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Discourse and Conflict

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Introduction

In the past, the linguistic means of conducting **conflict** among adults did not receive much attention in either linguistic or anthropological linguistic research, in part because conflict constitutes a type of **“disorderly discourse.”** Only recently has conflict generated much-needed interest which has provided us with some new **insights and directions.** Initially, researchers focused on **the structural properties** of arguments or disputes, but gradually the focus shifted to more **contextual strategies,** and more recently, scholars are investigating **how the self or selves is or are constituted through conflict and how ideology is constructed and reflected through conflict talk.** What will be discussed here are:

- (1) The structural properties of conflict.
- (2) The communicative strategies of conducting conflict.
- (3) Conflict negotiation and resolution.
- (4) The meanings of conflict.

1. Structural Properties of Conflict

Some studies center on **the structure of disputes or arguments and their components,** others investigate **the sequential organization of disagreement, and its status in social interaction.** Almost no study limits itself to examining just the structural properties of conflict, but what these studies share is their interest in **unearthing how conflict or disagreement is initiated and how it develops.**

One of the earlier studies on children’s conflict found that the children’s argumentative sequences fell into **three structural patterns: repetition, escalation, and inversion.** It also identified **“stylistic tactics”** (suprasegmental elements) that characterized the tone of the children’s exchanges. **A reciprocal redundancy was noted between content and style. *The shorter and more repetitive the content exchange, the more stylistically elaborate it was. Conversely, the more semantically complex exchanges were not stylistically elaborate.***

A subsequent study, investigated whether the features of arguments observed would be used **crossculturally,** so arguments in three speech communities are examined. **No significant differences were found in terms of content and**

style of disputes among the three different communities, even though there was some variation regarding the use of stress.

The three communities, however, **differed in their organization of arguments, particularly in the turn-taking system.** (The Indian children showed a much higher tolerance for overlapping talk than did the black children. White children showed organization patterns similar to those of the black students.)

The development of verbal disputing in children from their childhood to their adolescence was also examined. This study found that a pattern of disputing – **direct contradiction prefaced by “not” – was very pervasive among children of different age;** he called it a **“contradicting routine.”** **Contradicting routines started with assertions, challenges, and threats followed by contradiction, and then by another round of assertions or challenges or insults.** If an insult was followed by a counter insult, the dispute was likely to end.

However the pattern seemed to be turning into what he called **“situational joking,”** *where disputants would end up laughing with each other.*

Maynard (1985a) focused on **what constitutes an oppositional move besides a verbal action.** Maynard shows that **bodily and presuppositional claims are integral parts of an oppositional move.** However, Maynard claims an **oppositional move** does not always prompt **a dispute**, so he calls such a move **“argumentative”**.

Contrary to studies which argued that **disagreement is usually prefaced or mitigated,** children were found to use several lexical, syntactic, and phonological properties to initiate and sustain an opposition. This form of **disagreement which enhances polarity is termed “aggravated.”** This type of opposition was also found in studies among adults.

Another type of turn is **“dispreferred-action turn shape” which is not “oriented to” the talk as it was “invited” to be.** These dispreferred actions are structurally marked, displaying what it is called **“dispreference” features** such as *“delays, requests for clarification, partial repeats, and other repair initiators, and turn prefaces”*. When conversants feel that they are expected to agree with an assessment, yet disagree, they usually express their disagreement with some form of delay.

2. Communicative Strategies of Conducting Conflict

The researchers' interest is exploring not just **textual features of conflict or argument** but **discourse-level phenomena** as well, including *irony, joking, stories, reported speech, etc.* Some studies examine **macro- and microcontextual factors** to determine the effect they have on the oppositional strategies chosen; for instance, **cultural interactional rules, style, and gender, as well as speakers' interactional goals.** Schiffirin (1985) focuses on **the organization of an argument**, and she identifies two types of arguments: **rhetorical and oppositional.** By *rhetorical* she refers to a *“discourse through which a speaker presents an intact monologue supporting a disputable position.”* *Oppositional* is defined as *“discourse through which one or more speakers support openly disputed positions”.* She finds that both types of arguments share the same discourse properties in that a speaker, in order to support his or her position, will try to undermine another speaker's..

There are three types of **persuasive strategies: quasilogic, presentation, and analogy.** *Quasilogic is based on the assumption that persuasion can be achieved by using a type of informal reasoning. Presentation involves the processes of moving and involving the listener in order to persuade. Finally, analogical persuasion is based on the assumption that “by calling to mind, explicitly or implicitly, traditional wisdom, often in the form of parable (advice)- or fablelike stories”.* These three strategies are then mapped onto **three corresponding styles based on “conceptual correlates.”** Certain styles correlate with certain persuasive strategies, which speakers choose depending on the context

The quasilogic style seems to be dominant in western culture but not exclusively. Presentational and analogical styles correspond to eastern cultures, and especially, to the older and more religious tradition.

