The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict

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Introduction

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9.1 Why study interaction?

This section of the handbook is about enacted conflict. It starts from the logically self-evident, but nevertheless crucial, fact that the actual playing-out of conflict is impossible without people “doing” it. This fact is most obvious when the entirety of a conflict can be played out in just one spate of interaction – who gets the last piece of pie, who wins this football match, whether the accused is guilty. But it should be remembered that even the most protracted and global of conflicts would not be regarded as such if it could not be reduced to likewise recognisable episodes – an article published here, a speech made there, an argument ensuing, a shot fired – all of them by recognisable individual people.

In terms of scale, the studies in this section pertain to the “micro” end of the conflict spectrum. That is, they address (potential) conflict which is interpersonal in that it involves identifiable individuals talking to each other – what is often termed, following Grimshaw (1990), “conflict talk”. This is true despite the fact that some of them involve audiences that may become very large and all of whose members are not necessarily actually identified.

This focus on the participants in conflict brings to the fore another observable fact: whatever the overt object of dispute, however purely physical or instrumental this might be, its conduct inevitably involves interpersonal relations. When a family, a village, a nation or a species has not enough food to eat, there is potential for conflict among its members as to who gets what. In order to avoid this potential becoming reality, the resources available need to be doled out fairly and, crucially, perceived to have been doled out fairly. These perceptions are heavily influenced by people’s feelings for and feelings about others. And when the distribution of resources is not perceived as fair, the conflict that results gets played out with attention as much to the purportedly unfair behaviour and/or immoral stance of some members or subgroups as it does to the original bone of contention. That is, it is the rightness/wrongness, fairness/unfairness and justness/unjustness of the doings and sayings of particular participants that becomes the focus. In other words, both in avoiding or managing conflict, and also in conducting it generally, interpersonal relations are central.

Of course, many instances of conflict pivot around matters of direct importance for the interpersonal relations themselves. Most of the instances treated in the contributions in this
section involve conflict of this personal kind: purportedly rude, inconsiderate or inappropriate behaviour (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, Glenn, Graham), an interruption (Haugh and Sinkeviciute), reaction to a negative assessment of appearance (Glenn). And when they are not personal, they are matters of an otherwise “micro” kind: disputes about money (Glenn, Tracy and Hodge) or about the name for a company (Schmitt and Márquez Reiter). In none of these cases does the conflict directly involve more than a few individuals. (Only in the contribution from Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen are the topics matters of wider public interest.) One might view such cases as trivial when compared with the terrible violence perpetrated on whole populations around the world right now. But the fact that even these “serious” and large-scale conflicts so often involve interpersonal issues is a justification for studying how they play out. And there is a further justification. Most conflicts occur between people or groups who expect to have dealings with each other in the future so that the relations between them are crucial in themselves.

To put this perspective another way: to exist, conflict, regardless of its scale, needs both an overt object or cause and also at least two parties taking oppositional stances. Whether the object is the distribution of vital resources across whole populations or the behaviour of a single person at a particular moment, a conflict ensues when parties perceive themselves to be in opposition with respect to it and then act on that perception. When that action takes the form of language (as it nearly always does in the first instance), the expressing of this opposition invariably includes the voicing of assessments of a moral kind about the opposing party. These assessments can in turn themselves become subject to negative assessments … and so on. It is, typically, this chain that we are referring to when we describe a conflict – again of whatever scale – as “escalating”. Conflict is always “personal” in the last analysis.

The studies in this section, then, afford a markedly close-up view of conflict in action. Given this perspective, most of them have much to tell us about the beginnings of conflicts. Chapters 11–12 in particular, focus sharply on its very inception. Even when, as with the study in Chapter 13, conflict is assured by the activity type and wider social context (political argument), there is a focus on those precise moments when conflict is triggered and becomes manifest. But it is not just the beginnings. As Jeffries points out in her introduction to Section I, much large-scale conflict becomes entrenched and is exacerbated precisely because people do not talk to each other (thereby facilitating the naturalisation of negative stereotyping). So, this close-up view of conflicting parties interacting can also tell us about how conflicts can be avoided (Glenn) and/or managed (Glenn, Schmitt and Márquez Reiter, Graham).

9.2 How to study interaction

From the perspective outlined above, what matters as much as what is said and how (the main focus of the contributions in Section I of this Handbook) is who is saying it and when – this “when” encompassing who they are saying it to, who else is around to hear it, the exact moment at which they say it and what sort of activity is understood to be going on at the time.

