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‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’: Truth negating implications and effects of an epistemic frame trap

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Abstract

The paper theoretically examines the epistemic implications of the frame trap cued by the conversational use of the Shakespearean quote ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’, in which protestation of innocence is taken as evidence of guilt, as is its absence. The mechanism of frame trap is found to operate by recursive truth negation in the case of ongoing protestation (in keeping with the conversationally expected denial of false attribution) or its pre-emption in anticipation of further stricture along with resistance. Problematically, both the implications and paradoxical effects of the expression thereby ‘evidence’ the guilt of its recipient.

Keywords

Frames, Framing, Framing potential, Frame trap, Double bind, Epistemic injustice

1. Introduction

When comment is made on *what* someone has said with reference to *the way* in which they are perceived or represented to have said it, this may call into question its validity by simultaneously imputing an unfavourable character attribution to that person, thereby undermining their credibility. The Shakespearean quotation ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’ (here shortened to ‘The lady doth’) represents a formulaic observation on how a message has seemingly been conveyed, with epistemic implications and effects on its recipient derived from the repudiation of both meaning and character. Implied is that the speaker of ‘The lady doth’ knows better than to believe the first-person account of the recipient, who is hence assumed or portrayed to lack credibility; of immediate consequence to interaction is that the reassertion of ‘truth’ by the recipient can further be taken to confirm its falsity, while discontinued protestation paradoxically does the same. The current paper sets out to explore the way in which this paradox works to uphold the reality of the speaker of ‘The lady doth’ while negating the truth, or knowing, of its recipient through theoretical analysis of the expression's workings as an epistemic frame trap (Goffman, 1974). It thereby aims to extend our understanding of frame trap by examining the mechanisms and logical presuppositions by which it is able to work. These allow for the semblance of rationality when used, despite the irrationality of presenting another with a paradox in supposed discernment of the truth.

Frame trap is defined with reference to Goffman's (1974) original conceptualization, as we take an initial look, in Section 2, at how a metacomment (or comment on a comment) that attributes an unfavourable characteristic to the recipient can work to constrain their truth when a corrective account by them would, counter to intention, merely confirm it. This is further considered in light of its formulaicity, which is linked to habitualization of use and a corresponding economisation of effort. Section 3 explores the truth-negating implications and effects of what is here termed *epistemic* frame trap, namely, one that additionally invalidates the *knowing* of the recipient, as in the case of 'The lady doth' itself. It offers a critical overview of the meaning of the quotation and its present-day use outside of its Shakespearean context of performance, drawing on online explanations offered by the 'lay' public. In doing so, it problematizes the unexamined assumption of excess as formulized by 'too much'. Drawing on conversational logic and paradox, Section 4 then theoretically analyses the workings of the epistemic frame trap and the credibility deficit of the recipient. This leads us, in Section 5, to consider the potential that 'The lady doth' consequently holds for the unjust attribution of deception or accusation of guilt, from which we can conclude its possible use in service of an epistemic injustice.

2. Setting a frame trap: Attribution of an unfavourable characteristic by formulaic metacomment

In order to investigate how epistemic frame trap works in the case of 'The lady doth', we will first take a look at a metacomment that may serve to constrain another's truth by means of unfavourable character attribution without necessarily negating its epistemic value. This allows us to consider the relevance of constraint before we add 'truth' negation to the complex with respect to 'The lady doth'. It also serves as the initial basis of illustration and definition of frame trap itself, as informed by the work of Goffman (1974).

While a frame trap need not necessarily be cued by a metacomment, it is in the case of 'The lady doth', for which reason we will focus on this form of its realization. The metacomment that we will consider here is 'You always have to have the last word', which likewise attributes an unfavourable characteristic to the recipient that 'sets' a frame trap with the potential to constrain their expression of truth. As with 'The lady doth', the phrase represents a formulaic expression, namely, one that is 'relatively fixed in form and meaning' (Van Lancker Sidtis, 2004, 13). It is both for its implicit attribution of an unfavourable characteristic and its formulaicity of use, which it has in common with 'The lady doth', that it has been selected to illustrate frame trap. The current section will consequently first consider the relevance of unfavourable character attribution (in 2.1), and second, that of formulaicity (in 2.2) to the given frame trap.

2.1. The constraint of unfavourable character attribution

'You always have to have the last word' cues a frame trap that operates largely on the basis of its potential to constrain the expression of truth, or *knowing*, by the recipient, which would effectively prove the very point of its unfavourable character attribution—in this case, that they always have to win an argument or be right.

What is actually meant by frame trap can best be defined on the basis of what it does, namely, arrange the world (whether by intent or default) so that incorrect views, however induced, are confirmed by

each bit of new evidence or each effort to correct matters, so that, indeed, the individual finds that he is trapped and nothing can get through' (Goffman, 1974, 480). Thus, a frame trap might be said not only to limit one's capability to contribute one's own take on reality vis-à-vis that of another but also to further *misconstrue* it in the *ongoing* attempt to do so.

In this sense, it builds on Bateson et al.'s ([1956] 1999: 201) definition of a double bind as "a situation in which no matter what a person does, he "can't win"" by implicating to a greater extent the increasingly counterproductive effects of continuing to resist it. Indeed, the paradox of the frame trap rests on the response (or non-response) of its recipient—or an anticipated response (or non-response)—in as much as it does on the proposition which sets up the frame. This might also allow for the kind of metacommunication on the part of the 'trapped' person that is, by contrast, disallowed in the double bind context described by Bateson et al. ([1956] 1999).¹ Indeed, a metacommunicative response such as, 'How can you even say that (I always have to have the last word)' is not only allowed but it is also reckoned with in the very design of the frame trap, which is only reinforced by its use. Adding 'the last word', whether metacommunicatively or not, can be taken as evidence of the very character attribution of argumentativeness; at the same time, the proposition stands unchallenged in the lack of a response.

Unlike Bateson et al.'s ([1956] 1999) conceptualization of double bind, moreover, in which a metamessage and message conflict with each other in an *inherently* paradoxical way, meaning that the messages of the same person are contradictory 'in relation to each other' (Bateson et al., 1963, 154), the frame trap does not necessarily present a paradox of meaning and intent in of itself.² Rather, it is paradoxically contingent on either the response or non-response of its recipient. In short, as its name implies, it sets up a trap for the recipient; and it does so by means of a frame.

