Conflict Talk: A Discourse Analytical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys research in the area of conflict talk, focusing on discourse analytical studies of actual, naturally occurring conflict talk. The paper begins with a brief discussion on how conflict talk has been conceptualized. Then the scope of the paper is defined as focusing on discourse analytical studies that examine actual instances of conflict talk within a framework of argument as a situated, local interactional accomplishment. Next, some of the mechanisms and important factors by which conflict talk can be initiated, maintained or escalated, and terminated are reviewed. Finally, the methodological issue of missing data is considered, and a call is made for more detailed analyses of conflict talk in a variety of contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict and its associated talk are common but complex phenomena. Research on conflict has been extensive in numerous fields, e.g., philosophy, rhetoric, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and linguistics. Conflict has generally been negatively viewed, and unvalued in most disciplines. It is often seen as destructive, disruptive, hostile, and aggressive behavior. Indeed, the majority of work in the conflict resolution field is predicated on this perspective. It is often perceived as arising due to deficiencies in social skills, e.g., in psychology, or in terms of breakdowns in communication, e.g., in intercultural communication. However, conflict can also be understood as a constructive process with positive consequences[2] (Deutsch, 1963, cited in Marcus, 1985; Simmel, 1908/1955). Despite an extensive history of investigation into conflict in the social sciences, the study of the actual discourse within conflict episodes and its features is relatively recent. This paper begins with a discussion of the various ways conflict talk has been conceptualized. Then, the scope of the paper is defined, taking into account what are considered to be significant aspects of conflict talk. Then the paper reviews some of the mechanisms and

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[2] Although it has gained great popularity in recent years, the view that conflict is a positive phenomenon is not undisputed. Nelson (2001) suggests this view primarily stems from confusion over terminology. He points to the inconsistency of definition and use of the term 'conflict' with 'competition', 'dispute', 'negotiation' and 'mediation', and attributes the main cause of this confusion as the "failure to examine terms in specific contexts of use" (p. 17). He discusses two possible social consequences of such thinking: firstly, that all conflict may be mistakenly considered positive and therefore be promoted. Secondly, positive conflict may be undervalued if it is equated with hostile or negative conflict.

important factors by which conflict talk can be initiated, maintained or escalated, and terminated. Finally, concluding comments regarding methodology and directions for future research are made.

CONCEPTUALIZATION ISSUES

Issues in Conceptualization

The multifaceted nature of research into conflict and its discourse has resulted in a myriad of conceptualizations, terms, and definitions. Although this paper is not primarily concerned with producing a comprehensive definition of conflict discourse, a discussion of the conceptualization issues is pertinent in order to delineate the scope of the review, and also more generally to warn of the possibility of the unwarranted extrapolation of features in one type of conflict discourse to all types without due consideration that the conflict events or discourse are, in fact, comparable. The numerous terms abounding in the literature on conflict discourse indicate the many problems in delineating scope and definition. The terms used may denote narrow to broad concepts. For example, disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984), the adversative episode (Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981), the contracting routine (Boggs, 1978), oppositional argument (Schiffrin, 1985), quarrel (Antaki, 1994), disputes and disputing (Brenneis, 1988; Kotthoff, 1993), and conflict talk (Grimshaw, 1990).

One of the most commonly used terms is argument. This may be used in the formal tradition of argumentation, which considers the rhetorical construction of argument, and what constitutes a good argument or a bad one in terms of persuasive ability (Antaki, 1994). This classical perspective sees argument as based on logical reasoning, and primarily focuses on a single speaker. In contrast, argument can be seen as an interactive process between two or more participants. Such a distinction is made by Jacobs and Jackson (1981). They point out that these two concepts of argument are reflected in everyday language: one can make an argument for a certain position, i.e., as a type of speech act; and secondly, one can have an argument with someone, i.e., as a type of interaction. Schiffrin (1985) makes a similar distinction between arguments that are rhetorical, where a "speaker presents an intact monologue supporting a disputable position", and oppositional, where "one or more speakers openly support disputed positions" (p. 37). However, she acknowledges that her distinction may not be supported empirically. Indeed, it seems clear that oppositional arguments may well include rhetorical segments, and that rhetorical arguments themselves are interactional at a fundamental level since they must be directed toward an audience of some sort.

As noted, one conceptualization of an argument is that it is a type of speech act. Arguing can be seen as the illocutionary act with convincing as the perlocutionary outcome (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984). In order to account for more than short utterances, van Eemeren and Grootendorst extended the traditional notion of a speech act to include multiple utterances, i.e., illocutionary act complexes. However, the applicability to arguments in the real world is restricted, e.g., in their model, argument is initiated by disagreement to an asserted proposition. Although also working in a speech act framework, Jackson and Jacobs (1981) propose a more interactionally oriented model. They define conversational argument in two ways: structurally, as an expansion of the disagreement speech act since disagreement alone does not equate to having an argument "regardless of affect displayed, contradiction expressed, or opposition

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perceived" in the disagreement (p. 125), and functionally, as a means of managing disagreement. They added to the previous speech act theory work by formulating their model to include failure to meet the felicity conditions of any speech act, and not just an assertion of a proposition. They also suggest that conversational argument is characterized by some degree of serious commitment. This leads to the broader issue of whether a minimal level of substantive content is necessary for an argument to take place. Rips (1998) suggests that verbal disputes are not necessarily arguments if they only contain name-calling, or demand or threat exchanges, and that to be an argument, a stretch of discourse must involve an "exchange of views on whether it is worthwhile to believe some assertion or take some action" (p. 411). However, there are obvious problematic aspects of including content or intent as will be discussed later in the debate over sociable argument.