Investigating these interpersonal aspects of conflict necessitates approaches that facilitate the exploration of the workings of interaction in minute, even forensic, detail. For most scholars working in this area, the default field of vision, and therefore the default unit of analysis, is what has been called the encounter; that is, a spate of interaction with a recognisable beginning and end in which participants “jointly ratify one another as authorized co-sustainers of a single … focus of visual and cognitive attention” (Goffman, 1964, p.135) and are “open to each other for talk or its substitutes” (Goffman, 1967, p.144).
However, from this starting focus, the lens angle typically needs to be both widened and narrowed. As regards the former, it is usually the case that an apparently single-encounter conflict is not the whole story. This may be because the behaviour witnessed in that encounter is only fully explicable in the light of previous dealings between the parties concerned and/or (as demonstrated by Schmitt and Márquez Reiter in this volume) their assumption of dealings to come. This is why the notion of context is so important to this kind of study (and is discussed in some detail in this section by Sifianou). It may also, or alternatively, be because the outcome of the encounter generates succeeding ones (the person who did not get that last piece of pie feels resentment which impacts his/her future dealings with the person who did, or there will be an appeal against the decision of the court, etc.). As Tracy and Hodge observe in their contribution, even a very clearly bounded encounter with a definitive resolution such as the decision of a court may be regarded by the disputing parties as part of an ongoing conflict (i.e. as just one episode).

As for the sharper focus, there is much focussing on “moments” – specific points in an encounter when something important happens. Many of the concepts and methodologies that have been developed to achieve this focus can be grouped under the umbrella of what has become known as the field of interpersonal pragmatics (or sometimes sociopragmatics). This field studies how people get on – or do not get on – with each other when they interact. Historically, this area of study emerged from linguistic pragmatics, so that its assumed (sometimes explicit) ultimate aim was a deeper understanding of the workings of language. However, in this century, a shift has been observable whereby the ultimate aim is the understanding of the workings of human relations, with language analysis merely as the main tool for accomplishing this (see O’Driscoll, 2013a). This newer approach is obviously more suited to the exploration of conflict than the former.

While studies investigating interpersonal phenomena have always been numerous in sociolinguistics and pragmatics (which studies how people make meaning in language and interaction) more generally, it cannot be denied that the single most influential work in crystallising this area as a field in its own right was the work of Brown and Levinson ([1978] 1987). Entitled *Politeness: some universals in language usage*, it addressed the question of why people so often do not spell out (i.e. do not say literally) what they mean. It answered this question by appealing to the notion of face (see below) and then developing this notion as part of a full-blown theory explaining why people say what they say in particular ways. Since its publication, most of its components have been widely, comprehensively and convincingly refuted on methodological and/or affective and/or conceptual and/or empirical grounds (e.g. Eelen, 2001; Kádár and Haugh, 2013; O’Driscoll, 2007; Watts, 2003). Nevertheless, many of its terms and concepts have passed into general usage in the interpersonal-pragmatic scholarly community. It is also noteworthy that to date this work remains the only true theory in the field; that is, it is the only work that offers a systematic model for predicting what people will say in a given situation. However, as Graham notes in this volume, prediction seems to be of only marginal value in understanding interpersonal behaviour in interaction. Developments in the field in the last couple of decades have not been so ambitious and have contented themselves with offering perspectives and concepts that aid in the understanding of this behaviour after it has happened. These are briefly explained in the following paragraphs.

9.2.1 Face

The concept of face as a technical term was first expounded by the North American sociologist Erving Goffman ([1955] 1967), who saw it as a kind of contingent and temporary
personal identity – contingent in that, although it describes a person’s self-esteem, it is largely dependent of how others view him/her; temporary in that it is a property of the self while interacting (rather than a person’s general, context-spanning reputation) and can be modified during interaction. When taking up this concept, Brown and Levinson (1987) played down the contingent and temporary aspects and, preferring to see it as a desire rather than an accomplishment, claimed the existence of two abiding aspects of face that they called positive face (the desire to be liked and approved of) and negative face (the desire to be unimpeded in one’s actions).

Since then, scholars of interaction have found face to be an immensely useful concept. It has been widely used in empirical studies and its nature and constituents endlessly debated (see O’Driscoll, 2017 for an overview). Its value lies in the fact that it denotes neither simply a person’s self-image nor simply his/her reputation but something in between, capturing those parts of both self-image and reputation that are directly relevant in interaction and directly affected by what happens in interaction. Crucially, it is an inevitable fact of interactive life simply because in our dealings with other people, we are forced to give off impressions of what sort of person we are and to act on our impressions of others. Interactive life is all about making inferences and working hypotheses. There simply is not time to explain the totality of ourselves every time we encounter someone or to wait for them to similarly give a full account of themselves. Consequently, face is more than just an affectation or the result of an over self-conscious ego (as some lay uses of the term would lead us to believe). Equally crucially, we seem to be strongly affectively attached to our faces, as witnessed by our ability to feel embarrassment, humiliation or just mildly affronted.

