1 Introduction

ALLEN D. GRIMSHAW

1. Introduction

Discourse is species specific but pervasive and ubiquitous within our own species – we tend to take it for granted and not to consider it as problematic in ways which are likely to affect our lives very much. Conflict is pervasive and ubiquitous among all living organisms (sentient and non-sentient). We recognize it as threatening both to ourselves and, in extreme manifestations, to our species; we expend massive energy and resources on conflict at the interpersonal (perhaps intrapersonal), intergroup, and international levels and not inconsiderable resources and energies in attempts to understand and control it. This concern with conflict – and particularly with violence – notwithstanding, we have done little to try to understand how discourse and conflict (and violence) may be related among humans. Each of the contributors to this volume has a profound professional interest in how talk in social contexts is employed to get the social accomplished; to varying degrees each is also involved in investigation of “conflict talk” because of hope that such study may help us to understand conflict as a social process and, at some juncture, to control the more dangerous manifestations of conflict which threaten all of us.

This introductory chapter attempts to do three things. The remainder of this introductory section provides background information on our collaborative project. The following section explores the rationale behind studying conflict talk – as an important feature of everyday life, as a source of drama in literature, and as a critical consideration for the maintenance of humanity in the age of nuclear weaponry. The third section is a brief description of what investigators of conflict talk build on and add to in their research, most particularly a long tradition of work on social conflict as a process and, more recently, a literature on discourse analysis and, specifically, on argument, dispute, etc. The final section provides brief overviews of the studies which follow, concentrating on the questions they have addressed – and indicating other questions which either have not or could not be addressed. The book’s
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concluding chapter discusses the findings of the studies, possibilities for
generalization, and directions for further work.

1.1 Background

As a sociologist I have been studying conflict as a social process for some
thirty years; as a student of social control and social accomplishment by
means of talk in social contexts I have been engaged in the analysis of
discourse for the last twenty. While there are long and rich traditions of both
theoretical and empirical sociological work on social conflict, when I began
trying to combine my interests in social conflict and discourse about ten
years ago there was only a handful of pioneering studies on the topic (e.g.,
Brenneis and Lein, 1977; W. Labov, 1972a and 1972b; W. Labov and
Fanshel, 1977; Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan, 1975), none of which directly
focused on conflict talk. However, by the time I started to talk about this book
in the early 1980s with the colleagues who have joined me in writing it,
there was a rich and growing literature on conflict talk which included
contributions by anthropologists, lawyers, linguists, psychologists, and
sociologists — fields which are represented in this volume. A recent literature
review by Brenneis (1988) includes references to over 200 items on “lan-
guage and disputing.”

Over the last fifteen years there has been an exponential increase in
publications analyzing spoken discourse. This work, which has engaged the
attention of sociologists as well as scholars in disciplines more traditionally
interested in discourse studies (i.e., humanists, linguists, and natural lan-
guage philosophers), has increasingly focused on naturally occurring con-
versation. It has often focused also on social interaction which has
important consequences for participants, i.e., events in bureaucratic, educa-
tional, legal, medical, and work settings. Conflict occurs in each of these
settings as well as in less formal interaction in families, friendship groups,
and casual encounters, and many investigators have considered conflict in
the talk they have studied. However, there has been surprisingly little
research on the special features of “conflict talk.” One of the purposes of this
volume is to address this deficiency in the discourse analytic literature.

The anthropologists, linguists, and sociologists whose chapters appear
here include many of the discourse analysts who have attended specifically
to conflict talk in their own past work. An attempt has also been made,
however, to provide a sampling of theoretical perspectives, of methods, of
foci of interest in different dimensions of talk, of types of participants, of
scenes (or settings) of interaction, and of conflict topics. There are also
differences in the nature of the data sets examined, which include both audio
and/or video (or film) records of conflict talk, transcripts, ethnographic
records of varying extensiveness and, in one instance, dramatic scriptings.
There is a generally accepted belief that dispute modes vary developmentally, by gender, by participant relations of affect and of power, and by the nature of the matter under dispute. For this reason, an attempt has been made to maximize variability in the personal and role-specific characteristics of whose conflict talk is examined in these studies: conflict-talk participants include small children, adolescents, children of varying ages interacting with each other and with adults, and adults with different relations of power and of affect pursuing quite different sorts of goals. The settings of the events studied include nursery schools, a junior high school cafeteria, the streets, domestic kitchens, living rooms, a meeting room in a municipal utility, a food co-op, courts, and a therapist’s office. It will be seen that there are differences in disputes involving different kinds of participants in different settings and with different interactional goals; it will also be seen that there are significant similarities and identifiable underlying dimensions in all the conflict talk studied. We suspect that these similarities and underlying dimensions are not all specific to conflict talk in English-speaking North America, but limitations of space have kept us from including reports of comparative material. (Chapter 2 identifies some non-trivial differences between the disputes of American and Italian pre-schoolers.)