Researchers from outside of the speech act theory perspective also seem to concur with this idea of argument being broader than a single disagreement act. For example, Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) see conversational arguing consisting of "the conversational interactivity of making claims, disagreeing with claims, countering disagreements, and the processes by which such disagreements arise, are dealt with, and resolved" (p. 225). Schiffrin (1984) also sees argument characterized by sustained disagreement, as well as stances that are not aligned, and competition for interactionally negotiable goods, whether this is on the surface level or on the underlying action level. Goodwin (1990) employs an activity-based conceptualization of argument along the lines of Goffman's (1967) situated activity system and Gumperz's (1982) sociolinguistic notion of a speech event.

For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term conflict talk (following Grimshaw, 1990) when discussing such phenomena in the broadest sense. It captures the central idea that participants take alternative positions on the same issue (whether reconcilable or mutually exclusive) but it does not imply a restriction to a single speech act nor a single turn sequence nor a single topic of contention. Nevertheless, at all times, it would be well to keep in mind Nelson's call for recognition "that the meanings of terms are tied to their use, and those uses are multiple due to their use in multiple contexts" (2001, p. 19), as well as the effect of contextual variation on meaning.

Defining the Scope of the Paper

In defining the scope of this paper, there are both theoretical and methodological criteria. Firstly, conflict talk is broadly conceptualized for the purposes of this review as a situated, local activity, interactionally accomplished by the participants. The review is concerned with studies that seek to understand or describe the process of conflict talk as it unfolds, from its initiation to termination, rather than examining the episode as a finished product to be abstractedly deconstructed (Antaki, 1994). Secondly, the review primarily covers empirical studies of actual, naturally occurring interpersonal conflict talk. There is a growing consensus among discourse analysts that unedited text along with its situational and contextual details is critical to valid and meaningful analysis. A great deal of work on conflict focuses on retrospective accounts of the conflict and what was said, either by those directly involved or by observers (Labov, 1990). This type of reporting often relates more to the conflict rather than the talk itself, and usually glosses over much of the interactional detail. Indeed, the retelling of the episode is, in itself, a new event. Even if transcripts are available, they often do not contain sufficient detail for

microanalysis (e.g., court transcripts) or there is not enough background/case information regarding the particulars of the case. This is by no means to devalue the work on conflict that is reported. Indeed, it is often the only feasible method for conflicts that are high stakes or serious in nature, or that occur in situations where it would be impossible to predict, or to gather data on conflicts from the same institution.

However, as Goodwin and Goodwin point out in Grimshaw (1990), a framework that distinguishes between the surface structure of an utterance and its illocutionary force hides how the separate turns can be connected via phonological, syntactic and semantic phenomena (cf. Labov & Fanshel, 1977). Goodwin (1990) states, "These phenomena, no matter how minute and apparently 'linguistic' in character, must be investigated as forms of social action and not simply manifestations of underlying grammatical machinery" (p. 4). In addition, although conflict talk is often perceived as disruptive and a breakdown of interaction, it arises as a result of intricate cooperative behavior or coordination between participants (echoed in the phrase "it takes two to have an argument"). Participants pay close attention to talk in the previous turns and use this to construct appropriate subsequent talk. Such interactive cooperation is also camouflaged when analysis is based on a speech act gloss of a turn's talk rather than the actual talk itself.

Another factor in delineating scope is that the majority of studies examined involve interpersonal and not organizational conflicts. Organizational conflicts are further complicated by issues of representation, and seem to constitute a particular subset of the conflict literature. The benefits of such a strict analytical dichotomy between organizational and interpersonal conflict is debatable and certainly seems simplistic (Kolb & Putnam, 1992), but given the space constraints, this issue will not be addressed here. Along similar lines is the distinction between conversational or everyday argument, and institutional conflict talk. The type and practices of conflict talk examined here are not distinctly institutional, though the settings themselves may be functionally specific, e.g., schools, mediation sessions, small claims courts. A further subset relates to the distinction between conflict talk itself and conflict management or resolution episodes. Often, resolution may be part of the conflict episode, e.g., in labor-management discussions (O'Donnell, 1990) or conflict talk may be at the forefront of what are ostensibly resolution events, e.g., during a community center association meeting (Kallmeyer & Keim, 1996), during mediation sessions (Garcia, 1991; Greatbatch & Dingwall, 1997), and at small claims courts (Conley & O'Barr, 1990; Philips, 1983, 1990). This review will not consider in detail the mediation and adjudication processes.

INITIATING CONFLICT TALK

A variety of act types can be used to express initial opposition (Brenneis & Lein, 1977; Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981). Eisenberg and Garvey, in their influential (1981) study, suggest, "an adversative episode is a sequence which begins with an opposition[3]" (p. 150). This opposition may be in reply to an action, a request for action, or an assertion. Maynard (1985) challenges the view that the start of arguments can be predicted this way because almost any previous excerpt of talk could be interpreted as an initiator of dispute. This is undoubtedly possible though most analysts would agree that it is the interpretation of the participant that is of importance rather than all potential interpretations. The common thread of both studies is that the analytical focus is on how arguments emerge out of opposition. In other words, they treat argument (however defined) as a response-centered event (Hutchby, 1996).