Frames themselves can be defined as 'principles of organization which define the meaning and significance of social events' (Branaman, 1997, xlvii). In our example of 'You always have to have the last word', the social event, which can generally be taken to mean any identifiable activity of social interaction in which the participants are engaged (Tannen and Wallat, 1987), is framed as an argument by means of metacomment; and the recipient (of the formulaic expression) is the one who is perceived (or portrayed) to be fuelling it unnecessarily with their desire to win, i.e., have 'the last word'. This is further reinforced by the possible addition of an adverb of frequency, as given here, of 'always', which attributes a negative characteristic to the recipient on the apparently evidential basis of observed repetitive behaviour, hence indicative of personality type, i.e., of being 'argumentative'. The expression thus cues a frame trap that disallows further expression of the truth of the recipient without this in itself reinforcing the apparent truth of the characteristic attributed to

¹ Bateson et al. ([1956] 1999) describe a co-dependent traditional family relationship, in which metacommunication by the child is disallowed by their unequal relationship to their mother, whose approval is necessary for their very survival (with the father at that time considered to play a somewhat insignificant role in the psychology of the child). The mother, on the other hand, creates the double bind as a means of maintaining a family homeostasis that serves to support her own beliefs, or the way that she arranges the world around her (to which the father may provide his support, thereby colluding with his wife's version of the way things are).

² It is this inherent paradox that is noted by Bateson et al. ([1956] 1999) to cause potential confusion in the interpretation of both its meaning and intent by the recipient. Indeed they contentiously argued that this in itself was conducive towards mental health disorder in the case of schizophrenia, a hypothesis which, while not exactly disproved, has since been largely discarded.

them. Character attribution can thus be considered key to the operation of frame trap in so far as it serves as a rationalisation for ‘fitting’ the frame, even if the user is seemingly unaware of ‘setting’ a trap in doing so.

Indeed, Goffman (1974, 482) points out that, ‘routinely, the character we impute to another allows us to discount his criticisms and other professions of belief, transforming these expressions into “what can only be expected” of someone of that character’. In this way, the frame reinforces our preconceived ideas about both the person and the views espoused by them, for which it serves as a ‘principle [] of organisation’ (Branaman, 1997, xlvii–xlviii).

In the given example of ‘You always have to have the last word’, the viewpoint that has given rise to the use of the expression is not necessarily itself negated; nevertheless, the recipient's truth is unable to ‘get through’ (Goffman, 1974, 480) without confirming the truth of the user of the expression with regard to the implied attribute of argumentativeness (if not to the actual point of argumentation). This, moreover, allows the speaker of ‘You always have to have the last word’ to safeguard the legitimacy of their own viewpoint at the expense of the development of the other's and to the detriment of their character, even in the case of this being evidentially ‘incorrect’ and/or the attribute itself ‘out of character’, i.e., somewhat unfairly levied against the recipient. ‘You always have to have the last word’, then, exemplifies constraint on the basis of a catch-22 in which the recipient's ‘face’, or ‘image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes’ (Goffman, 1967, 5), is invested; yet it does so without, or with limited, epistemic effects. In other words, it does not entirely negate *what* has or is being said by them by imputing a lack of credibility, as we will see in the case of the epistemic frame trap ‘The lady doth’.

2.2. The constraint of formulaicity

Interactive frames are cued, or signalled, in a way that communicates ‘a superordinate message about how communication is intended’ (Tannen, 1984, 23; cf. Bateson, 1955; see also Tannen, 1993, for an overview). In the present case, it is the use of the formulaic expression itself, i.e., to ‘have the last word’ which does so—it constructs the event as an argument and the recipient as the argumentative type. Unlike cues that signal ritualized performance as play or pretence (see Bateson, 1955; Nao, 2011), the participants are still ‘in character’ as themselves. As such, the frame trap can be taken to uphold their everyday, normative reality. Such behavioural habits that are not ostensibly ritualized (i.e., demarcated as stepping out of what remains unexamined as the norm) allow for an everyday ‘economy of trial and error’; in other words, ‘precisely in *not* re-examining or rediscovering the premises of habit every time the habit is used ... [w]e may say that these premises are partly ‘unconscious’, or [...] that a *habit* of not examining them is developed’ (Bateson, [1969] 1999, 274).

A given reality might easily be propagated in an unexamined way through the use of formulaic expressions that convey preconceived ideas of character type that form part of a cultural narrative, such as the types of negative attributes commonly ascribed to people who serve others as scapegoats, upholding both the worldview and the positive image of the attributors themselves. Since formulaicity of a more figurative type encodes pre-existing meaning over and beyond the sum of its parts, which has been reinforced through prior use, it is ‘only appropriate when we are not trying to say something new’, as Wray (2013, 2020) points out. In this way, formulaicity supports an unexamined truth. It is

thus unclear to what degree the use of a frame trap such as ‘You always have to have the last word’ is either ‘by intent or default’ (Goffman, 1974, 480) of maintaining, or reconstructing, existing social relations within which everyday life is ‘economized’ (Bateson, [1969] 1999). The line between the two may be all the more blurred the more figurative, i.e., less literal, a known formulaic expression, given that this may require a lesser cognitive processing effort (Wray, 2013), at least for those already ‘in the know’ of what the expression means.

‘The lady doth’ can be considered one such expression, whose greater opacity as a figurative expression presupposes an existing understanding of its meaning in order that it might be used and apprehended in a common way requiring lesser ‘examination’. This is evident in the very question, less likely to be posed in the case of the more literal ‘You always have to have the last word’, of what the expression actually means.

3. The meaning and formulaicity of ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’

Outside of its Shakespearean performance context, ‘The lady doth’ has come to take on a different meaning. For this reason, the present section touches only very briefly on its source (Section 3.1.), before considering its current usage as a formulaic expression, as critically informed by ‘lay’ users’ definitions in response to an online query on what it means (Section 3.2).

