe. Det er ok. Måske jeg er så  Hehe. That's ok. Perhaps I'll be
         18   heldig at se nogle eksempler på   fortunate enough to see some
         19   et tidspunkt.                     examples some time.

Jonas    20   ja måske ;-)                      yes perhaps ;-)

Maria    21   Uhh, bliver lige fanget af        Wow, my attention has just been
         22   dokumentar om nogle               caught by a documentary about
         23   teenagere der skifter køn.        some teenagers who are having
                                                gender reassignment surgery.
Jonas    24   neeej, noget studierelevant..     ooooh, something relevant to
                                                your studies..
```

Maria and Jonas are engaged in the activity of getting to know each other by first talking about

Jonas' interest in photography (1-16) and secondly talking about Maria's subject of study (24). The

target lines are 17-20 in which Maria, as a solution to Jonas' difficulties in explaining his preferred

subject of photography, suggestively establishes imagined togetherness. This she does by delicately

introducing an unspecified future temporal notion "på et tidspunkt" (some time) combined with an

epistemic adverb, "måske" (perhaps), to which she attaches an activity engaging both of them

(Jonas showing her examples of his photographic work). The imagined scenario is constructed as pleasurable through her introductory formulation casting herself as fortunate if the imagined scenario were to come true. The chronotope of imagined togetherness is not necessarily connected to specific spaces, but can in some cases be centered on an activity rather than a space. Crucial is that all of the imagined scenarios point forward in time through future temporal markers, fusing the participants in some potential shared offline activity. This might be interpreted as Maria fishing for an invitation to a physical meeting or at least to further closeness. Alternatively, Maria's turn could be viewed as not so much an expression of wanting to meet for this concrete activity, but rather as uncommittedly playing with the potential of what this interaction might lead to. Thus, in this case the construction of a future shared activity serves immediate interactional functions for the participants as a subtle way of communicating further romantic interest.

The proposal is handled by Jonas through a mirroring of Maria's ambiguity in re-using the epistemic adverb, pairing it with a winking emoticon (21), thereby leaving the imagined scenario unsettled and open. The emoticon can be viewed as a meta-comment (Darics, 2010; Dresner and Herring, 2010) that seems to communicate Jonas' interpretation, and recognition of Maria's turn as flirtatious. Maria contributes to the lack of commitment by changing the topic in drawing attention to a television program that she is simultaneously watching (22-24). This is turned into a self-presentational sequence by Jonas through his other-oriented self-eliciting question (25), thereby shifting the sequence from flirting back into the larger project of getting acquainted.

Example 2 similarly demonstrates how potential shared future activities are proposed and responded to ambiguously. However, in this case the scenario is developed slightly further. The extract is taken from an email interaction between Mette and Morten on elitedaters.dk. Relevant to the excerpt is that Morten professionally sells Christmas trees, which has been a topic of conversation throughout the correspondence.

Extract 2

```
Mette    01   Jeg er pt. den          I'm currently the happy
         02   lykkelige ejer af en    owner of a really cool
         03   fantastisk hyggelig     garden in XXX with some
         04   have i XXX med nogle    large broad-leaved trees
         05   store løvtræer, så der  so there's always
         06   er jo altid noget at se something to do
         07   til og ikke mindst nu   especially now when the
         08   hvor bladene falder og  leaves are falling down
         09   komposten kalder.       and the compost calls.

Morten   10   det lyder da dejligt    it sounds really
         11   med en have i XXX. Hvis lovely with a garden
         12   der skal plantes        in XXX. If you're
         13   grantræer kan jeg evt   going to plant pines
         14   være behjælpelig...     I can perhaps
                                      assist...

Mette    15   Tak for det fine        Thanks for the generous
         16   granplantningstilbud :) pine planting offer :)
         17   ... måske huset her     ... my house may be able
         18   lige kan lave sig en    to make a small extra
         19   lille ekstra indkomst   income that way? Then
         20   der? Så kan de          all the Christmas-
         21   juletravle aarhusianere rushed Aarhusians
         22   selv komme ind i haven, [people living in
         23   fælde det og få "hele"  Aarhus] can enter the
         24   naturoplevelsen med...  garden themselves, cut
         25   Det må der da være      it down and get the
         26   penge i ;)              "full" nature
         27                           experience... There
                                      should be some cash to
                                      be made there ;)