Initial disagreement can be examined in terms of the conversation analysis concept of preference[4]. In response to the first part of an adjacency pair, there are preferred and dispreferred courses of action (Bilmes, 1988; Pomerantz, 1984). The preference notion for agreement does not imply that participants will always agree but that agreement is the unmarked form and disagreement will be marked in some way. Dispreferred second turns require extra "work" in the form of delays or hesitations between turns. They are often softened and indirect, and accompanied by justifications, explanations, etc. Thus, the preference system helps to modulate the expression of disagreement.

However, such modulated disagreement does not occur in all contexts. Studies have shown that children often use aggravated disagreement. Boggs (1978) demonstrates that the most common part of the "contradicting routine" of mixed-Hawaiian ancestry children is the use of 'No!' as a direct and undelayed disagreement. Similarly, Goodwin's (1990, p. 144) analysis of children's conflict talk also found that, contrary to disagreement being dispreferred activity with delays before production and mitigation and with the actual disagreement element being pushed back within the disagreement turn itself, the children in her study highlighted opposition via expressions of polarity to initiate the turn (such as 'No!' or 'Yes'), and partial repetition of the opposed preceding talk in order to focus attention and challenge it.

Adults also exhibit aggravated disagreement in conflict talk. Kuo (1992) observes that formulaic opposition markers tend to occupy turn-initial positions in informal conflict talk among Chinese friends, and are also produced with an emphatic tone. He suggests that the "direct and aggravated disagreement strategy shows not only the intimate relationship among the speakers but also their strong desire to maintain a sincere and independent self" (p. 401). Georgakopoulou (2001) found that the main devices for disagreement are not only explicit linguistic signals but include rhetorical strategies. These are: specific turn initial markers followed by stories as analogies, and questions (in the form of questioning repeats and partial acceptance with exploration). It should be noted that the elements discussed in this section not only mark the opening of disagreement, but also appear within conflict episodes. The next section examines those features that explicitly play a role in maintaining and, at times, escalating conflict talk.

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[3] In addition, they define the ending of the adversative episode as the occurrence of resolution or dissipation of the conflict. This has been heavily criticized, and is discussed later in the paper.

[4] Preference is not intended to convey a psychological wish to agree but instead is a structural concept, similar to the linguistic notion of markedness (Levinson, 1983) and reflective of cultural norms (Bilmes, 1988).

MAINTAINING AND ESCALATING CONFLICT TALK

One of the most analytically challenging aspects of conflict talk is that once an episode begins, it can follow a bewildering array of trajectories. Features of a conflict inevitably change over its course: Coleman (1957, cited in Grimshaw, 1990) notes that conflicts may expand in focus (sometimes to the extent that the original focus is forgotten), change in focus (e.g., to become more personal in nature), and spread along existing class or social boundaries. They are highly unlikely to follow a linear route towards resolution but may be discontinuous or episodic.

In examining how conflict talk is maintained or escalated, one of the major areas of interest proceeds from the observation that conflict talk is a cooperative endeavor achieved by two (or more) participants. In particular, researchers using conversation analytical methodology have shown how the "natural" structure of interaction promotes the continuation of conflict talk. Other researchers have considered the linguistic resources that interlocutors have at their disposal, as well as non-linguistic variables such as goals, contextual and social constraints, e.g., power, and status. This section reviews the research on the complex ways in which these factors drive conflict talk.

The Role of Interactive Structure

Folger, Poole and Stutman (1997) state, in their widely adopted text in the interpersonal conflict field, "conflicts move in negative directions because people are incapable of diagnosing the conflict and altering their behavior" and that they can be "trapped in their own interaction patterns" (p. 73). The authors consider these patterns in terms of the moves and countermoves made and strategies employed by participants. Although they do not explicitly make the connection, the idea seemingly can be aligned with Labov and Fanshel's (1977) position that coherence in conversation is not found at the linguistic level but at the speech act level, i.e., "obligatory sequencing is not to be found between utterances but between the actions that are being performed" (p. 70). That interlocutors can be trapped by common interactional norms is also expressed by Brenneis (1988) when he states that "shared commonsense understandings of interactional structure compel responses that may well be opposed to the respondents' own best interests" (p. 228).

It has already been noted that initiation of a conflict talk episode can be analyzed within the framework of an oppositional response to an arguable action (Maynard, 1985). Hutchby (1996) extends this analysis to explain how arguments continue. The oppositional move becomes the next arguable action, and thus can be followed by another oppositional move. Here, the conversation analysis concept of adjacency is important but in a modified form from the usual question-answer type. In the latter, the question makes the answer sequentially relevant, but for action-opposition sequences, for the action to be arguable (and hence opposition to be relevant), the action must be treated as arguable by the listener (Hutchby, 1996). Also working in the conversation analysis framework, Garcia (1991) presents evidence to show how changes to the interactional structure of ordinary conversation can inhibit or even prevent argument between disputants in mediation hearings. She suggests that the particular interactional organization of mediation is the underlying reason for the success of this non-adversarial mode of conflict

resolution. Specifically, she highlights the participation framework and the turn-taking system. The participation framework of ordinary conversation holds no restrictions on who can be addressed. Thus, it is possible for disputants to directly address each other. Furthermore, in ordinary conversation, turn-taking is not predetermined, allowing a disputant to create aggravated opposition by placing a disagreement sequentially next to what is being disagreed with through self-selecting or being selected by another. In this way, a conflict episode can be extended since accusations may lead to counter-accusations or counter-assertions or denials. As Garcia notes, denials, being preferred second parts to accusations, are "produced without the delay that might allow accusers to repair or mitigate accusations" (1991, p. 821).

