Conflict talk

Studies of language use in social contexts have multiplied in recent decades, yet relatively little attention has been paid to the important area of conflict talk.

The eleven studies in this volume fulfill this need, using analytic and interpretative perspectives to examine the disputes of adults and of children. Most of the studies are based on audio or sound-image records of naturally occurring discourse arising in a variety of contexts. These range from street to school, from courtroom to hospital, and from home to workplace. Allen Grimshaw has provided a short introductory chapter and extensive theoretical conclusion to the studies, which come from a variety of disciplines: the authors comprise anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, a lawyer and a psychologist. The book will appeal to researchers and advanced students in all of these areas, and also to counselors, legal professionals, and negotiators.
Conflict talk

Sociolinguistic investigations of arguments in conversations

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Preface

Conflict and talk are two features of human social life which are both pervasive and intellectually fascinating: they have attracted the interest of scholars and humanists for at least as long as we have records – and have necessarily been attended by group members as long as there have been groups. This species-long history of interest notwithstanding, systematic interest in and research on the phenomenon of conflict talk is both rarer and more recent. My own interest in conflict talk has roots in ameliorative as well as in intellectual concerns. I have been studying social conflict for more than thirty years and talk for more than twenty-five. My enthusiastic embracement of sociolinguistic data and analytic and interpretive perspectives following my first introduction to them resulted in part from a strong presentiment that better understanding of talk and better understanding of social conflict would turn out to be complementary. I believe this has been demonstrated. My hope then, and now, is that such increased understanding may, over the longer run, contribute to reduction of species-threatening varieties of social conflict. Such a reduction remains only a hope. I have an undocumented but strong sense that most of the contributors to this book have been similarly motivated.

There has been a quantum increase in publication on sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and related arenas of investigation in the last decade. As I sampled these growing literatures, however, I came to realize that, while conflict talk was often recognized and discussed in the course of analyses of other matters, research on conflict talk and on conflict in talk was reported only rarely. Five years ago this summer, several of us whose work appears in this volume had a “show and tell” mini-conference during the course of which we viewed a large number of sound-image records particularly rich in conflict talk. This experience further convinced me of the potential value of more explicit attention to conflict talk. I therefore invited a number of colleagues who seemed to me to have interests or data which would make them valuable contributors to a book on conflict talk to write chapters on the topic. This volume is the result.
Preface

To a greater degree than is perhaps ordinarily the case with edited volumes, this is very much a co-operative venture. In addition to the meeting mentioned above, sub-sets of contributors discussed the project at disciplinary annual meetings and several of us gave versions of chapters at the Eleventh World Congress of the International Sociological Association in New Delhi in 1986. We agreed that, while any attempt to make general statements about the nature of conflict talk will require studies of the phenomenon in different cultures, societies, speech and language communities, etc., an initial attempt would probably best be limited to instances of English. It will be seen, however, that inclusion of comparative materials from Italian has substantially enhanced the value of Corsaro and Rizzo’s studies of children. In my original invitation to participants I mentioned my hope that all might attend in some way to the interpretive usefulness of what I have called the “sociological variables” (i.e., relations of power and of affect and considerations of utility). Several contributors resisted such a constraint; in the event it seems to me that those variables are shown to be importantly implicated in determining the initiation, course, content, and outcomes of conflict talk. Finally, each contributor read my introductory and summary chapters. I have incorporated some, but by no means all, of their comments, corrections, and suggestions – and have ordinarily indicated where I have been stubborn. I am most grateful for their help.

I have not always had good experiences with collaborative projects and I had some hesitation about involving myself in this one. My first thanks are owed to the contributors whose papers follow – and whose counsel and encouragement kept me going when I wondered not only when, but if, we would finish. I am thankful to Susan Allen-Mills of Cambridge University Press who encouraged us to undertake the project and showed patience when I fell behind on this, and other, commitments. We are all grateful also to Penny Carter of Cambridge University Press, who provided us with both expeditious editing and production and encouragement when she took over our project when Susan Allen-Mills left the Press. We are each individually indebted to colleagues who read our chapters at various stages of writing; I am particularly indebted to Randall Collins, who has been a helpful and encouraging reader in this as in other instances. Richard D. Lambert guided my early work on social conflict and social violence and I gladly acknowledge my debt to him. Leonard D. Savitz told me about the importance of language in conflict many years before I fully understood what he meant; I am grateful to him also – even if I have been tardy in accepting his gift.

Allen D. Grimshaw