Though these broad correspondences between strategies, style, and culture, this does not mean that culture will determine linguistic choices made in rhetorical situations. Instead culture may predispose people toward a particular strategy. **Therefore, it is believed that cross-cultural misunderstandings have their root not merely in different styles but instead in people's failure to adapt to and understand different persuasive strategies.**

Silence has been found to be a strategy used in conflict talk either to disengage from or to intensify a conflict. *Silence is comparable to extreme noise in some cases.* People may opt for silence rather than confront someone when the

potential for conflict is high. In contrast, they prefer direct confrontation for trivial forms of conflict. British playwrights tend to mask *negative emotion* by the use of *pauses and silence*, whereas American writers have their characters “*express strong negative emotion loudly and explicitly*”.

Regarding overall *argumentative strategies*, Participants in the sociable arguments among friends employed several forms of aggravating disagreement. Formulaic expressions, initiations of disagreement, uncooperative interruption, and wh-questions with partial repetitions and substitutions marked forthcoming disagreement. In the parliamentary interpellations, sarcasm and accusatory questions were added to the list of forms and types of disagreement.

The *linguistic strategies* of engaging in conflict were in one culture *direct disagreements* sometimes accompanied by *figurative kinship terms, contrastive repetition, sarcasm, personalization of an argument, accounts, and stories*. And in other culture are *formulaic expressive adverbials, repetition, code-switching, silence, and personal experience stories among others*.

Four major *types of disagreement* have been identified, ranked from most to least aggravated: *irrelevancy claims, challenges, contradictions, and counterclaims*..

Gender is a *factor contributing to the emergence of specific patterns of oppositional discourse*. Studies report that African American boys’ and girls’ argumentative strategies tend to be rather similar in many ways, but she also observes some qualitative differences. *Girls have argumentative skills equal to the boys’ but the girls also use some more extended types of arguments than the boys*. One of them is what she terms “*he-said-she-said*,” a type of accusation behind someone’s back.

Boys use stories to sustain a dispute, and they alter their participation framework according to a social hierarchy. In contrast, girls employ stories to transform the alignments of the participants. Sheldon (1996) refers to a discourse strategy that she has termed “*double-voice discourse*,” *a type in which the speakers orient themselves toward the addressees’ interests and goals*. While *girls engage in this type of discourse, which manifests itself as both mitigation and concern for self-interest*. In contrast, *boys employ “single-voice” discourse, which is characterized by direct and aggravated forms of talk*.

Boys and men tend to engage in direct confrontations or use opposition as a way of negotiating status, whereas girls and women tend to seek at least overt expression of agreement and avoid direct confrontations.

Women expressed disagreement indirectly, off-record, using delays, hedges, and pre-disagreement tokens, which were followed by weak disagreements. Women tended to use more upgraders, and they accompanied their disagreement with qualifications and accounts. Men, however, usually used interturn delays, in the form of either silence or insertion sequences, and they postponed their disagreement over several turns.

In another medium, computer-mediated communication, *women* posting messages on e-mail lists *tend to disagree by cushioning (put) their disagreements with affiliative comments, posing questions rather than making assertions*. In contrast, *men* posters *tend to use an adversarial style (putting down a participant while promoting their own claims)*. Both men and women are more interested in exchanging views than information.

3. Conflict Negotiation and Resolution

Children rarely used “*nonadaptive*” strategies, that is, *insistence, repetition, or paraphrase of their utterance*. Instead they *employed “adaptive” strategies, such as supporting their moves with reasoning, justifications, and requests for clarification to resolve their conflicts*.

Maynard (1986) focuses on *multiparty disputes* among children. He points out that *some disputes may start as two-sided, yet end up being multiparty*. Different “parties” may, invited or uninvited, align with a displayed position, stance, claim, or counterposition, and may challenge a particular position . He also found *fluid patterns of collaboration in this type of dispute that depended upon the children’s emergent alignments*.

The claim disputes in Italian data displayed the element of **discussione**, that is, the “**enjoyment of argumentation**,” which they compare to **the aggravated disagreement**. This element also manifested itself in the “dispute routines”. During these routines, Italian children engaged in a “*skillful performance*” to *tease, enacting “complex, stylistic, and aesthetically impressive routines”*. This “**emphasis on style**” characterized all Italian children’s disputes in contrast to the American ones.