Kotthoff (1993) also shares the perspective that systematic deviations from the preference pattern found during argumentative episodes can lead to further disagreement. She suggests that the first exchange in a conflict talk episode does follow and display the features of the dispreferred format but after this, the "context specifications" change (p. 195) and disputants (re)orient themselves to further disagreement (as evidenced by the reduction of reluctance markers). This orientation to defending their position prolongs the conflict talk episode: "When the context of argumentation is established, it is no longer preferred to agree. On the contrary, it seems very important to contradict quickly and in a coherent manner" (p. 203). Goodwin's (1990) analysis of children's conflict talk demonstrated aggravated disagreement, as noted already, and this also enabled participants to sustain and promote conflict talk.

However, Dersley and Wootton (2000) claim that we cannot yet accept that argument shows a reversal of preference vis a vis agreement. They note that the notion of a simple prevailing constraint is simplistically drawn mainly from research on children, institutional discourse, and a restricted range of speech activities. In addition, they highlight that Pomerantz's (1984) proposal of a preference for agreement for most utterance types relates to "first assessments" of complaints, brags, etc, and not necessarily to all types of complaints or brags[5]. If a simple preference for agreement has not yet been satisfactorily established, then the notion of a reversal of preference in conflict talk is premature too. This seems plausible since conflict talk episodes do not seem to proceed in a linear manner with constant disagreement. Kotthoff (1993) speculates that it "takes some accountable effort" (p. 213) for participants to alter the preference structure of disagreement once it has started. However, there often are interspersed turns within an episode where disagreement is formulated in line with the preference for agreement (e.g., see the conflict talk data in Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998, as well as Dersley & Wootton, 2000, 2001; Lee & Peck, 1995). The context of focus group discussions (Myers, 1998) also exhibits variation in preference structure. Participants often do mark disagreement as dispreferred but there are times when disagreement seems allowable and encouraged. Myers points to the difference in responses to other participants (where disagreement is mitigated) and responses to the moderator (where disagreement can be bald and unmitigated).

The interactional structure of conflict talk has also been explained in relation to the notion of face. Based on Goffman's notion of face or public identity (1967), Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that there are universals in face wants: negative face, i.e., the desire to be unimpeded by others, and positive face, the desire to be wanted and needed by others. In this framework, disagreement is considered an inherently face-threatening act (FTA) since disagreeing with someone threatens that person's positive face (Wood & Kroger, 1994).

Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) suggest that the regularities found in three-turn argument exchanges are primarily determined by participants' attempts at doing facework. These three-

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[5] Pomerantz notes some other specific exceptions, such as responses to compliments and self-deprecations.

turn argument exchanges consist of Turn 1, in which Speaker A makes a claim, Turn 2, in which Speaker B disputes this claim, and finally Turn 3, in which Speaker A either directly supports his Turn 1 claim or directly disagrees with Speaker 2's Turn 2 disagreement. The authors examined 164 naturally occurring exchanges of this type and propose that, contrary to Turn 3 being primarily determined by the Turn 2 (as would be expected if conversation is locally organized on a turn by turn basis), the regularities found in Turn 2-Turn 3 sequences are due to participants' concerns with face issues. These concerns are organized along an "aggravation-mitigation continuum" (p. 243) of disagreement acts. The degree of face aggravation of Turn 2 determines the orientation of Turn 3 so that the more Turn 2 damages Speaker A's face, the more likely is it that Speaker A, in Turn 3, will reply with an act oriented to Turn 1 in order to lend more support to his Turn 1 claim. This is certainly interesting support for their theoretical premise that regularities in conversational structure are associated with regularities in social structure. However, the correlation discussed may be a particular feature of non-antagonistic conversations. The authors do note that a different pattern would emerge if Speaker A adopts a tit for tat strategy, i.e., retaliation for the face damage suffered in Turn 2. Given that this would undermine the personal relationships between the participants, the authors reject this possibility for their family conversation data.

Whether the FTA framework is an adequate one for interpreting conflict talk is debatable. Face itself may not be universally definable (Gu, 1990; Matsumoto, 1988) and so the FTA is inextricably tied to the contextual aspects of the speech event in which the act occurs. Dersley and Wootton (2001) have criticized the use of the notion of face in understanding argumentative sequences. The interpretation of a conversational act is at least partly a function of the properties of the sequence from which it arises rather than wholly a function of some intrinsic property of the particular act. Although conversation analysts regard preference organization as a structural feature of the talk and not related to internal desires or wants, many linguistic markings of disagreements as dispreferred responses bear resemblance to politeness strategies (Holtgraves, 1997). The debate is beyond the scope of this paper, yet the cultural and interpersonal aspects of preference seem too obvious to be ignored.