Mette    28   Hvor har du dine        Where do you have your
         29   juletræer henne?        Christmas trees?
```

This example follows the same structure as the previous one. Embedded in the activity of getting acquainted through self-presentation, marked by Mette's volunteering personal information at the beginning (01-09) and her other-oriented self-eliciting question at the end (27-28), the participants establish an imagined togetherness: Morten offers in an *if*-clause – the linguistic epitome of possibility – to assist Mette at some possible future occasion (meaning they would spend face-to-face time together) (10-14). Linguistically the activity of talking about time/space constellations that are not phenomenologically accessible in the interaction of here and now can be lexically constructed through spatial and temporal deictic markers as seen in excerpt 1. Moreover,

grammatical irrealis proves to be a relevant resource in the case of this study as the participants make use of modal verbs and conditional clauses to linguistically mark imagined togetherness[3]. Studies have shown that grammatical constructions of non-reality can be used as a way to minimize and handle potential face-threatening acts ( Ford, 1997; Jensen, 2009). In the case of online dating, this function may prove to be valuable to participants since rejection of one's romantic interest is an omnipresent risk within the interaction; nevertheless, as this and the following excerpts demonstrate, constructions of non-reality also work as devices for constructing and maintaining the excitement of possibility. This point is further demonstrated in the typographical ellipses that ends Morten's turn (14). Similar to emoticons, the interpretation of typographical ellipses is largely reliant on the context; they appear with great variation in digital written discourse (Ong, 2011). Ellipses also appear in written love letters documented in Ahearn's (2003) study of Nepali youth courtship. As the demarcated omission works to manage cultural norms for what can be written and by who, ellipses also function as a way to leave "meanings intentionally vague so as to invite the recipient to co-construct possible interpretations" (Ahearn, 2003: 114). With his typographical denotation of omission in extract 2, Morten signals that there is potentially more to the constructed togetherness than he has included in his description, leaving it up to Mette to potentially supply what is not there. Moreover, this use relates to what Simpson (2005) has termed "suspension dots", which create tension and excitement in written interaction and in the case of Morten and Mette thereby add to the flirtatious innuendo.

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[3] The term *irrealis* is specifically used in Danish grammar discourse to describe the particular phenomenon of deploying the past tense to signal distance from reality, but not necessarily to communicate non-reality. To avoid misunderstandings I choose, in line with Jensen (2009),  to use non-realis to refer to grammatical demarcations of phenomena that are not part of the discourse of here and now.

Before proposing his offer Morten constructs a second assessment of Mette's garden,

"dejligt" (lovely) (10), adding to the construction of the place as pleasurable, and thereby

constructing the imagery of togetherness in a positive light, similar to what occurs in the previous

excerpt. Mette responds by similarly assessing the offer positively, adding to the pleasurable

evaluation of the scenario, but uses a rather formal linguistic formulation that seem to play on

Morten's professional involvement in the Christmas tree business. The formality is however toned

down within the same turn through the use of an emoticon and the re-use of suspension ellipses (14-

17), after which she enters the scenario and develops it by imagining the profitable possibilities of

such a setup (17-26). Rather than inhabiting the future scenario specifically with herself and

Morten, she peoples it with undefined generic "aarhusianere" (Aarhusians) (24). Thereby, she does

not take up the possibility of romanticizing the future space. However, the ellipses squeezed in

between accepting his offer and the following non-personal development of the scenario delicately

forms a space for excitement.

The constructions of imagined togetherness also appear as more joking interactions. In

such cases, imagery includes highly exaggerated suggestions of shared romantic activities (e.g.,

travelling, moving in together, having kids).

Extract 3

```
Bo     01  Hey du                        Hey you

       02  Jeg syns du ser skide sød og  I think you look damn cute and
       03  interessant ud, lyst til at   interesting, would like to
       04  skrive lidt sammen, flytte    correspond a bit, move in
       05  sammen og få en masse møgunger together and have a lot of
       06  :D                            brats :D

       07  Kram
                                         Hug


Maria  08  Progressivt scorereplik       Assertive pick-up line
       09  modtaget.                     received.
       10  Og så fordi dine billeder er  And also because your photos
       11  alt for vilde, altså flotte.  are out of this world  -
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14

```
       12   Lad os skrive sammen. En anden    spectacular. Let's correspond.
       13   dag. Nu er jeg på vej i seng       Some other day. Now I'm about
       14                                      to go to bed

Bo     15   synes godt om, skal også iseng,   like, I'm going to bed too,
       16   skriv nå du for tid, sov godt     write when you have time, sleep
       17   du :)                             tight you :)

       18            ((three days later))⁴

Maria  19   Hej Bo                            Hi Bo

       20   Ja hvad faan skriver man lige     Yes, hell what do one write
       21   til at starte med?? Jeg kaster    first?? I'll launch a topic:
       22   et tema ud: 4-hjulstrækker???     four-wheel drive??? but why?
       23   but why?
```