3.1. Epistemic doubt in Shakespeare's original

‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’ is spoken in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by the character of Queen Gertrude (Act III, Scene II), who has been asked by her son to comment on a play that he himself has staged to depict the murder plot of a king. Hamlet has for some time been plagued with suspicion towards his own mother, both for the hastiness of her marriage following his father's untimely death and for her choice of spouse, namely, his father's brother, Claudius. Suspecting foul play following the ghostly visitation of his father, he arranges for a play to be performed in which the player queen makes extensive avowal of her love to her husband, the player king, and of her intention never to remarry upon his death. When Hamlet asks his mother, ‘Madam, how like you this play?’, she responds with ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’ (Shakespeare, 1808, 45).

What exactly Gertrude intends by this is, of course, subject to literary interpretation. At the very least, however, it points towards her suspicion of such protestation, regardless of whether she is aware of Hamlet's intrigue or feels any measure of discomposure having intimated its analogy to ‘real life’ events (i.e., ‘the play’ to which the ‘play within the play’ pays disdainful homage). We can assume that she suspects something and may also suspect that she herself is suspected of something. While the origin of the phrase is, then, rooted in some degree of epistemic doubt on the part of Queen Gertrude regarding the meaning or intention of the player queen's excessive avowal in the staged performance, it cannot be considered an epistemic frame trap as defined here, as it does not present a paradox that traps the person (or character) to whom it refers.

3.2. Epistemic doubt of *the lady's* truth in current use

By contrast with the original, the verbal component of ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’ now denotes denial rather than avowal in its non-performance context. The Oxford Dictionary of

Reference and Allusion correspondingly defines its current use as: ‘when someone denies something very strongly, which suggests that they may in fact be hiding the truth’ (Delahunty and Dignen, 2012, 238). In addition to the literal change in the meaning of ‘protest’ to represent denial, the definition ascribes a figurative opacity to ‘The lady doth’, by which it conveys a sense beyond the mere sum of its parts. This can be understood primarily in the definition’s attribution of a potential motive, namely, of ‘hiding the truth’, for the strength of denial. As such, denying ‘something very strongly’ points towards concealment of the truth rather than its (re-)assertion, thereby imputing falsehood to *the lady*.

This definition also finds resonance with responses by the lay public to an online user’s query regarding its meaning in Yahoo Answers, posted in 2007 (with answers dated until 2016/17).³ These definitions are drawn on as they represent contemporary interpretations and include explanations of the type of use outside of the Shakespearean context with which we concern ourselves here. The ‘Favorite Answer’, as voted by users, is given as: ‘It means that when someone denies something too much and too often, they’re usually lying. They’ve done whatever it is they’re accused of and trying [sic] too hard to cover their tracks’ (Yahoo Answers, Anonymous).

The Favorite Answer definition assumes that denial by *the lady* is in response to accusation (‘they’ve done whatever it is they’re accused of’), presupposing that they have done something ‘wrong’.⁴ As with the Oxford Dictionary of Reference and Allusion, such breach of moral code involves concealing the truth, i.e., ‘cover[ing] their tracks’, whereby protesting ‘too much’ suggests both intent (‘trying’) and effort (‘too hard’). As this is the ‘usual’ case (‘they’re usually lying’), moreover, deception represents a generalizable conclusion that can be drawn from the perceived excess of denial.

The attribute of deceptiveness seemingly evidenced by denial further implies that the truth is the very opposite of what *the lady* has asserted. This is illustrated by another online user, who replies with: ‘[it] means that if someone feels the need to protest so much after already saying that she did not do it, then she probably did it’ (Yahoo Answers, SFS 18). In the case of accusation, this would mean that denial (e.g., ‘I did not do it’) can be taken as evidence of its very truth (i.e., ‘she probably did it’). The same respondent further explains that ‘[a]fter a while of hearing, I couldn’t have done that or whatever, the person is often trying to convince themselves more than others’. Another underlying motive is thus *self*-deception. Whereas deceiving others suggests guile, the assumption of *self*-deception by *the lady* further undermines her credibility as a reliable source of her own truth. Both the guilt of guile through other-deception and the innocence of ignorance through self-deception can be happily married in the moral pronouncement of falsity through use of ‘The lady doth’, insofar as this attributes an undifferentiated falseness of character to *the lady* that undermines her very credibility, the basis of which need not, therefore, be explicated.

³ <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid==20070410132804AAIRI9H> last accessed 12/01/20; archived: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200112104301/https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid==20070410132804AAIRI9H>.

⁴ The present discussion does not restrict itself to the female gender, as it is possible for ‘The lady doth’ to be used for a recipient of any gender, particularly given the common variant ‘Thou doth protest too much, methinks’. The gender neutral third person plural ‘they/them’ is adopted to refer to both the user and recipient of the expression; where the recipient is referred to as the lady from the quote, she/her is used for stylistic consistency. The potential relevance of the use of the quote to gender is, however, briefly considered in relation to a broader discussion of epistemic injustice at the societal level in Section 5.

Whether motivated by self- or other-deception, the truth is assumed to have been concealed by *the lady* by stating its converse, as seemingly evidenced by ‘too much’ protestation. Yet, the Favorite Answer, ‘when someone denies something *too much* and *too often*, they’re usually lying’ (Yahoo Answers, Anonymous, my italics) may prompt us to consider what exactly the perceived excess of ‘too much’ in the expression ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’ entails—is it vehemence of assertion (i.e., its emotiveness) or its repetition (i.e., redundant verbiage), or a combination of both; moreover, at what point might this become excessive, and against which measure?

Such questioning of the apparent measure of judgement may be critical to an understanding of how epistemically rooted injustice can occur through the expression’s use, given that it allows the mere perception of excess to be unproblematically taken as evidence of untruth. In online users’ definitions, an abstract conceptualization of excess is, for example, communicated through use of ‘over-’, as in ‘[i]t means she’s overreacting to the situation. She’s guilty of something’ (Yahoo Answers, Anonymous). Such definition is further notable in that it presents the straightforward equation between ‘too much’ and guilt. This takes the generalizability of the Favorite Answer, ‘they’re *usually* lying’ (my italics), one step further in allowing certainty of attribution of guilt on the basis of a perceived yet otherwise undefined excess.