Goals and Aims

Rather than assuming that argument is a repair mechanism utilized to resolve underlying conflict, researchers have reported situations where this does not seem to be the case. In particular, studies of children involved in conflict talk demonstrate how they often do not take up opportunities for resolution but instead continue in their efforts to maintain the dispute (Corsaro & Rizzo, 1990; Genishi & di Paolo, 1982; Goodwin, 1990; Maynard, 1985). A common interpretation is that instead of being a tool for conflict resolution, the display of aggravated disagreement is an important feature of peer culture.

The significance of culture is also present in the idea that argument is an index of sociability for some groups. Schiffrin's highly influential (1984) study of disagreements between her American-Jewish informants presents a picture of argument as non-serious and cooperative. She goes on to claim there is a cultural preference in Jewish talk for the use of argument for interactional ends other than the resolution of conflict. She draws on Simmel's (1908/1955) distinction between the form and content of social relations. This distinction is seen in sociability, a form of social life where substantive meanings are suspended. Schiffrin presents

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four main factors to show that the arguments are sociable[6]: a prevalent preference for disagreement even if topic is not inherently disputable; fluid argumentative frames so that arguments are unpredictable in initiation and termination; a surface form of competition and threats to self covering the underlying cooperation; and a positive evaluation by participants of disagreements. Other studies have supported this sociable view of argument, e.g., Hewitt, Duchan and Segal (1993) found that arguments functioned as a positive source of social interaction for mentally retarded residents of a group home.

However, aside from the obvious criticism that cultural generalizations of discourse strategies of homogenous and static cultural groups are too simplistic, there are also criticisms leveled at Schiffrin's identification of sociability. Lee and Peck (1995) do not dispute the existence of arguing for its own sake but present data to show that the presence of the four specific features said to mark sociability are also found in arguments that are not sociable. They observe that factors aside from sociability may account for the apparent pleasure taken in conflict talk by some individuals or groups, such as the (albeit temporary) experience of power and domination. Stein and Albro (2001) also suggest that issues of power, control and dominance may "guide much of the seemingly irrational behavior that occurs in arguments".

Maynard (1985) shows how elementary school children form alliances in disagreements with individuals they disagree with to gain power and control in reading groups. Power and the affective quality of relationships are posited as significant factors in children's arguments with their siblings, friends and mothers (Dunn, 1996). Goodwin (1990) points to the importance in conflict talk of the creation and ratification of social organizational structures, such as hierarchy and command, and consequently the significance of how participants are portrayed and constituted in interaction. It is not surprising therefore, that her data from the talk of urban black boys playing on the street, demonstrates how opposition in their conflict talk is often directed towards the general competence of other boys. Through opposition, the participants can interactively construct roles and identities for themselves and others. Hence the notion of power cannot be only equated with winning an argument. Indeed, there may be other more compelling goals for the participants. Such complex factors have yet to be satisfactorily examined within discourse analysis.

Resources and Devices

Since the resources that are available to participants in conflict talk are those of communicative competence (Hymes, 1974), it would be an impossible and pointless task to make an exhaustive list of the ways in which speakers could continue a conflict talk episode once it has started. This section seeks to highlight some of the resources and devices that are predominant in the literature.

As noted before, opposition or disagreement is signaled in the second part turn. Participants cannot only connect back to the action of the previous speaker, but can also display

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[6] Schiffrin acknowledges that there are two other possible interpretations of her data. Firstly, the arguments are in fact serious with her presence being "protection against repercussions". However, the dispute topics do not seem to support this interpretation. Secondly, the arguments are real but have stabilized into routines and their display is a sign of solidarity. Schiffrin posits that such explanations are not as persuasive as sociability.

opposition across turns via format tying[7]. This is the strategic use of phonological, syntactic, and semantic surface structure features of previous talk turns. In other words, format tying is a means by which subsequent argumentative moves are related back to prior moves by reusing materials in those previous moves. Examples are exact repetition, embedding prior talk in a new sentence, and contrast replacement (Goodwin, 1990, p. 178-185). Corsaro and Maynard (1996) demonstrate that although all three groups of children (Italian preschoolers, African-American Head Start preschoolers, and middle/upper middle class white preschoolers) in their study use format tying, there are differences in their nature leading to different argumentation trajectories.

Goodwin and Goodwin (1990, p. 97) make an interesting distinction between topic and content, where topic relates to the underlying coherence of a sequence. This allows for an argument to encompass talk about a range of different subjects but still be coherent. It plays a role in escalation since an argument started on one issue can develop to include many more, and the conflict episode does not necessarily terminate when there is a shift in content. The shift may not necessarily be to a completely different subject matter. Justifications or explanations given by a speaker can lead to further argumentation (Boggs, 1978; Goodwin, 1990) if the focus of the conflict talk moves to arguing about the justification itself. This phenomenon of escalation through attempts at closure underscores the fundamental collaborative interactivity between participants in conducting and terminating a dispute.

Communicative style has already been touched upon in the discussion of argument as sociability. An explicit comparison of different groups' conflict talk styles is seen in Corsaro and Rizzo's (1990) cross-cultural study of children in Italian and American preschools. As may be expected the children shared similar ways of initiating disputes, and argued over the same issues but the data also presented some cultural differences. The main difference is the extent to which verbal disputes occurred and their importance: the 'discussione' produced and enjoyed by Italian children was a central feature of their peer culture, and apparently engaged in as an end in itself when compared to American children conflicts. However in both cases, disputes played a positive role in terms of communicative competence development and the acquisition of social knowledge.