2. Why study conflict talk?

Conflict talk is at the same time so complex a phenomenon and one so deeply implicated in every dimension of human social life that it would be possible to identify dozens of reasons why it should be a focus of systematic inquiry; by the same token one would be left wondering why its study has been so neglected. For present purposes I will identify and comment on only four of the many reasons why we study conflict talk — and will leave the question of its neglect to others. My four reasons are: (1) disciplinary development, that is, specification of theoretical and methodological issues in the relevant social science disciplines, in linguistics, and in sociolinguistics — and of directions of research which may help in answering questions generated by that specification; (2) development of humanistic studies, that is, specification of theoretical and methodological issues in relevant specialties in the humanities, for example, comparative literature and/or critical studies in drama, fiction, and poetry; (3) improved theoretical understanding and empirical knowledge of specific substantive areas such as (in the studies following): child and adolescent socialization, race and ethnic relations, labor relations, language and law, etc.; (4) socially relevant applications on the interpersonal (and, perhaps, intrapersonal), intra-institutional, community, and international levels. I can do no more than to sketch some of the main points which would need to be covered in a full discussion of these four reasons.
2.1 Disciplinary development

Social scientists are interested in specification of the operation of conflict as a social process and in optimal ways of engaging in that specification. Linguists want to known how language works and, depending upon their own theoretical orientation, how that “working” can be specified formally or in terms of pragmatic functions. The final chapter of this book suggests some preliminary answers to the question of how study of conflict talk can lead to both more refined and better-documented understanding of the sociological dimension of social conflict as a process. As the studies here show, some questions, such as “What are the circumstances/conditions under which conflict talk is likely to occur?” are of such generality that it has been possible to posit some (possibly “testable”) propositions. Other questions, such as the nature of conflict groups or the role of third parties in conflict talk (and conflict more broadly), are visible clearly in only some of the studies following.

I have for some years employed a heuristic distinction between (1) social-interactional rules governing social behavior within social structures having such features as role, hierarchy, exchange requirements and (2) sociolinguistic rules governing the use of resources of spoken and written language within sets of social structural constraints (Grimshaw, 1980b). If, as Simmel (1955 [1908]) argued, conflict is to serve to organize and perhaps even facilitate interpersonal relations then, if parties are going to engage in conflict talk, they must select appropriate manners of speech (both codes and prosodic and lexical variants), follow sequencing rules and, for example, know when to display anger. While answers to linguistically oriented questions about “how language works” are not foregrounded in the studies below, I believe that they both validate the heuristic usefulness of the social-interactional rule/sociolinguistic (selectional) rule distinction and allow interested readers to see directions which research on specification of linguistic and sociolinguistic resources might profitably follow.

2.2 Development of humanistic studies

Some years ago a humanist scholar friend, who did not conceal a contempt and dislike for sociology, humphed that he was going to have to read Erving Goffman, “in order to be able to keep up with literary criticism,” where, he complained, everyone was busy citing the sociologist. The reason that humanists begin to read and cite a Goffman or a Geertz or a Levi-Strauss is that they find in the scholar cited new ways of perceiving and interpreting the materials which constitute their work – the same process works in the other direction as social scientists (sometimes quite uncritically) loot the work of Chomsky or Derrida or Foucault or Peirce. If students of literature turn to Goffman because his conceptualizations of frame “shifts” and “re-
keyings’ and ‘laminations’ illuminate the ways in which dramatists and writers of fiction or poetry make their narratives compelling, their characterizations believable, and their sociological insights valid beyond the boundaries of particular writings – so too will they turn to studies which display, in actual talk, processes of social conflict they so often incorporate into fictional renditions and specification of conditions under which conflict will or will not occur, by whom it is most likely to be initiated, etc. (see, for example, the summary propositions in chapter 13). While only Tannen has chosen to direct her attention to conflict talk in fiction and drama, I believe humanists will find the empirical findings and the conceptualizations of other contributors insightful and suggestive. In a complementary way, I believe that Tannen’s contribution should demonstrate to students of language in use in social contexts the value of investigation of dramatic and fictional renderings of conflict talk – which may foreground both social-interactional considerations and sociolinguist resources more clearly than is sometimes the case with naturally occurring events (see also Burton 1980; Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967).