This excerpt demonstrates a repetition of the structure of setting up imagined romantic togetherness by one participant, and the simultaneous rejection and acceptance by the other participant followed by a return to prompted self-presentation. In this interaction, Bo presents a chain of causal activities starting with the realistic proposal of writing together, leading to romantic life events. In this case imagined togetherness is presented explicitly, with Bo neither understating the romantic aspects nor blurring the people who inhabit the scenario. Rather, the scenario is exaggerated, jumping from initial contact to complete fusion and thereby activating not simply the possibility of a transgression from the current online context to a physical offline context, but the complete hetero-romantic dream, which the dating sites use to market themselves. Despite the bluntness of the question, Bo's turn can be interpreted as drawing on mechanisms of implicitness. Brown and Levinson (1987:219) list overstatement as an off-record strategy, which through extreme exaggeration makes the meaning negotiable and the extent to which the speaker can be assumed to commit to what he has said unclear. Using Antaki's words Bo's initiating line of questions can be described as "super extreme descriptions" that in the context of a first time online dating interaction appear "absurdly extreme" (2004: 90). According to Antaki absurd statements "carry with them their own retraction"

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⁴ The three–day interval may appear remarkably long. However Bo does not orient to it as accountable in his following response to Maria.

(2004: 93), which means that a speaker by use of absurdity can communicate a message without being held accountable. In the case of Bo and Maria's interaction, Bo manages to get a hetero-romantic scenario lined up, thus establishing an idea of shared romantic future, while simultaneously handling the potential risk of rejection.

Maria comments on his straightforward manner by delivering a meta-commentary that classifies Bo's initiative as assertive flirting. Her use of walkie-talkie slang, "modtaget" (received), adds a humorous innuendo to the message by orienting to the short-form style of Bo's initiative. This suggests that an exaggerated humorous approach might prompt similar responses. Maria only commits to one part of the imagined scenario by accepting the specific activity of writing together, but leaves out the two romantically loaded subsequent events. She defers the activity of writing to a future point in time, which is acted out three days later when she initiates a conversation that has no connection to Bo's previous romantic imagery, but instead picks up on biographical information laid out in his profile text – his interest in four-wheel drives.

In contrast to the other examples, it appears easy to identify flirting due to the exaggerated naming of romantic events and the responsive explicit classification of this as flirting. However, these cases are rare in the data – in fact only two such cases exist, out of which this is the most direct one – whereas the embedded and ambiguous cases are far more frequent.

The above three examples have all demonstrated how flirtatious proposals are incorporated into the ongoing interactional project of getting acquainted. In the following section, an excerpt is presented in which imagined togetherness is developed in a more complex and ambiguous manner over a longer sequence of turns.

*Complicating the structure: Ambiguous constructions of imagined togetherness*

The chronotope of imagined togetherness is not always as clear as in the previous examples, but in some cases turns into sequences in which ambiguous scenarios are tenuously negotiated. The analysis of the following excerpt will focus on the subtleness by which interactants manage to open up vague interpretational possibilities for intimate romantic contact. The following excerpt comes from the email interaction between Rasmus and Anna on dating.dk. Before the excerpt occurred, Anna and Rasmus had written to each other about their current living situations: Anna had explained about the recent renovation of her apartment and Rasmus had volunteered information about his garden.

Extract 4

```
Anna     01  Måske kan jeg sætte min      I may be able to renovate my
         02  lejlighed i stand, men til   apartment but I lack a real
         03  gengæld mangler jeg en        garden!
         04  rigtig have!

Rasmus   05  Synd uden have - sushi og    A pity you don't have a
         06  hvidvin (og bøffer med       garden – sushi and white wine
         07  sovs) med roser i            (and steaks with sauce) with
         17  baggrunden, er en luksus     roses in the background, are
         08  jeg kun kan unde dig ;)      a luxury that I would wish
         09                               for you to have;)

Anna     10  Måske jeg ikke har en        I may not have a garden but
         11  have, men til gengæld har    on the other hand I'm not far
         12  jeg ikke langt til skoven    from the woods and the sea.
         13  og vandet. Og der kan man    And there you can also enjoy
         14  også nyde sushi, lidt mere   sushi, although it's a bit
         15  upraktisk er det dog at      more difficult however to
         16  medbringe bøffer med         bring steaks with sauce…
         17  sovs...

Rasmus   18  Lyder i den grad skønt med   Sounds really nice being so
         19  kort til stranden - jeg      close to the beach – I miss
         20  savner det selv. Havnen er   that myself. The harbor just
         21  bare ikke helt det samme.    isn't the same. Steak with
         22  Bøf med sovs kan dog         sauce however can be fixed –
         23  sagtens fixes - det er       it's just about bringing the
         24  bare med at få Trangiaen     gas jet :)
         25  med :)
```