Face in interaction, then, is both ever-present and vulnerable, so it is not surprising that it can be appealed to as an explanation for moments of potential conflict, the beginnings of conflict and the playing out of conflict. In this section, both Haugh and Sinkeviciute and Schmitt and Márquez Reiter identify and make use of different particular aspects of face. In the latter, it is an important component of the analysis, and it is absolutely central to Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen’s analysis. Sifianou makes frequent reference to face-threats, face-protection and face-attack, the last of these also being referred to by Graham.

9.2.2 Politeness/impoliteness and relational work

From their conception of two kinds of face (see above), Brown and Levinson propose two “strategies” used by people to mitigate the threats to face that are intrinsic to many of the things they say: positive politeness attends to positive face and negative politeness to negative face. The former of these is utilised by Sifianou in her discussion of disagreeing and is also mentioned in passing by Schmitt and Marques-Reiter.

Work in this field which has “moved on” from Brown and Levinson focuses not so much on what people intend by what they say and more on what they can be seen to have achieved in the course of interacting by what they say. The key notion here is evaluation of people’s behaviour as polite or impolite, appropriate or inappropriate, nice or nasty, observable by other people’s reactions to what has been said. All of the contributions in this section take up this post-facto perspective, especially that from Tracy and Hodge and that from Graham, the latter using the notion of relational work, the term preferred to politeness by Locher and Watts (2005) as a way of avoiding the value-laden judgement inherent in the everyday use of the latter term.

Of central importance to conflict, of course, is the opposite of politeness. Impoliteness was first theorised by Culpeper (1996) as a simple mirror image of Brown and Levinson’s model but has since adopted the evaluative perspective as well (e.g. Culpeper, 2011).
In this section, both impoliteness strategies and impoliteness evaluations are utilised at length by Haugh and Sinkeviciute in their discussion of causing offence and taking offence respectively.

9.2.3 Context

Another important aspect of understanding people’s behaviour when they interact is the consideration of what sort of encounter is going on. It is the participant’s own, ultimately subjective, understanding of this that dictates their own ideas about what sort of things can and can’t, should and shouldn’t be said. Their reactions to what actually gets said are heavily coloured by these expectations. This aspect goes by many names in the literature (e.g. “frame” in Goffman, 1974, “activity type” in Levinson, 1992) but the term preferred by the two contributions in this section that address themselves squarely to specific kinds of canonically adversarial encounter (Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen on various types of political encounter and Tracy and Hodge on courtroom hearings) is “genre”. This is also the term used by Sifianou in her discussion of different levels of context.

“Genre” is a term that foregrounds the nature of the discourse itself. However, as Sifianou points out, there is an important aspect of what she calls “local” context that is relevant here too and has a significant effect on the behaviour of participants. This is the precise roles, and even relative physical positions, of all those present and their relation to what is said at any one point, an issue theorised in Goffman’s (1981) notions of participation framework and production format. The former notion describes the roles of those who witness what is said and distinguishes first between ratified participants and overhearers. A good example of this significance can be found in this section in Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen’s comparison of broadcast political interviews and Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) in the British parliament. As they observe, while both are televised, the former are produced for TV viewers (i.e. they are ratified) but in the latter these viewers are in a sense accidental – the event would go on whether they are there or not, and they are not understood to have, as viewers of TV interviews have, hearing rights (i.e. they are overhearers). Goffman (1981) demonstrates that people habitually design their utterances not only for ratified participants but also for overhearers. But this difference in the hearing rights is one reason why, it can be observed, politicians at PMQs behave with less awareness of the viewers than they do when interviewed in a TV studio. Another reason is the immediate physical presence of many other participants at PMQs who, moreover, are accustomed to expressing their reactions vocally (albeit not always verbally). Those being interviewed, on the other hand, typically do so in a studio without “live” participants other than the interviewer, so that their awareness of those at the other end of the camera must be proportionally greater. To put this another way, while, as Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen show, politicians in both settings show much concern for face, at PMQs, they are more concerned about their faces with other MPs than those with the viewers.