The formulaicity of the expression further obviates the need to clarify the basis on which judgement of excess is made. While ‘the lady’ can be replaced with ‘thou’ or another pronoun (which may facilitate its gender-neutral use), both ‘protest’ and ‘too much’ might be considered necessary fixtures of the expression, insofar as they would appear to be required for it to be identifiable as a formulaic chunk of meaning; and it is the formulaicity of excess in particular, i.e., ‘protest too much’, which provides the supposed evidential basis of judgment of guilt. Such judgement, based on an abstract conceptualization of excess that is unmeasured, or indeed perhaps unmeasurable, might therefore be considered an economising of effort, akin in its socially habitual use to the linguistic formulaicity of the expression. As Bateson ([1969] 1999, 274–5) states, ‘[h]abit can deal successfully only with propositions which have general or repetitive truth, and these are commonly of a relatively high order of abstraction’. The habitualization of an expression to the point of formulaicity therefore normalizes its strategic use, whether ‘by intent or default’ (Goffman, 1974, 480), to support existing assumptions and expectations about the way the world works. Moreover, at the higher level of abstraction, it may be able to do so at a lower level of awareness, allowing speakers of the phrase to remain convinced of their own reality, potentially at the cost of another’s with which it conflicts, thus happily avoiding any psychological discomfort of dissonance.

By contrast with the formulaicity of a proverb, literary quotation may further derive a certain weightiness from its acclaimed source, i.e., over and above that of cultural tradition. Even in the lack of awareness of who the originator might be, an old-fashioned and literary style of language in itself signals an authoritative source of cultural value that has withstood the tests of time. This may serve its users, who effectively borrow such authority, very well in that it underlines the value of their own judgement by contrast with that of *the lady*.

In particular, ‘methinks’ embodies this transfer of authority from an acclaimed source to one’s own opinion. A now obsolete pronoun-verb amalgam, it would appear to position the user as someone with superior discernment. It is such assumed superiority built on esteemed cultural authority, and

hence pretension, that may underpin its use in jest, or indeed in ironic response to ‘The lady doth’, e.g., ‘Methinks the gentleman is a prat’ (Yahoo Answers, *derfini*).⁵

As seen in the response above, ‘methinks’ is a relatively flexible component of the formulaicity of ‘The lady doth’—not only can it be positioned at the beginning of the expression, considered by Delahunty and Dignen (2012, 238) to be a ‘popular misquotation’, but it need not be used at all, as in its Urban Dictionary definition.⁶ Despite its omission, then, the meaning of phrase remains intact. As such, ‘methinks’ cannot be considered a ‘formulaic fixture’ of figurative use. Crucially, for the purpose of the current paper, furthermore, it does not contribute to the paradoxical workings of the frame trap itself, by contrast with the formulaically embedded ‘protest too much’, with which we will primarily concern ourselves in the subsequent discussion.

4. The logic and paradox of the epistemic frame trap ‘The lady doth’

The pronouncement of judgement by the speaker of ‘The lady doth’ on the basis of perceived excess on the part of the recipient potentially forecloses further discussion on the topic, as in the case of the frame trap ‘You always have to have the last word’ discussed in Section 2. The more said by ‘the lady’ in response, and the more vehemently it is reasserted, the more credibility is lost. However, in the case of ‘the lady doth’, the loss of credibility is further tied to the proposition itself. Having been labelled ‘too much’, any reassertion of the same proposition in an ‘effort to correct matters’ (Goffman, 1974, 480), or set things right according to her reality, can be taken as further evidence of *the lady’s* deception, and in the case of continuing to protest her innocence, of her very own guilt. At the same time, the lack of a response by her that would contradict the implication of falseness likewise lends credence to its truth, and consequently to the attribution of her own untruth. The actual truth proposition of *the lady’s* assertion is thus negated by either its constraint or continuation; and the paradox with which she is faced therefore has both epistemic underpinnings and implications.

Here, we consider why the *lack* of protestation in response to accusation can likewise be taken to imply guilt. The logic that underpins such reasoning predicated on the absence of a response where one might ordinarily be expected can best be approached with reference to the conversation analytic (CA) tradition of research, which methodically examines the structural mechanisms of turn taking and sequential ordering of interaction (Sacks, 1995; Schegloff, 2007). In particular, the CA concept of preference organization, referring to the common structural patterns of conversation, provides us with insight into participant expectations of what it is they are doing in interaction, if *not* to their psychological motivations for doing so; nor whether these be by ‘intent or default’ (Goffman, 1974, 480). It does not, then, address the question of the extent to which participants might be aware of what they are doing at a meta-level of cognisance, namely, with conscious ‘intent’. Nevertheless, the way in which they conjointly manage interactional procedures suggests an implicit familiarity with a

⁵ <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080307211058AANzIHD> last accessed 14/01/20; archived: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200114044338/https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080307211058AANzIHD>.

⁶ See, for example, the Urban Dictionary definition: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=the%20lady%20doth%20protest%20too%20much>, last accessed 18/01/20; archived: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200118205404/https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=the%20lady%20doth%20protest%20too%20much>.

‘default’ structural mechanism that supports whatever it is they are doing in interaction, regardless of the degree to which they are aware of what that might be or how they are going about doing it.

An understanding of preference derives from an analysis of the ordering of constituent parts of conversation and the noticeable absence of a preferred part, namely, something that is ordinarily forthcoming, and the lack of which is meaningfully accounted for by the participants in interaction. Asking a question can most easily be taken in illustration of this: if A asks B a question, A would ordinarily expect an answer from B, as evident in the contingent turns of conversation, e.g., A repeats the question or holds B to account in some way for their non-response. As such, there is an observable preference in conversation for a question to be answered.

Bilmes (1988, 167) clearly expresses such procedural expectation of response in relation to accusation: ‘If one fails to deny an accusation, a denial is noticeably absent and is a cause for inference, the most common inference being that the accusation is true’ (see also Atkinson and Drew, 1979, on judicial proceedings; Castor, 2015). Hutchby and O’Reilly (2010) similarly comment on the tendency of accusations that are not countered to be dealt with by participants in conversation as support of their very truth: ‘In talk-in-interaction ... accusations that go unresponded to by those who could be expected to respond tend to be treated as unchallenged and hence true’ (Hutchby and O’Reilly, 2010, 57).