2.3 Knowledge of specific substantive areas

Each of the studies here contributes to new understandings of interaction in an institutional arena, or documents empirical observations previously supported in the main by anecdotal evidence. The institutional arenas are, on the whole, familiar ones: economic (a food co-operative [Labov] and a public utility [O’Donnell]), educational (nursery schools in Italy and the United States [Corsaro and Rizzo] and American “middle schools” [Eder]), familial (at dinner time [Vuchinich], in casual talk [Schiffrin], and in the dramatic representation of the talk of members of a triangle whose relationships are at risk [Tannen]), legal (litigants in small claims court [Conley and O’Barr], and opposing attorneys and judges in criminal trials [Philips]), and medical (a psychiatric review board [Mehan]). It may be harder to find a label for the institution in which the behaviors of the Goodwins “sling shotters” are embedded (“play,” “leisure”); it is a familiar one often found in other institutional “domains” (see, especially, the studies by Corsaro and Rizzo and by Schiffrin).

It will also be seen that the studies contribute to our understanding of processual/interactional dimensions of substantive questions about child and adolescent socialization, race relations, ethnic relations, status claiming and negotiation, and so on. One way in which they differ from investigations of the same institutions and processes employing more traditional survey or other quantitative methods or even ethnographic observation is in their discovery of subtle nuances of “reportable” (W. Labov, 1968) behaviour such as the presence of a “breaking of ranks” by management representatives in front of their union subordinates (O’Donnell) or the heavy ambiva-
ence about stressful interaction with blacks manifested by liberal whites in the food co-operative (Labov). Such mild departures from expectations should lead students of the substantive arenas and/or interactional processes of interest to contemplate modification of the social-interactional rules mentioned above (2.1) A second difference is their specification of interactional resources seldom indentified or discussed in the more traditional studies, i.e. opinions (Schiffrin), silence and pauses (Tannen), or sequencing conventions (Vuchinich). Such specification should not only lead sociolinguistically inclined students of language in use to contemplate modification of sociolinguistic selectional rules (2.1); it should also lead sociological students of institutions and social processes to consider previously neglected dimensions of the question of how the social gets accomplished in interaction.

It is true, of course, that any study of talk within these institutions and in the accomplishment of social processes would reveal features hitherto neglected by sociologists. The study of conflict talk will prove itself to be particularly productive of understanding not only of conflict, but also (non-exhaustively) of accommodation, co-operation, conformity, socialization, stratification processes, and so on, within the institutions of interest.

2.4 Amelioration of social problems

There is a strong functionalist bias in much of the major theoretical work on social conflict (see, especially, for example, Simmel, 1955 [1908]; Coser, 1956. Cf., however, Dahrendorf, 1959; Collins, 1975) and there are often emphases on the contribution of social conflict to the generation of social structure, to socialization, to the strengthening of group bonds, and so on. Most studies of conflict talk have investigated events whose outcomes are of only transient significance – however angry, or depressed, or exhilarated, or smug participants may momentarily feel; there are few studies of conflict talk in which participants appear to either intendedly or otherwise cause serious injury to their interlocutors. It is no less true, however, that conflict can be a literally deadly phenomenon, that thousands of persons are killed annually in events ranging from interpersonal fights to gangland rumbles, to tribal or religious struggles, to wars, and that the population of the planet itself is at risk of extinction by nuclear conflict. We also know that outcomes of conflict talk can be both immediately hurtful (because of ethical and other data problems there are few studies of such talk; see however, Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) on Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?) and momentous in their consequences both for participants and for those who may, unbeknownst to themselves, be “spoken for” (Goffman, 1981; T. Labov, 1980) by actual interlocutors. Conflict is a quintessentially social phenomenon – and violence is, most of the time, preceded by talk (or some written or other symbolic “stand-in” for talk).
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While I have no illusions about the likelihood that either those who act as our representatives in international disputes or the psychologically maimed and maiming who wound one another regularly in dances of hostile intimacy (see, e.g., Henry, 1965) will rush to seek our counsel, I think that students of discourse can offer two kinds of understanding which could reduce the risks of potentially dangerous conflict talk and of socially injurious outcomes when such talk is initiated, whatever may have been done to avoid it. The first kind of understanding is that of communicative nonsuccess (Grimshaw, 1980c) engendered by unrecognized (or known, but dismissed as unimportant) differences in norms of production and interpretation (Hymes, 1974) of written and spoken discourse; the work of Gumperz and his students is particularly exemplary here (Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b; see also, illustratively, Erickson and Shultz, 1982 and Chick, 1985). The second understanding is that of the process(es) of interactional accomplishment in conflict talk, i.e., in part the specification of social-interactional and sociolinguistic rules but also the specification of a variety of other features of such talk including its variable course, manifestations and outcomes. I believe that the studies reported here successfully contribute to our understanding of processes; a summary of some findings appears in chapter 13 below.