Throughout the excerpt, Anna and Rasmus align in the activity of assessing the recreational qualities of their current homes. Embedded in the development of the topic is an instance of

imagined togetherness as Rasmus in lines 5-9 sets up an imagined activity of enjoying specific food in the surroundings of his garden and then brings Anna into this activity by wishing for her to experience this situation. This is not a neutral description of his garden and its recreational benefits, but a romantically tuned presentation in which Anna is brought in as a potential future actor. Chronotopes do not simply project a representation of space-time, but also an "imaginative sociology" of possible lives that inhabit that space-time (Dick, 2010: 277). The material artifacts that Rasmus chooses for setting up the imagined situation – fine dining and roses in the background – all have romantic connotations and seem to draw on well-established discourses of romance and dating culture. The winking emoticon at the end of his turn can be interpreted as adding to the romantic innuendo. This may well function as a pre-invitation to a date – for Anna to enjoy the luxury of outdoor sushi and white wine she would have to come to Rasmus' place and meet with him – but importantly this is not formulated explicitly as an invitation.

Rather than responding to Rasmus' turn as if it was an invitation, Anna continues presenting the advantages of her own home through which she transfers the material objects of Rasmus' imagined scenario to her own home surroundings – the beach and the woods. In her description she attaches a positive verb, "nyde" (enjoy) (14) to the imagery, thereby casting it as something pleasurable. In her description she ambiguously blurs the actors inhabiting the scenario, changing Rasmus' "jeg" (I) and "dig" (you) into a generic "man" (one) (13), and she presents a practical obstacle followed by typographical ellipses (14-17). In this case the ellipses might simply function as punctuation (Baron, 2008; Hård af Segerstedt, 2002), but could also be interpreted as a way to signal 'to be continued' and thereby would not be presenting the posed obstacle as closing off the scenario. This signal is taken up by Rasmus who offers a solution to the practical challenge while sticking to the sophisticated strategy of leaving out any direct reference to the actors; he does this by omitting a subject completely (22-25). Furthermore, both participants in their co-

construction of imagined togetherness deploy the modal verb, "kunne" (can) (23, 32), to construct

non-realis, thus making use of grammatical devices to mark the scenario as hypothetical.

      This excerpt demonstrates how the participants are able to delicately incorporate

romantic imagery of future togetherness while purportedly doing self-presentation. Rasmus and

Anna's engagement in the fine dining scenario is deeply embedded in the activity of delivering

biographical information and can thus innocently pass as making conversation and getting

acquainted. This exemplifies how difficult it is for the researcher to identify such instances of

flirting, as this phenomenon easily might have been left unexamined due to its implicitness.


*Explicit negotiations of implicitness*

As it has become evident, a key factor in handling imagined togetherness is to avoid agreeing on the

specifics of the imagined scenario. The following example demonstrates the work that participants

put into not committing fully and thereby extending potentiality. The excerpt comes from an email

interaction on dating.dk between Mette and Nikolaj. During the correspondence Nikolaj provided

information that over the upcoming weekend he was going to visit the city in which Mette lives.

This information gave rise to several constructions of imagined togetherness, which throughout the

correspondence was eventually narrowed down to a plan to meet offline. The excerpt demonstrates

how the concrete planning of the date is postponed with the interactional function of maintaining

tension and excitement of possibility.


Excerpt 5


```
Nikolaj   01    jamen kan være du engang      well perhaps I should give you
          02    skal ha mit nr så vi kan       my number some time so that we
          03    aftale tilfældigt og støde     can plan to bump in to each
          04    ind i hinanden :-D             other accidentally :-D

Mette     05    Det skal jeg, men skal vi      You should, but shall we let
          06    lade det være en perfekt       this be the perfect
          07    cliffhanger til i morgen        cliffhanger until tomorrow
          08    hvor vi snakkes ved? Du kan    when we'll be in touch? You
```

```
         09    alligevel ikke bruge mit      can't use my number to find
         10    nummer til at finde mig på     me on Facebook tonight
         11    Facebook i aften  ;-)          anyhow ;-)

Nikolaj  12    jamen vi tar den bare i        well we'll just do it
         13    morgen.. så må du glæde dig    tomorrow.. then you can look
         14    og se om jeg os vil i          forward to it and see of I'm
         15    morgen ;-)                     still willing to give it to
         16                                   you tomorrow;-)

Mette    17    Orv ja måske er du vildt       whoops yes maybe you'll be
         18    karrig i morgen :-) ...        totally hard to get tomorrow
         19    Er den sådan 50-50?            :-)... Is it like 50-50?

Nikolaj  20    nej er ret sikker på det       no I'm pretty sure that it
         21    kunne være hyggeligt og        could be great to meet up
         22    mødes og se hinanden ad en     and check each other out for
         23    times tid eller 2 :-)          a couple of hours :-)
```