Given that there are cultural differences in how conflict talk is conducted, it follows that arguments, in essence miscommunication, can result from a lack of skills in understanding interpretive conventions or a mismatch in communicative styles (Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 1990b). In addition to group differences, individual differences in communicative styles may also have an impact on how a conflict episode progresses. For example, verbal aggressiveness may escalate conflicts. Infante and Rancer (1996) review the literature on two traits of aggressive communication: argumentativeness (attacking the positions that others take on given issues), and verbal aggressiveness (attacking the self-concepts of others rather than their positions). They note that the work to date is primarily from a psychological perspective with an emphasis on the individual, particularly in terms of self-perceptions and perceptions of others. Thus, very little is known in terms of how the discourse of people who exhibit argumentativeness differs from that of non-argumentatives, and the effect on conflict talk episodes, e.g., do some participants have a tendency to escalate arguments, and others diffuse them? This seems a fruitful area for interdisciplinary research.

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[7] This type of strategy comes to light through micro analysis of the data, and may not be possible if one takes the position, as Labov and Fanshel (1977) do, that surface elements do not impact sequencing rules.

Rather than seeing differences in communicative style as the *cause* for (unintentional) misunderstandings, some researchers see them as a resource that interlocutors can deliberately draw upon for their own goals. An example is presented in Kallmeyer and Keim's (1996) study of a community association meeting. They propose that speakers can use their different communicative styles for political action, to polarize their own position and that of others. Here, communicative style is defined as "various features of verbal and non verbal behavior such as phonological variation, patterns of syntactical structures, special meanings of lexical items, formulaic speech, pragmatic rules of politeness, special ways of conflict management" (p. 271). The main speaker, an outsider to the group, is perceived as having an authoritarian manner, and the authors characterize his conflict management style as implicit and indirect, consisting of allusions to the cause of conflict (by semantically weak terms, phonological and prosodic cues, and an ironic and sarcastic tone) to indirectly express a negative evaluation of others. Despite realizing that his conflict talk style is different, he employs it without modification. The authors claim that this "is part of a handling of perspective differences which leads to a mutual exclusion of standpoints" (p. 286).

A resource that appears particularly central to conflict talk is the participants' abilities to deliberately manipulate the 'key' (Hymes, 1974), 'keying' or 'framing' (Goffman, 1974) of the ongoing interaction (Grimshaw, 1990). Framing (or more exactly, reframing) seems to be central in how conflict talk develops in terms of escalation or diffusion. The argument frame can be broken by the absence of a tie or connection to the previous turn, by a topic change or other action. Playful or metaphorical frame switches can be used as techniques for attempting closure in children's conflicts (Goodwin, 1990), and other numerous examples of frame breaks can be found in adult conflict talk data (e.g., Lee & Peck, 1995; Schiffrin, 1984). Jacquemet (2001) discusses two significant devices used by participants to intentionally shift contextual frames: contextualization strategies and metapragmatic awareness. Contextualization strategies are those practices that "both produce representations of the social world in accordance with a given ideology and seek to persuade others to comply with these representations" (p. 38). Metapragmatic awareness allows participants to construct particular participation frameworks, and the relationship between the participants, and their relative status and stance, that such frameworks entail. Both are powerful practices used to seek interactional control.

Lee (1997) proposes the Cognitive Grammar notions of frame, profiling and radiality as being useful discourse analysis tools. The notion of frame varies from that used in the ethnography of communication (where the frame is the key of activity being engaged in, e.g., joking) or in interactional sociolinguistics (where the frame is used for the interpretation of utterances and is signaled through contextualization cues). The cognitive frame relates to the "conceptual structures invoked by individual words and the concepts they denote" (p. 340). Profiling relates to foregrounding an element within the frame, and radiality describes how the same linguistic unit can be used to refer to situations that are different yet remain connected by a central or prototypical meaning. His demonstration of the usefulness of these concepts in analyzing conflict episodes is convincing, i.e., how "certain linguistic units may invoke clusters of meanings (frames) for one person that are quite different from those evoked for another – such framings being a function of the particular experience of the individual language user" (p. 355), and this lack of congruence is a source of misunderstandings and possibly the escalation of conflict talk. However, Lee does not fully address the potential for the deliberate use of this lack of congruence in frames as a means to escalate or diffuse conflict.

Although Mehan (1990) does not explicitly utilize framing as a theoretical concept, his analysis of a psychiatric review meeting highlights the significance of socially constructed definitions of a situation. He shows how there may be competing but unequal definitions of the same event (by the doctor and the other members of the review board, and the patient) and how eventually the conflict comes to be defined by those with institutional power (i.e., the doctor), and hence resolved within the context of that definition. This role of the fundamental difference in perspectives is likewise seen in Maoz and Ellis's (2001) analysis of the phenomenon of "going to ground" in Israeli-Jewish encounter group arguments. The participants attempt to build a favorable version of social reality, to serve their rhetorical goals, by the tactical use of argument strategies, such as limiting the topical space. The authors show how the arguments reach an impasse when participants reach 'ground', i.e., when they declare, "that's the way things are" (p. 412).