This comparison has relevance to Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen’s discussion of how conflictual discourse is conducted in parliament, especially of the apparent rowdiness of PMQs and the reputedly poor image it gives to the British public of the pettiness, and even childishness, of their politicians. Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen report on a study showing that the entry “interruption” in Hansard (the official record of what is said in parliament) has increased exponentially (by a factor of more than six) in recent decades. The televising of parliament began in 1989. What role has this advent of a TV audience had in this apparent change? In the face of the charge of shallowness, one might have expected that it would
have caused MPs to quieten down and behave more soberly. However, the opposite appears to have happened. Perhaps instead it has made them especially anxious not to come across to the viewing public as “stuffed shirts”, too pompous and distant from the ordinary person? There is, however, another possible explanation for that spectacular increase in “interuptions”. And here we may bring in a wider aspect of context. The notion of interruption is itself value-laden (see Glenn in this section). It is possible that the “increase” may simply be a reflection of changing attitudes to what counts as an interruption on the part of the writers of Hansard (who were not always the same people throughout the period studied, and in any case, have not been trained in conversation analysis – see below) and may be one example of a perceived trend that demands greater “civility” in public life than heretofore. Those who have perceived this trend (e.g. O’Driscoll, 2013b; Tracy, 2008) argue that it should be resisted. And indeed, the section on PMQs displays a good example of the argument that impoliteness is sometimes necessary and valuable.

Another aspect of participation framework is a distinction between those ratified participants who are being addressed and those who, while nevertheless fully ratified, are not. In institutionalised conflict such as that found in the British parliament and in the small claims court examined by Tracy and Hodge, there are explicit regulative rules in this regard. In both cases, there is a proscription against addressing the opposing party directly. Instead, speakers are expected to address their remarks to the “chair” (in the UK parliament, the “Speaker”, in the court, the judge). But there is an important difference. In the former case, they do so entirely ritualistically, such address not being supported by gaze or posture, which can in fact be directed squarely at the opposing party as long as they continue to refer to this party in the third person. In the small claims court, on the other hand, there is an urgent reason for litigants to “really” address the judge because it is the judge who will decide the outcome, so it is necessary for them not just to talk through the “chair” ceremonially but to make that chair understand their viewpoint.

The above discussion pertains to the roles and attitudes of those who hear what is said. Also of significance to how utterances are received is the relation of the speaker to what s/he says. Goffman’s (1981) production format distinguishes three different roles in this respect: principal (being accountable for what is said), author (composing the words used) and animator (physically uttering the words). In their analysis of political interviews, Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen make use of equivocation theory, which treats the notion of principal (as “sender”) but also contains categories relevant to the immediate context of the previous utterance.

9.2.4 Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) is a very specific method for studying interaction that can be placed under the umbrella of interpersonal pragmatics only with some difficulty, or at least protests from some of its practitioners. This is because it eschews (and in its more puritan forms, absolutely forbids) nebulous concepts such as face, politeness, genre and all but the most local aspects of context, dealing only in behavioural phenomena directly observable in the interaction. Its main focus is on how talk is structured. CA’s viewpoint is radically that of the participants whose talk is examined. Thus, for example, an utterance that may seem to the analyst be an act of advice-giving is only recognised as such if there is evidence in the reaction of the addressee that it has been interpreted (or “oriented to”) that way.

Although its claims to empirical rigour can be contested, there is no doubt that CA offers an exemplar of attention to the minute details of talk. And indeed, most of the contributions
in this section make use of aspects of its methodology. Glenn’s contribution is entirely
devoted to it. Haugh and Sinkeviciute make passing reference to it explicitly and use much
of its approach and terminology. They also use its very specific method of transcribing spo-
ken data, which is designed to record all possibly relevant aspects of the talk (there being no
prior assessment of what might and might not be relevant). Tracy and Hodge and Schmitt
and Márquez Reiter also make use of features of CA by implication, although in both cases,
their analyses are framed as a more general kind of discourse analysis. Sifianou discusses
the CA perspective with reference to disagreement. There is in fact, no obvious reason why
the phenomena it recognises cannot be combined with some of the approaches outlined
above. Glenn’s account of how people react to being given advice, for example, in particular
their tendency to resist it in various ways, could be developed with reference to face – being
the recipient of advice poses obvious face threats.

9.3 The contributions in this section

The rest of the chapters in this section are sequenced in a very loose sense from the most
theoretical to the most empirical. Sifianou, and Haugh and Sinkeviciute both discuss
behavioural phenomena with clear relevance to conflict, involving two different kinds of
oppositional stance taken towards what someone has done or said. Glenn discusses the
applicability to the study of conflict of one particular approach to interaction. The remaining
chapters – Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen, Tracy and Hodge, Schmitt and Márquez Reiter,
Graham – all examine instances of conflict, and often also its avoidance and resolution, in a
variety of domains (politics, the law, business and on-line gaming) and settings (a legislative
chamber, a TV studio, a small claims court and on-line).