Use of ‘The lady doth’ attributes deception to *the lady* by negating the truth of her proposition. Regardless of whether this constitutes a direct accusation, as assumed in the Favorite Answer, ‘They’ve done whatever it is they’re *accused* of and trying [sic] too hard to cover their tracks’ (Yahoo Answers, Anonymous, my italics), deception that is not legitimized (for example, through ritualistic exchange such as social niceties), may itself be widely considered a breach of moral code. Indeed, its inclusion in religious codes of conduct (such as the lying tongue in the Christian faith, which represents an abomination to God, e.g., Proverbs 6:17, KJV), suggests a high moral propensity for social condemnation. As such, ‘The lady doth’ might be considered a disapprobation on the basis of guilt by deception, regardless of whether *the lady’s* ‘protestation’ is one of innocence in response to an unfounded accusation. Moreover, accusation by definition implicates ‘that another has done something wrong’ (Castor, 2015, 20). One might correspondingly expect *the lady* to refute the attribution if it is considered to be untrue. In fact, Bilmes (1988, 167) formulates as a *general* conversational principle with regard to character attribution: ‘When someone makes an attribution *about* you, contradict, unless you want others to understand that you accept the truth of the attribution’ (my italics).

The conversation analytic work by Bilmes (1988) and Hutchby and O’Reilly (2010) serves to illustrate that regardless of whether the attribution (X) by the attributor (A) to the recipient (R) is true (+) or false (-), the lack of a contradiction (C) by the recipient to the effect that it is *not* true, will most commonly lead to the inference (→) that it *is*, as conveyed in (1). The first two examples (1) and (2) illustrate this preference in relation to the meaning and character attribution of falseness with the literal formulation ‘you are lying’, after which we will consider the paradox of the figurative expression ‘The lady doth’ in examples (3) and (4).

- (1) Lack of contradiction ($\emptyset C$) by recipient (R) to true (+) or false (-) attribution (X)⁷
 A: You are lying (X = + or -)
 R: $\emptyset C$
 $\rightarrow X = +$

Example (1) illustrates that in *either* the case of (X) being true (+) or untrue (-), the lack of a contradiction by (R) leads to the inference by (A) that it *is* true (+). In order, then, for (X = -) to be emergent as possibility, there must be a contradiction by (R).

- (2) Contradiction (C) by R to false (-) attribution (X)
 A: You are lying (X = -)
 R: That's not true (C)
 $\rightarrow X = + \text{ or } -$

Although a contradiction (C) is conventionally required (in accordance with preference organization) for the inference that the attribution (X) is false to be made, such inference may nevertheless *not* be made. While (C) is a conversational prerequisite of (X = -), it merely allows for its potential as an inference. In other words, it allows (A) to draw the inference that their attribution of falsity (of proposition) and falseness (of character) to (R) may itself be false—something that would, however, appear to necessitate both the acknowledgement and admission of their own error of judgement. Yet, the very assumption of superiority of judgement (and morality) that allows (A) to overtly make such claim may obstruct their receptiveness to the possibility of their own misattribution. Thus, they may remain somewhat conveniently unconvinced, or unwilling to accept, (R)'s corrective account—convenient in the sense of this being consonant with their existing set of beliefs and assumptions. Furthermore, notwithstanding (C) by (R), (A) may ‘legitimately’ not accept its veracity if an existing power differential exists and is assumed to be operative among the participants, which allows (A) to perform and exercise a seeming superiority of judgement. As such, (A) may lay claim to superior knowledge of the veracity of (R)'s proposition than (R) themselves.

In the following example (3), we examine the formulaic expression ‘The lady doth’, which conveys the implication ‘you are lying’, and the paradox its use occasions as a frame trap.

- (3) Contradiction (C) by (R) to false (-) attribution (X) conveyed with ‘The lady doth’
 A: The lady doth protest too much, methinks (X = -)
 R: That's not true (C)
 $\rightarrow X = +$

In this case, the inference remains that (X) is true (+), despite (C) by (R), which would allow for it to be false if (X) were otherwise expressed (as in example 2, ‘You are lying’). Indeed, it is *because* of

⁷ Please note that while reference is here made to the CA literature to explain normative expectations of a contradiction in response to an untrue attribution or accusation, its methodological approach is clearly not adopted in the current paper and the hypothetical examples and formulae are, rather, intended to serve in illustration of the logic and paradox of ‘The lady doth’.

(C), which presents ‘protestation’ and hence apparent evidence of untruth, that the inference confirms the proposition. Moreover, reiterated contradiction by the recipient merely adds to the conviction that the inference of falsehood is correct. The frame thus induces a recursive truth negation in the case that *the lady* continues to ‘protest’.

(4) Reiterated contradiction (C) by R to false (-) attribution (X)

A: The lady doth protest too much, methinks (X = -)

R: That's not true (C)

A: Really.

R: No, really, it's NOT TRUE.

→ X = + +

In (4), the inference is reinforced by subsequent assertions to the contrary by the recipient due to the ongoing effects of the frame trap induced by (A) with ‘The lady doth’. The reiterated truth expressed by (R), ‘No, really, it's NOT TRUE’, represents excess both in terms of verbiage (an additional statement) and emotiveness (through use of uppercase for NOT TRUE, e.g., greater emphasis or loudness). Indeed, such reaction might be considered ‘natural’ in the case of unjust attribution and in the event ‘the individual finds that he is trapped and nothing can get through’ (Goffman, 1974, 480), understandably resulting in some degree of frustration.

However, the degree of perceived excess with which *the lady* originally spoke to occasion the actual use of ‘The lady doth’, which sets a trap of recursive truth negation, is at the whim of (A)'s initial judgement and subject to their motivations (regardless of the degree to which they may be aware of having them or not). Excess as evidence of untruth therefore remains problematic not only with respect to what ‘too much’ actually means but to whether (A) has ‘accurately’ measured it, and if so against what; and, ultimately, whether it is at all measurable.