Other common strategies studied that continue the dispute or lead to its escalation are recycling positions by sustained contradiction (Goodwin, 1990, p. 158), the use of nonspecific proof strategies (Goodwin, 1990, p. 165) such as betting, claiming shared perspectives with others, or finding inconsistencies in the other participant's talk, finding personal fault with the other (Dersley & Wootton, 2001), the use of rhetorical questions (Brenneis, 1988; Tagaki, 1999), and highly face aggravating responses such as irrelevancy claims and challenges (Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998).

Sociological Variables

The achievement of power and the impact on the affective aspect of relationships have already been noted as possible goals in conflict talk. Furthermore, such variables may impact the form or nature of conflict talk. For example, Rees-Miller (2000) posits that Brown and Levinson's factors of power and severity of offense influence the choice of strategies in disagreements though in addition other complex factors, in particular the importance of the situational context, are at work. Positive politeness may also play a role in minimizing disagreement episodes (Holtgraves, 1997). Grimshaw (1990) proposes that power and affect constitute principal *constraints* in conflict talk, e.g., the greater the discrepancy in power between participants, the less likely the participant with greater power will be challenged. Even if they are challenged, the conflict is likely to be more indirect, of lower intensity, and more overtly neutral. He also claims "positive and negative affect may have superficially similar effects on conflict and its course in conflict talk" (p. 300) and provides an example of a couple whose lack of conflict may reflect their high positive affect of a strong harmonious relationship, or the low affect of a weak relationship unable to withstand disagreement. Although power and affect are important considerations in the orientation of participants to conflict talk, it seems that Grimshaw's position reflects a somewhat static and structural approach to discourse. The *a priori* assumption of the importance of particular variables is, of course, a matter of long and contentious debate.

One variable that will be discussed here, as it has been examined in some depth in the conflict literature, is gender. As in the wider debate on gender differences in language use, there are many positions espoused on the differences between male and female conflict talk. However, researchers who report significant differences between the conflict talk of genders are, not suprisingly, believers of gender differences in language use in general. Tannen (1998), when

comparing agonism (conventionalized aggression or being combative for the sake of it) with literal aggression (fighting for something you truly believe in) observes that women are less likely or apt to do the former. Lee and Peck's (1995) data also indicate possible gender influences, in that the male participant seems to enjoy the arguments in his family. In contrast, Rees-Miller (2000, p. 1106) indicates that gender is not an influence on the rate of disagreement or the use of softeners of disagreement. However, there is some suggestion in the findings that men may be more likely to use aggravated disagreement than women. Goodwin's (1990) in-depth study of the talk of children playing in the street provides evidence that boys and girls have access to similar ways of arguing. Some studies only focus on one gender. Unlike the majority of studies on female adolescents that examine conflict expressed indirectly through gossip, Eder (1990) looks at direct confrontation. She examined interactions between white female adolescents in school cafeterias at lunchtime, focusing on the different types of communication skills (e.g., how to resolve conflict, and how to deal with distress) that are learned through conflict exchanges. She finds that there is increasing competence in these skills with age.

TERMINATING CONFLICT TALK

Once a dispute has begun, there may be disincentives for bringing it to a termination. The very factors discussed previously that play a role in the escalation of conflict talk obviously play a complementary role in hindering de-escalation and termination. At the beginning of this paper, it was proposed that the governing feature of conflict talk was that participants had different positions on the same issue. Given this, movement towards the same position would appear to be the primary form of termination, and, indeed, this is the underlying premise of much of the literature and practices of conflict resolution. A participant's change in position or perspective can be displayed or signaled by a change-of-state token (Heritage, 1984), e.g., "oh", some type of repair (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1977), e.g., "I mean", or acknowledgement of the other participant's position, e.g., "well", "I know, but" (Goodwin, 1990).

However, early work on conflict talk overestimated the extent to which resolution was present in endings. This was mainly a consequence of the data collection methods used. For example, Eisenberg and Garvey (1981) conducted role plays in a laboratory setting. More recent studies of naturally occurring data appear to show that the resolution of the manifest or central issue is not often accomplished, and participants do not reach agreement. Although resolution may not be reached, participants need to, on some level, collaborate in order to bring the conflict episode (if not the actual conflict) to an end. This collaboration may take a variety of forms. An excellent example of the variety of instances of termination is reported by Vuchinich (1990). In his analysis of American family disputes at dinnertime, he observed five main formats: submission where one participant accepts the other's position, dominant party intervention where the disputants submit to a third party, compromise where one participant offers a concession which is then accepted, stand-off in which there is no submission or compromise, and finally, withdrawal, either from the verbal conflict or physically from the environment (see also Dersley & Wootton, 2001). The most common termination in the data was the standoff, and Vuchinich proposes that this is because stand-offs allow for closure without loss of face. However, one would expect that the termination of a conflict talk episode is highly dependent on the context in which the episode takes place. In classroom disputes, children may not need to resolve conflicts on their own because teacher intervention is available (Genishi & di Paolo, 1982). So, in

Vuchinich's study, although face appears to be an important variable in how the disputes come to a close, it should be noted that, in the specific context of a family dispute, face may not be as significant a factor as power or affect. For example, the most predominant form of third party intervention in the family disputes was parental.