3. Resources for the study of conflict talk

There are three "sets" of resources for the investigation of conflict talk, namely: (1) theoretical, methodological, and substantive literatures on conflict, on discourse analysis, and (increasingly) on conflict talk itself; (2) a fairly eclectic collection of concepts from this literature and other literatures; and (3) an increasingly rich (but still limited, because of problems of access) set of ethnographically grounded data which has been electronically recorded across a range of sites and situations. I can comment only briefly on each of these resources here; but the first two are discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

3.1 Relevant literatures

A quick perusal of the references collected in the bibliography will reveal that contributors to this volume have ranged far beyond their home disciplines (primarily sociology, anthropology, and linguistics [in that order]) in their pursuit of understanding of the phenomena of conflict talk. Somewhat curiously, in my view, they have apparently not found much in the traditional theoretical literatures of the social sciences germane to their work— I say curiously because a dichotomy between conflict and system or functionalist theories is, along with distinctions between social organization and social psychology and quantitative and qualitative methods, a principal
orienting perspective in sociology (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in both anthropology and political science). It seems to me that both such precursors as Machiavelli, Marx, Pareto, Simmel, Sorel, and Weber and contemporaries like Boulding, Coser, Dahrendorf, Rapoport, Schelling, and Williams have things to say about conflict as a social process which will help us to make more sense out of conflict talk. Perhaps this will be a next step for some students.

Contributors have drawn much more heavily on a variety of analytic modes for the investigation of discourse. Simplifying grossly, it can be argued that there are two principal approaches to analysis, namely: (1) that which focuses attention on resources available to participants in interaction (traditionally primarily speakers but in recent years increasingly hearers as well), and (2) that which focuses on resources available to analysts for the discovery of meaning-in-text. The first approach, exemplified by the comprehensive discourse analysis of W. Labov and Fanshel, the conversational inference investigations of Gumperz, the systemic/functional analysis of Halliday, and ethnomethodological/phenomenological perspectives ranging from those of Wittgenstein to Schutz to Garfinkel, attempts to discover how participants make sense of discourse produced within known and specified contexts of text and of situation (in Halliday’s sense of those terms). The second, represented by the critical analysis of text as practiced by Althusser, Barthes, or Derrida, by the conversational analysis of Sacks and Schegloff and their followers, by the research on speech acts by Austin and Searle and contemporary linguists like Green or Fraser, and by the studies of conversational implicature of Grice, attempts in contrast to discover both referential meaning and pragmatic “intention” within the syntactic organization and/or lexical construction of the text itself, generally invoking context only when analyses won’t otherwise “work”.1 All of these analytic perspectives, as well as others, are employed in the studies in this volume – most of the contributors appear to find at least some knowledge of context(s) necessary for their investigations.

While I think my initial claim that there has not been much research on the specific features of “conflict talk” is correct, there is a substantial and growing body of material on conflict and discourse. However, while there are many studies in anthropology, criticism (both literary and dramatic), folklore, political science, psychiatry, psychology, and sociology which associate discourse with conflict as their analytic focus, only a small proportion of these investigations directly address the question of how sociolinguistic resources are employed in the pursuit of social-interactional goals.2 There are exceptions, however, and analysts have investigated such features of conflict talk as the use of direct and indirect speech, particularities of sequencing and of other devices studied by conversational analysts, the employ of narratives, and so on. A goodly portion of these studies has been identified and discussed by Brenneis in his very useful review article (1988); his review
is particularly useful because he underlines the fact that particularities of conflict talk vary quite considerably cross-culturally.