Sifianou’s focus is disagreement, which, for operational analytic purposes, she sees as a
hyponym of conflict (i.e. it is one ingredient), but her contribution includes an extensive dis-
cussion of the various related terms that have been used to circumscribe some or all aspects
of conflict, drawing attention to the differing styles and tenors of interaction that these terms
connote and their differing, though overlapping, semantic fields. She concludes that under-
lying all such terms is the notion of opposition but points out that many of them seem to
involve the idea that conflict additionally involves some features of the people doing the
disagreeing (their personal goals and/or their emotions).

Haugh and Sinkeviciute address the role of offence and thus the root origins of interper-
sonal conflict. They emphasise the needs to distinguish between causing offence and taking
offence and illustrate their approach with detailed analyses of a phone conversation and a
face-to-face encounter in a “reality” TV show. Of all the various triggers for conflict, this
contribution singles out accusations as especially predictive. That this should be the case is
on reflection perhaps not surprising: to express (or otherwise project) antagonism towards,
dislike of or hatred for another person is one thing; but to combine this kind of stance with
an assertion that that person is somehow morally lacking is another. The former alone is
a bilateral matter, leaving the person’s standing with other people largely untouched. But
when the latter is added, his/her reputation with the rest of the world is called into question.
To accept an accusation as accurate, then, is to change one’s face for the worse in one’s
future dealings with people.

In the following chapter, Glenn presents a concise account of the principles and workings
of conversation analysis (see above) and proceeds to a closely reasoned and level-headed
discussion of its potential for use in the study of conflict. Exemplification is provided
with analyses of dinner-table talk, a phone conversation and a couple arguing in a TV
documentary. These include moments of conflict inception and conflict avoidance, as well as illustrating the trajectory of conflict.

The contribution from Bull and Simon-Vandenbergen addresses political discourse, an arena in which conflict is endemic, indeed one might say constitutive, so that the focus here is on how politicians deal with it. The chapter describes and analyses their verbal behaviour in specific situations, successfully demonstrating a number of methodologies and the concept of face as a means of analysis. It also introduces some valuable discussion on the nature of political debate and its relation to conflict.

Tracy and Hodge likewise examine a type of encounter in which conflict is woven into the very fabric of the situation, in this one – the small claims court – there being a clear winner and clear loser each time. They show how the genre privileges a certain kind of discourse, disadvantaging those participants who do not have facility in it. In the light of Haugh and Sinkeviciute’s identification of accusations as a major trigger of conflict, it is perhaps significant that Tracy and Hodge find disputants, in a situation whose very existence depends on the prior issuing of some sort of accusation, to be often anxious to assert their moral reasonableness. Like that of Sifianou, this chapter also discusses the different terms to denote various aspects of conflict, though this time with reference to the dimension of public versus private.

Schmitt and Márquez Reiter likewise discuss these terms and, like both Sifianou and Tracy, conceive of disagreement as one ingredient of conflict but this time in the context of an analysis of a very different kind of situation. The chapter describes a conflict between the three members of a start-up company in which the complex interplay of the instrumental (making a business decision) and the interpersonal (the three having various relational histories) is clearly shown. This contribution is also valuable in demonstrating the analysis of a series of encounters.

Graham examines the nature of conflict in one particular medium. Her study is located entirely in the on-line world, an arena whose propensity for hostility and aggressive verbal behaviour has become almost a cliché. Accordingly, she discusses this propensity before examining in detail the various ways in which participants deal with the interpersonal conflict which, apparently inevitably, arises and often escalates. As does Sifianou, Graham brings up the matter of the extent to which conflict can be ritualised. As her case study is of a gaming community, there is, of course, an inevitable ingredient of ritual (as in any sporting contest) but the interest here is on the extent to which often aggressive verbal exchanges around the gameplay have a ritual function.

Taken together, the chapters in this section offer ample evidence of the sheer intricacy of interaction. This intricacy is both a joy and a danger. As to the former, I cannot resist quoting from one of my favourite scholars, who observes that the mutual obligations and expectations that people have when they are interacting with each other, recognised by them and continually being modified by them and modifying their behaviour form the bridge that people build to one another, allowing them to meet for a moment of talk in a communion of reciprocally sustained involvement. It is this spark, not the more obvious kinds of love, that lights up the world.

(Goffman, 1967, pp.116–7)

As to the latter, one can observe that this spark sometimes starts a fire. We cannot predict with certainty on which occasions such ignition will occur. But by studying the intricacy of interaction closely, we can identify hot spots and also learn of ways to douse the flames.
References