The presence and role of a third party in termination of a conflict talk episode seems to be a key contextual element. However, although third parties are often present in conflict data, there is not a great deal of literature explicitly considering their role in termination. One area where third party intervention is central is within the conflict resolution field. For example, in mediation settings, the third party, or mediator, is seen as taking a neutral position in order to help the participants resolve their dispute[8]. However, there are few studies that carry out microanalyses of the actual interactions between mediators and disputants. One example is Greatbatch and Dingwall's (1997) work on exits from arguments in sessions at an independent divorce mediation agency in the UK. They report on how mediators did help de-escalate arguments in a variety of ways, e.g., through seeking clarification, shifting topics, negatively sanctioning the participants. However, they often passed on opportunities to do so. Unlike Garcia (1991) who highlighted the interactional organization of the mediation (in terms of turn-taking and the participation framework) in limiting verbal conflict, Greatbatch and Dingwall demonstrate that the disputants often initiated de-escalation themselves and that these practices are generic and present in everyday conversation. Similar to findings in other studies, the participants did not generally move towards agreement when ending a conflict talk episode, but tried to exit without submitting or making concessions. For example, they would not take their turn to speak which implies a withdrawal but at the same time, deflects blame (p. 157-161). What does differ from conflict talk in conversation is that participants orientate themselves to the mediator's role as a neutral facilitator, rather than a potentially partisan third party. They do not attempt to 'win' the mediator over to their side, nor do they directly ask the mediator for his/her view. This insightful study draws attention to how conflict talk practices in institutionalized settings and everyday conversation show a degree of similarity but that they are also context sensitive[9], and that general conclusions as to their nature cannot be drawn until the context has been clearly explicated and understood.

An interesting example of the withdrawal format is the unilateral walkout (Dersley & Wootton, 2001). A withdrawal is not technically an ending of an argument since it "set[s] up an expectation that, on some next occasion, the nature of the division will need to be readdressed" (p. 613). It is also an extremely emotionally charged situation, and although the relationship between emotion and conflict is no doubt of great significance to conflict talk, there has been little systematic work in this area of discourse analysis. From their analysis, Dersley and Wootton posit that walkouts are preceded by participant complaints of personal deficiencies in the other that are both harmful and generic, and as the conflict episode escalates, they concentrate on faults in current behavior as examples of generic behavior. While their analysis is not fully developed, it is an excellent beginning into understanding acrimonious and antagonistic conflict talk.

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[8] Issues such as the neutrality of the mediator, and the efficacy of mediation compared to other methods of resolution (e.g., adjudication) are not examined here, but have been topics of controversy in recent years.
[9] For example, in Garcia's (1991) study, the mediator had the power to impose a binding decision. This may obviously have impacted the participants' willingness to accept the turn-taking allocation system as it was.

CONCLUSION

The diversity of scope and analysis of research at the interface of conflict interaction and discourse analysis is an indication of the complexity of conflict talk phenomena. In progressing from laboratory studies and role plays to investigations of situated conflict discourse, the field is showing a greater interest in the context of talk, and has begun to combine a focus on interactional agendas and outcomes by considering identity construction and negotiation, socialization, social organization (instead of a sole concern with winning or resolving the argument), with an analysis of the mechanisms and resources for accomplishing talk by investigating the processes of interpretation or disambiguation[10] (and not only an analysis of the observable structural features). Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the current body of research is somewhat fragmented, producing studies that are often not theoretically cumulative and not methodologically systematic.

The issue of data is an important one. Studies to date indicate that different types of conflict talk will generate different features, e.g., conflict talk about the future (Georgakopoulou, 2001; Lee & Peck, 1995), and talk regarding the truth of propositions (Schiffrin, 1984). Grimshaw (1990) identifies the problem of 'missing data'. For example, there is relatively little data on conflict talk between individuals or groups displaying large power and/or status differentials, or conflict talk where there are high stakes involved. Until such work is more commonplace, one cannot propose that current findings are transferable to situations of greater social complexity.

It is apparent that the data dilemma will not easily be overcome. Conflict talk data is, by its nature, sensitive and often difficult to capture as arguments often arise spontaneously. Some researchers have turned to literary sources, e.g., Tannen (1990a), Weizman (1999). While these may be helpful in making salient cultural or situational norms, they do not constitute naturally occurring interaction. One data source that has been recently utilized in an effort to tap into "missing data" is real life television documentaries (Dersley & Wootton, 2001; Lee & Peck, 1995). There are problems with such sources: The presence of the camera may influence the participants' behavior and talk, and editing may hinder the analysis and interpretation of the discourse. However, these problems are not insurmountable. Time blunts the impact of the outside observer, and careful selection of unedited portions can be made. The benefits of access to such conflict talk and the added benefit of the visual information captured on video seem to outweigh the possible problems.

Despite the complexity of conflict talk, researchers should not seek to artificially reduce the phenomenon for analytical purposes. It would be a difficult and misconceived task to try and find its "objective" features (Lee & Peck, 1995). In remembering Nelson's (2001) call to recognize the highly context dependent nature of conflict talk, we should seek opportunities for more systematic research into a variety of local interactional contexts.

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[10] Grimshaw (1990, p. 281) notes that conversation analysis purists would disagree with this.

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