Once the frame trap has been induced through use of ‘The lady doth’, however, the mere repetition by *the lady* of her truth in itself meets one clearly identifiable quality of excess, namely, that of saying something *too often*, as exemplified in the Yahoo Answers Favorite Answer ‘when someone denies something too much and *too often*’ (Yahoo Answers, Anonymous, my italics). The very use of the expression therefore calls excess into being given the conversational expectation to contradict an untrue attribution, whether or not it was there to start with, and whether or not it is measurable and hence presents a legitimate yardstick of veracity. Moreover, due to the recursiveness of truth negation, the greater the effort expended in contradiction by (R), or excess of ‘too much’, the more *the lady's* truth is constrained within the confines of its very converse proposition.

The continued protestation of *the lady* thus provides (A) with further evidence in support of what they have already asserted, confirming their rightness of judgement, while the lack of contradiction of the proposition likewise serves to confirm it. *The lady*, on the other hand, finds herself trapped in a paradox of unjust attribution—whether or not she protests, it can be taken as evidence of untruth and, in the case of accusation, of guilt.

Indeed, in the legal context, in which accusation has critical relevance to the accused, the widespread belief has been observed that ‘the innocent person need not explain anything, but the guilty party will advocate his innocence too much’, underpinning the use of ‘The lady doth’ in judicial proceedings (Oxenhandler, 2000, 377). If deeply ingrained, such belief suggests a lack of awareness of the frame trap occasioned by its use—in other words, it is employed by ‘default’ (Goffman, 1974, 480); on the other hand, if strategically applied to ‘win’, i.e., by ‘intent’ (Goffman, 1974, 480), it lacks any ethical concern for judiciously evidencing the guilt of untruth in order to establish the truth itself. Either way, the very premise of ‘The lady doth’ in such context is founded on faulty logic of its conversational use. In fact, by protesting her innocence, *the lady* is no longer innocent until proven guilty, but guilty until proven innocent, and even then unlikely by her own account, which has been seemingly ‘evidenced’ to lack credibility and is subject to the ongoing effects of recursive truth negation.

5. Discussion

‘The lady doth’ formulaically invalidates *the lady's* truth—she is perceived and/or represented to have excessively declared something to be or not to be the case, implying its converse. In the Yahoo Answers discussed in Section 2, such conviction of truth as the opposite of *the lady's* proposition is seen to range from habitual generalizability with ‘they’re *usually* lying’ (Yahoo Answers, Anonymous) to the straightforward equation of excess with guilt: ‘[i]t means she’s overreacting to the situation. She’s guilty of something’ (Yahoo Answers, timo_10143). Not only can the speaker of ‘The lady doth’ decide for themselves whether or not *the lady* represents such usual case of deception, drawing a seemingly generalizable conclusion, but their attribution further *appears* to be substantiated by an evidential premise of excess. Crucially, such axiomatization allows them to *retroactively* ascribe excessiveness to *the lady's* interactional behaviour in support of their very judgement, all the more so as it is emergent in response to, and hence contingent on, the use of ‘The lady doth’. As such, their judgement may in truth be rooted in another premise altogether, such as whether or not they themselves agree with *the lady's* actual proposition or, indeed, whether or not they agree with *the lady* herself actually making that proposition.

That the notion of excess represents poorly substantiated evidence in support of the recipient's deception or guilt is evident from its very ambiguity or ambivalence—it is unclear from the expression whether ‘too much’ refers to both/either repetition and/or vehemence of protestation. It further remains questionable whether the passing of judgement on excess can be at all judiciously applied, i.e., on any quantitatively measurable or qualitatively meaningful basis, to justify the use of ‘The lady doth’. Once the frame trap has been induced, however, the conversational expectation, or preference, that any false attribution or accusation be contradicted (Bilmes, 1988, 167) necessitates reassertion by *the lady* for her truth to be emergent as possibility. This *then* becomes quantifiably ‘too much’ in its very repetition, seemingly vindicating the forejudgement by the user of ‘The lady doth’ of *the lady's* falsehood and guilt. Any vehemence of protestation, again in response to unjust character attribution or false accusation, might further be deemed qualitatively ‘too much’ in its emotiveness, likewise providing ‘evidence’ of soundness of forejudgement—this, despite some display of emotion being an understandable and perhaps even to-be-expected reaction to perceived injustice. Given the social propensity for moral condemnation of untruth, *the lady* might rather have to be entirely equanimous and transcendent of self-identity, i.e., without any face concerns and indifferent to her

own fate, not to respond with some level of emotion, if only a 'flash' of frustration, to the false attribution of deception or accusation of guilt.

As we have seen from the conversation analytic literature, there is a tendency in interaction to contradict negative attribution or accusation, whereby the absence of a response is noticeably dealt with by participants in talk as confirmation of its veracity (Bilmes, 1988; Hutchby and O'Reilly, 2010). Yet, paradoxically, attempts on the part of the recipient of 'The lady doth' to counter the accusation of untruth lead to the recursive negation of their truth and, correspondingly, to an increasing loss of credibility. As such, they are 'trapped' by a paradoxical frame of truth negation invoked on the questionable evidential basis of excess, whereby 'nothing can get through' (Goffman, 1974, 480).

Any resulting emotion or reassertion presents apparent evidence in support of the very judgement of deception or guilt, whether or *not* 'too much' of it was there to justify the use of the expression to start with. Both the quantitative and qualitative bases of evidence *resulting* from the pronouncement of 'The lady doth' therefore serve to retroactively confirm the preexisting beliefs and any underlying motives of the speaker of the expression.

While on the one hand the conversationally expected response to false attribution or accusation presents apparent evidence of excess and hence deception and guilt on the part of *the lady*, on the other, it upholds an image of rational discernment of the speaker of the expression, whose judgement has been retrospectively 'proved' to be right. The face of the speaker may consequently be enhanced by their apparent 'rightness', which is further reinforced by the implicit contrast between their seeming rationality of judgement and *the lady's* emotively 'evidenced' falsehood, given that rational thought and emotion are often normatively dichotomized. While the speaker of 'The lady doth' therefore presents as a rational, discerning, and just individual, *the lady* by contrast appears emotive, non-credible, and false.