An important new dimension has been added to work on conflict-related discourse with the emergence in recent years of new academic-professional specialty focusing on negotiation. Leaders in the field are often lawyers and other practitioners who are very skeptical about the possibilities of learning much from analysis of the details of the actual talk of negotiations; some have them have produced extremely suggestive reports and commentaries on either general strategies, such as focusing on interests rather than positions (see especially Fisher and Ury, 1981), or on how to deal with “Xs” (often the Soviets, see Sloss and Davids, 1986). I believe that discourse analysts could usefully employ the insights of some of this work – and that negotiators could learn from analyses like those which follow. Resources are available; thus far neither group appears to feel it has much to learn from the other. Brenneis’ observation (1988) about our collective inability to articulate work on “broad issues of social organization, political economy and power” and the “often apparently miniscule specifics of pronoun choice, syntactic variation and turn-taking” is particularly apposite.

3.2 Theories and concepts

There is obviously no such thing as a “unified theory of sociolinguistic description” (Hymes, 1974) of conflict talk; there are a variety of axiomatic orientations, proto-theoretical perspectives, and conceptual notions which are available for use in organizing the phenomena for systematic analysis. The organizing perspectives vary considerably in level of abstraction, in amenability to identification and (particularly) measurement, and in specificity of relevance for conflict talk as compared to talk in general; all have influenced at least some work on conflict talk by contributors to this volume and other investigators. I will focus briefly here on the following: (1) general orientations; (2) concepts drawn directly from sociological theory; (3) concepts drawn directly from general studies of discourse; (4) typologies of conflict discourse; and (5) speech-act theory and notions of interactional terms/moves.4

(1) In using the term general orientation, I have in mind two kinds of organizing perspectives. There are, first, such heuristics as Hymes’ (1974) SPEAKING mnemonic with its reminder to would-be-analysts to take into account such elements of language in use in social contexts as Settings, Participants, Ends, and so on. There are also interpretive orientations which focus on a smaller set of notions by treating some the elements in Hymes' heuristic roughly as if incorporated into a more relational-processual frame. My (hardly novel) notion of the “sociological variables” of relations of power and of affect and of the nature of utility (conceptually subsuming salience and costs of interactional goals for participants) has given me a very
considerable interpretive leverage in a variety of studies of naturally occurring discourse. While at least some of the contributors to this volume may reject my characterization, it seems to me that all students of discourse (spoken or written) are guided by one or more sets of such organizing perspectives, i.e., by what Cicourel (1980) has variously labeled “top-down notions” and “unspoken predicates.”

(2) My notion of sociological variables obviously derives directly from some of the sociological work noted above as particularly germane for students of interactional accomplishment in talk. Another, considerably less global, notion which has been extremely useful for students of conflict talk is that of consideration of the role of third parties. While rooted in the astute observations of Roman political strategists and commentators and developed by Machiavelli and others, the modern conceptualization of *tertius gaudens* was initially developed in the work of Simmel and some of his contemporaries and further refined by a number of ours. Moreover, this work has provided not only a productive conceptualization for ongoing investigation of social conflict phenomena, it has, in collateral refinements and developments such as conceptualizations of “footing” and “participation status” discovered by Goffman (our contemporary Simmel!), engendered some extremely useful work in studies of discourse.

I argue in chapter 13 the usefulness of sociological studies of the development and change of social conflict in its ongoing course: while a number of students of conflict talk have addressed similar questions about that talk, few if any have utilized the results of the sociological work. I hope that the later discussion will persuade some investigators to look at it.

(3) In recent years discourse analysts have developed an extremely rich and varied conceptual apparatus. Because each of the studies here focuses primarily on a single variety of conflict within a particular setting (although Corsaro and Rizzo look at the same type of setting in different societies) some aspects of that apparatus, for example the concept of domain, are little used. On the other hand, however, several contributors do look at speech registers which over the course of a single speech event in a particular setting characteristic of an identifiable domain – do differ in some manner significant for interactional outcomes. At a fairly general level contributors have focused on such dimensions/features of talk as prosodic/paralinguistic variation, sequential organization, theme, topic-shifting, etc. (but not, e.g., clausal structures); at the analytic level they have looked at selection of such specific sociolinguistic resources/devices as direct and indirect speech, address forms, narrative, silence, etc. (but not, e.g., voice, or metaphor, or anaphora). In short, participants in conflict talk have the same resources available for that interaction as do all conversationalists – and analysts the same interpretive apparatuses. As will be seen, neither participants in the disputes studied nor analysts of those disputes have employed the full range of resources available.