Nikolaj makes attempts to organize practical matters for meeting in his first turn. However, even at this stage in which both parties have agreed to meet, the planning is done in a designedly vague manner using modality devices (epistemic adverb "tilfældigt"/coincidentally, modal verb "kan"/can), thus a level of uncertainty is continuously incorporated (01-04). Mette engages in the activity of planning the meeting in an interesting counterproductive way by explicitly suggesting that they postpone the act of exchanging phone numbers as a way to incorporate suspense (05-08). She refers to the possibility of Nikolaj wishing to 'stalk' her through other online platforms (08-11). Lurking and stalking are common online practices among youth in which participants make use of the Internet's data accessibility to anonymously search and collect biographical information on others (Chayko, 2008; Jones et al., 2011). In this case the assumed desire to seek out more information about the other can be interpreted as a sign of enhanced romantic interest, potentially playing on erotic peeping, which the following winking emoticon might to support. Moreover, it might orient to the inherent risk of inauthenticity in computer-mediated interaction such as online dating, which may cause an urge to double-check information through other sources. Nikolaj aligns immediately with the playful suggestion, adding further suspense, which gives rise to a playful exchange that nevertheless ends with Nikolaj reassuring Mette about his interest.

This excerpt demonstrates the work that participants put into keeping the interaction implicit even after both parties have agreed to an offline date. This illustrates the essential role that potentiality plays in these types of interactions. The participants in this case skillfully manage to set up a meeting while keeping flirtatious tension at a maximum.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined the implicit workings of flirting as it is played out in online dating email and IM interactions. The article is not an attempt to put forward a universal definition of flirting. I have explored and discussed the central aspect of implicitness by narrowing down one out of many potential strategies: *chronotopic construction of imagined togetherness*. By deploying Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the chronotope the article has suggested an analytical conceptualization for understanding how participants manage to delicately communicate interpersonal desire by drawing on romantic configurations of a shared future. The chronotope of imagined togetherness is linguistically constructed both by grammatical (modal verbs), syntactical (conditional clauses), and lexical devices (temporal and spatial deictic markers, epistemic adverbs). Interactional analysis has additionally demonstrated how such chronotopic constructions are embedded in reciprocal exchanges of biographical information, ensuring that the flirtatious attempts can innocently pass as part of the activity of getting acquainted. This implicit strategy thus makes it difficult for the researcher to identify instances of flirting; this article therefore emphasizes the need for close attention to the tenuous linguistic and interactional mechanisms when researching flirting interaction. Flirting may be embedded in other activities designed to pass as such, but intrinsically carrying delicate messages of interpersonal attraction.

Interactional analysis has further illuminated the recurring practice of leaving the imagined togetherness unsettled by neither rejecting nor progressing towards concrete planning. I have argued that this mechanism does productive work in nurturing the excitement of possibility. The tension of uncertainty about the interactional development and the other person's romantic interests lays out grounds for fantasizing about what might come, and what might happen if… This mechanisms links to the "postponement of pleasure", which Deleuze and Parnet (2002:100) argue is a central dynamic in the realm of desire. Desire is not necessarily about immediate fulfillment; rather, incorporations of delay themselves build pleasurable "planes of desire". It is also possible to view this dynamic of postponement as closely connected to fantasy (cf. Hall, 1995). The chronotopic constructions of pleasurable imagery draw on and add to a socioculturally grounded fantasy schemata of romantic physical love. By postponing concretization, participants put work into creating and preserving the excitement gap between imagined togetherness and its fulfillment.

By examining empirical evidence, this article has emphasized the centrality of implicitness in flirting as both prudent strategies for communicating and negotiating romantic interests and pleasurable dynamics for nourishing the excitement of possibility. Flirting may well be designed to appear intangible and ambiguous, but by providing attention to complex linguistic details and interactional dynamics it becomes evident how implicitness can be tracked in analysis, ultimately pinpointing flirting as a linguistic and interactional phenomenon.

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