Yet, despite the face-enhancing benefits conferred upon the speaker of the expression, these may nevertheless be 'by default' rather than 'by intent' (Goffman, 1974, 480) of its habitualized use as a formulaic expression. It is precisely its formulaic abstraction, whereby its meaning as a whole differs from the mere sum of its literal parts (Wray, 2002), that may allow it to remain unexamined by the speaker if a lesser cognitive processing effort is indeed required in both its comprehension (Wray, 2013) and habitualized use as a formulaic expression. This would allow its users to easily bypass some of the reasoning which might bring to their attention the epistemic paradox it occasions in conversation.

As a formulaic 'default', the expression facilitates the forejudgement of deception and guilt, which can hence precede and shape the very perception of excess used to vindicate it, potentially without the full awareness, or strategic 'intent', of its user. The judgement of excess which is unquestioningly taken as 'evidence' of untruth may much rather be based on pre-existing assumptions concerning the credibility of *the lady* inasmuch as her assertions. In other words, an unexamined judgement of excess allows for implicit bias not only against *what* it is that someone is saying but also *who* it is that is saying the *what*, over and above the veracity of the *what* itself.

If the *who* lacks credibility on the basis of an observed personal history of deception, such as in the case of having ‘cried wolf’ one too many times, it is possible for the judgement of veracity to be reliably informed by the character attribution of falsehood. Nevertheless, deception is by no means a given in any one particular instance of *the lady*’s ‘protestation’. If, on the other hand, the *who* is not known to have a personal history of deception, or the speaker of the expression is not, in fact, that familiar with their character, the assumption that their assertion lacks credibility is problematic in its bias. In the latter case of unfamiliarity, the assumed lack of credibility can only be informed by either the meaning of the proposition itself or *the type* of person *the lady* is perceived to be, or more realistically, as we are social animals with less than entirely rational minds, both of these combined, i.e., what the assertion is and the type of person who is making it. The general relevance of type in the case of unfamiliarity cannot be understated. It is most clearly evidenced in the behaviour of unacquainted interlocutors who draw heavily on categorization sequences in first-time interactions, employing common typificatory schemes (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), such as place of residence/origin or professions, to forge an initial pathway in conversation (Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984; Svennevig, 1999; Nao, 2015). Yet, even in the case of familiarity, it may also be likely to play a role. An unwarranted assumption that an assertion by *the lady* is non-credible, formed in part on the basis of *who* is saying the *what*, must be underpinned by an implicit bias which privileges some people’s accounts over others as well as the speaker’s own judgement of the veracity of others’ accounts.

An assumed lack of credibility on the basis of *type* of person can thus be expected to reflect a more widespread epistemic injustice of being categorically wronged in one’s ‘capacity as a knower’ (Fricker, 2009, 20). In the case of ‘The lady doth’, this occurs with respect to one’s very own account, and as such it represents a ‘testimonial injustice’ in particular (Fricker, 2009, 20; Fricker, 2019). In other words, *the lady* may experience credibility deficit on the basis of the type of person she is perceived to be, whether or not the user of the expression is aware of their bias. While ‘The lady doth’ (or its variant use ‘Thou doth’) might arguably be applied to a recipient of any type, the implication that *the lady* herself lacks credibility makes certain types of people more vulnerable to its use if they have been socio-culturally positioned and assumed to lack credibility, rationality of judgement (often defined in contrast with emotionality and equated with a lower intelligence), and an honest disposition (given that truth is defined and exercised by others and cannot be claimed by them). Such types can generally be assumed to be those who hold lesser power in society and its institutions. Reinforcing Goffman (1974), Sullivan (2009, 1316) notes that ‘those with little social power have little power to challenge frames applied to them, and any attempt to provide corrective accounts [are] instead used to reinforce incorrect views’. In other words, they are ‘trapped’ by the frames that work against them.

In theory, those who are vulnerable to the use of frame traps against them could represent any type which is differentiated from other more powerful types; in practice, however, the given attributes, i.e., non-credible, irrational/emotional, and dishonest/manipulative, have often been applied as stereotypes to minorities and women (see Fricker, 2009). Moreover, given that the ambiguous and ambivalent concept of excess, as denoted by ‘too much’, is key to the workings of the ‘The lady doth’ frame trap, women may be particularly vulnerable to its use, having been negatively characterised throughout history as shrill and garrulous (Cameron, 2008) as well as emotive.

If 'The lady doth' (rather than its variant form 'Thou doth') is, in fact, directed towards a female recipient, it may further be experienced by her as being wronged in her capacity as a knower on the basis of her gender, given that 'lady' is typically used for females (whether or not the user has intended the formulaic expression to be so gendered). The sense of injustice at being personally disbelieved may be compounded by the experience of social prejudice on the perceived basis of one's gender. This may add to the frustration of being 'trapped' and amplify the 'too muchness' that can consequently be taken to vindicate the very forejudgement of the users of the expression.

Somewhat ironically, 'The lady doth' may itself be used 'at the service of emotion' (Bortolotti, 2014, 6), namely, to justify *post hoc* the intuitive impressions of the users in support of existing beliefs and biases. In other words, possibly unbeknownst to themselves, their 'reasoned' conclusion may itself be emotively driven, based on the type of person *the lady* is assumed to be and whatever it is she is claiming that they have chosen to refute as truth.

Similarly, typing, and therefore forejudgement, can occur at the individual level of personality on the basis of ascribed attributes that are not necessarily associated with a social category, i.e., one that is shared with others as an identifiable 'group'. Thus 'The lady doth' may be levied against a particular person who is negatively typified in terms that support the assumption of credibility deficit, such as being deceitful or lacking in intelligence. In this sense, the relationship between framing and stigma (Hancock and Garner, 2011), may also be operative at the individual level of scapegoating.⁸ Through illustration of frame trap with 'You always have to have the last word', in Section 2, we saw that the ascription of personal attributes to the recipient plays a key role in the constraint of their expression of truth. By contrast, the axiomaticity of an expression such as 'The lady doth', lends the user's own truth the semblance of rationality by default, allowing any depth of logical reasoning to be easily bypassed by them.