Looking at **conflict termination turns**, “stand-off,” *the case where participants drop the issue at stake and change the speech activity, is the most common type of conflict termination*. **Five termination formats are proposed: “submission,” when a participant “gives in” and accepts the participant’s position; “dominant third-party intervention”; “compromise”; “stand-off”; and “withdrawal.”**

Differences by generation were also observed due to power differences (parents versus children), but in some of the arguments that ended with parent–child stand-offs, power was not a prominent factor, since they were sociable arguments

The negotiation of conflict through different activities is the focus of Schiffrin’s (1990) study. She investigates the role of **two speech activities – expressing an opinion and telling a story**. **Opinions were found to have the paradoxical nature of both starting and finishing an argument**. By way of contrast, **stories provided support to a speaker’s claim and invited the audience to share responsibility with the “principal”**.

“Oracular reasoning.” is the strategy of *Maintaining one’s belief or opinion by denying or contesting contradictory evidence in conflict resolution*. This type of strategy is used by both doctors and patients, but it is the doctors’ reasoning that prevails because of their institutional authority.

The role a third party plays in conflict resolution is explored in Maley’s (1995) work. He investigates Australian courts and divorce mediation sessions and finds that *these two different contexts affect the nature and the purpose of the activity and even shape the discursive practices involved*. Whereas the adjudication context of **the court case** lends itself to **direct and powerful intervention by a judge**, **the mediation context is characterized by indirect types of intervention by the mediator**, who lacks both power and authority to control the outcome of the mediation.

Conflict resolution strategies and the way that gender affects the strategies have been investigated in two disputes (one representative triad for each gender) which displayed **different discourse strategies**. The **girls** used patterns of **opposition–insistence–opposition sequences**. However, they also used a variety of means to reach a negotiation (e.g. **reasons**). The **boys’** dispute was much more extended and with more **opposition–insistence–opposition sequences** than the

girls'. *In contrast to the girls' strategies, the boys did not "jointly negotiate a resolution"* even though they did offer some compromises.

Different types of **confrontation and negotiation** of conflict were observed in another study. Focusing on the direct exchanges of conflict, it is found that *teenagers would use several strategies to resolve normative conflict, but the most successful one was the strategy that addressed "the real issues behind the conflict"*. *Eighth graders were found to be the most skillful in handling conflict resolution and insulting exchanges*. Those students belonged to more stable social groups. It is suggested that could be the reason why they felt more comfortable engaging in direct confrontation with their familiar peers. Furthermore, **social class seemed to play a role**, since ritual insulting was more common among students from working and lower classes, where being **"tough"** was more highly regarded than being **"polite."**

4. The Meanings of Conflict

There are **situated, cultural, and social meanings of conflict**. Conflict is viewed in different societies and by different groups. **Status negotiation has been one of the most commonly cited meanings of conflict talk among children and adults. Conflict** among children latently *functions to "develop their sense of social structure and helps reproduce authority, friendship, and other interactional patterns that transcend single episodes of dispute"*.

A clearer association between conflict and status is found. **The reason arguments occur during children's play is because children view argumentative talk as "status assertion."** The use of directives in their play challenges their status and their opposition to these challenges is a means of defending it. An important aspect of the boys' disputes was to establish a dominance hierarchy which helped them frame their role in a relationship (who the leader was) and the outcome of disputes (usually the "tough" one would use physical means and end a dispute). The **ritual brogez ("being in anger")** functions as a form of **"status competition"** among children who belong in the same "social sphere." **Brogez is a type of ritual insult and threat similar to sounding in discourse**, which allows both girls and boys in same-sex groups to vent their anger and hostility through *"ritually constrained interactional channels"*. It is also used as a means to discover social hierarchies (e.g. who has leadership qualities). *Venting one's anger in a nonconfrontational manner or just being antagonistic in ritual insults or verbal duelings has also been reported in other cultures.*

Studies demonstrate that **opposition is positively valued** by certain cultures and subcultures. **Direct confrontation**, which may strike a foreigner as rude, yet has a positive norm in other culture. The speaker's assumption is that a listener "has the strength and integrity required to take the speaker's direct talk as sincere and natural". Schiffrin (1984) provides linguistic and cultural evidence to show that **disagreement** is in some cultures not an action that threatens social interaction, but instead is a form of **sociability**. Building on notion of **sociability**, **sociable argument** is defined as a *"speech activity in which a polarizing form has a ratificatory (true) meaning"*.

Some studies report **a positive evaluation of conflict** in some contexts, for example, in friendly conversations. Other cultures **have not valorized the direct expression of conflict**, among them the Chinese and Japanese, who traditionally view **the open expression of conflict more negatively**.

One of the ritualistic forms of opposition is **agonism, or ritualized opposition** in which the participants used **agonistic stances** such as **explicit expressions of conflict and sustained disagreement, and they rarely compromised**. Only when the interaction became too "hot" did the participants reframe the interaction or change topics.

In summary, conflict has been viewed as a means to negotiate status, in particular among males, and it has been evaluated as either positive or negative, depending on one or more of the following factors: culture, gender, class, or situational context.