Occasioning a double-bind interactional context by means of a frame trap is one way that a 'typed' person's truth can be held in check and an existing order of differentiated rights maintained, giving the user 'the right to define the operant context for another person' (Gibney, 2006, 55). Thus, 'an economy of trial and error' is preserved, allowing the 'premises of habit' to become 'partly 'unconscious' (Bateson, [1969] 1999, 274). Whether drawing on macro-level categories with associated social attributes or micro-level personal attributes that are individually ascribed, the epistemic double bind occasioned by 'The lady doth' places the user in a position to act as the arbiter of truth, while the recipient is disallowed from even defining their own.

'The lady doth' might thus be said to present the user with 'framing potential', by which I mean the potential to maintain or gain social value relative to, and at the expense of, another's. An unexamined

⁸ This is hence a more encompassing conceptualization of epistemic injustice than that originally proposed by Fricker, which concerns itself with the collective experience of 'identity-prejudicial credibility deficit' (2009, 4). However, the inclusion of individual scapegoating within its remit is consistent with Goffman's (1963) own observations on stigma, which reflect more widely obtaining 'societal labels' (Fasulo and Piazza, 2015, 1) as well as the 'spoiled identity' of individuals to which negative characteristics have been attributed. Furthermore, while Fricker (2017) continues to maintain a distinction between epistemic injustice as ingenuous rather than deliberate misjudgement, the current paper questions the level to which we may be aware of exploiting what is here subsequently termed the 'framing potential' of 'The lady doth', so that it may not be entirely clear whether and to what extent its use is either 'by intent or default' (Goffman, 1974, 480).

reality may therefore be perpetuated in the mind of the user by intuitive ‘default’ of maintaining an upper hand rather than by ‘intent’ (Goffman, 1974, 480), although these concepts may be more likely to present opposite ends of a spectrum of awareness than discreetly identifiable mechanisms of reality construction and maintenance. While ‘The lady doth’ might strategically be used with full awareness, whereby its default nature is knowingly exploited by intent, it might also therefore be employed with relative lack of awareness. In the extreme, this could occur to the point of absolute ignorance or a diminished perceptiveness of the effects on another of its use, other than that it causes an emotional reaction that is seemingly typical of the type of people to whom it is ascribed, and which further substantiates the rightness of knowing of the user. Ironically, it is possible that the user's belief in being right by way of reason may act as a cognitive impediment to understanding the very irrationality of setting an epistemic frame trap, which *either* inhibits another person from protesting their truth following unfair attribution or wrongful accusation when this would be conversationally expected in testimonial evidence of their innocence *or* reinforces the very opposite of the truth that they are trying to communicate.

6. Conclusion

I have here argued that the habitualized use of ‘The lady doth protest too much’, a process by which it has become a formulaic expression outside of its original Shakespearean context, validates the problematic concept of excess as an evidential basis of untruth. In particular, this is realized in the formulaic string ‘protest too much’, which assumes *the lady's* proposition to be excessive either in force (quality) or in repetition (quantity), or both. On the one hand, the formulaicity of the expression potentially automatizes the judgement of its user; on the other, its axiomaticity of meaning further obviates the need to discriminate between quality and quantity or indeed to base one's judgement on any definable measure of excess at all. In other words, it can operate at the ‘default’ level, i.e., at a lesser degree of awareness than ‘by intent’ (Goffman, 1974, 480). As such, the use of ‘The lady doth’ is easily subject to either distortions of perception or interpretation—and particularly to those that would support existing beliefs and assumptions about the way the world works, given that these are the most convenient and congruent ones, causing the least amount of discomfort or dissonance. Since these beliefs can be expected to relate to both the proposition and the type of person who is making it, i.e., *the lady*, the use of the expression may make us highly susceptible to our own forejudgement.

In this way, it may be our own assumption of credibility deficit on the part of *the lady* that leads to the attribution of untruth, while the credibility deficit resulting from the very use of the expression perpetuates an epistemic injustice against her. Contrary to its use elsewhere (Fricker, 2009, 2017, 2019), I have here suggested that this could apply at either the macro-level of wide-scale social injustice or at the micro-level of individual unjust character attribution, as well as strategically yet below the level of awareness of conscious intent. Happily (for the user of the expression), their own forejudgement is vindicated whether *the lady* protests or not. I have illustrated this to be operative by means of a conversational mechanism of recursive truth negation in the case that she does ‘protest’ (in keeping with the conversationally expected denial of false attribution) or by pre-emptive inhibition of ‘protestation’ due to the anticipated strengthening effects of the frame trap with any increased resistance to it. Problematically, the use of the expression itself is taken to ‘evidence’ the guilt, or untruth, of the recipient.

Thus, the frame trap can be used somewhat irrationally to rationalize an implicit bias of credibility deficit against the recipient of the expression ‘The lady doth’, who has here eponymously been referred to as *the lady*. Its use is self-serving in that it upholds one's own world view at the expense of that of another, for which reason I have suggested that it holds ‘framing potential’—it allows one to maintain or gain a social upperhand, which may be intuited if not necessarily consciously acknowledged, particularly as its use may have become habit-forming; and by the very fact of being a formulaic expression, it can be assumed to represent a more widely performed cultural habit. As it is self-serving, then, it might to some extent be seen as a rational form of action, at least from a competitive evolutionary perspective of social survival. And yet, its pragmatic pretence at discernment of the truth is deeply irrational, given that it presents a Catch22 to *the lady*. If *the lady* is guilty of deception whether or not she contests the attribution of untruth, how can the use of ‘The lady doth’ itself be discerning of that very truth? Nevertheless, the epistemic implications and effects of the expression allow the user to apply it with seemingly cool rationality and discernment in direct contrast with the assumed excess of protestation by *the lady*, which represents an emotional response. As such, it is dichotomised to lack reason although it may present an entirely reasonable response to being trapped within a frame so that ‘nothing can get through’ (Goffman, 1974, 480). In this way, the frame trap can paradoxically be used to uphold the semblance of truth and justice in the face of an unjust attribution of deception and guilt.

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