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Conflict, disagreement and (im)politeness

Maria Sifianou

10.1 Introduction

In popular parlance, “conflict” has been associated with tensions surrounding decisions on various issues and in general terms, it “has been stretched and molded to refer to any discord in any social situation” (Jeong, 2008, p.6). Attempting to illustrate the complexity of conflict, Hartwick and Barki (2002, p.4) state that some scholars equate conflict with disagreement or differences of opinion; some see it as antagonistic or hostile behavior; others view it as a mixture of negative emotions like anxiety, jealousy, frustration and anger; and still others treat conflict as some combination of the above.

Thus, broadly speaking, in many social and cultural contexts (see Section 10.4), conflict has been associated with disagreement but mostly with “destructive, disruptive, hostile, and aggressive behavior” (Adams and Laursen, 2007; Leung, 2002, p.1; Teven, Richmond and McCroskey, 1998). Despite such negative associations with disruption in social relations, some scholars describe conflict as in-built in human relationships, such that it cannot be eliminated (see, for example, Janicki, 2015, p.1; Jeong, 2008, p.1). It is viewed as “an inevitable fact of life” (Putnam, 2001, p.10) and as “fundamental to the construction of social reality and of social relations” (Briggs, 1996, quoted in Pagliai, 2010b, p.96). Moreover, some argue that rather than being harmful, conflict may be beneficial within teams and family under certain circumstances (Adams and Laursen, 2007; Jehn, 1995). Simmel (1908/1955) is widely quoted as a supporter of the positivity of conflict. For instance, he views the expression of conflict as a means of avoiding more serious communication breakdowns in cases of eruption of suppressed conflicts (quoted in Kakavá, 1993, p.43), and also as a means of sociation, that is, the opposite of appearing indifferent (Nelson, 2001, p.13). Tannen (2002, p.1653) sees both positive and negative aspects in conflict and verbal aggression as they “can be used in interaction to negotiate either power, or solidarity, or both at once”. They can be “destructive power plays” but can also “function constructively to create rapport”.
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As sociolinguists have shown for years, disagreement, too, need not be seen only in negative terms, as it may not necessarily result in conflict but can, on the contrary, be a sign of intimacy and sociability (Kakavá, 1993; Langlotz and Locher, 2012; Locher, 2004; Schiffrin, 1984) and may not destroy but rather strengthen interlocutors’ relationships (Georgakopoulou, 2001). Similarly, Kienpointner (1997, p.283) contends that “[c]ooperative rudeness fulfills a number of important social functions and quite often stabilises rather than endangers social relationships”.

This breadth in understandings of conflict reflects the fact that, for a long time, conflict has been of concern to scholars from various disciplines, such as philosophy, social psychology, sociology, conflict and business studies among others. Moreover, in addition to being a theoretical construct, conflict is a common, every day, abstract term and hence bound to vary in its meaning. As Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2018) observes, the nomenclature along with first- and second-order uses of the terms employed to describe the phenomena under study complicate their understanding (see also Nelson, 2001). In linguistics, work influenced by speech act theory and mostly by Grice’s principle of cooperation (and attendant maxims) marginalised interest in what was seen as disruptive, aggressive and conflictual behaviour (see, for example, Pagliai, 2010a). However, the relatively recent scholarly interest in impoliteness, especially its on-line manifestations, has kindled research on the various aspects of conflict (see, for example, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014).

The aim of this paper is to address some of the issues raised above and suggest that a multimodal (D’Errico et al., 2015; Stadler, 2006) and a multidisciplinary approach is needed for better understanding the function of conflict and disagreement. In other words, they cannot be treated as merely linguistic phenomena, since they are closely linked to feelings and even simple feelings of like and dislike may affect their development and outcome (Allwood, 1993). More generally, as non-verbal behaviour (including prosodic features) contributes significantly to the expression and interpretation of feelings, politeness and conflict, it should not be ignored. Understanding disagreement and conflict requires much more than single utterances or even complete exchanges since their source may be located beyond the current exchange. In addition, the situational and socio-cultural contexts in which they occur are deemed very significant as there are contexts and cultures which are more tolerant and even encourage conflict and disagreement and others where they are less appropriate. Since disagreement and conflict are complex and multifunctional phenomena, it is hard, if at all possible, to provide all-encompassing definitions. In the following section, I will try to explore the various definitions that have been suggested for conflict and related terms and their relationship.

10.2 On defining conflict and related notions

As is usually the case with definitions, scholars do not agree as to how conflict should be best defined and what its relationship is with other related notions. Such related notions include “disagreement”, “argument” (Maynard, 1985; Muntigl and Turnbull, 1998; Schiffrin, 1984, 1985), “debate” (Johnson and Johnson, 1985), “dispute” (Corsaro and Rizzo, 1990; Dersley and Wootton, 2001; Goodwin, 2006; Kotthoff, 1993), “confrontation” (Hutchby, 1992) and “opposition” (Kakava, 2002), among others. Tannen (2002, p.1562) uses the term “agonism” to refer not to “conflict, disagreement, or disputes per se, but rather to ritualized adversativeness” (emphasis in the original) in academic discourse. Hutchby (1992, p.244) prefers the term “confrontation talk” for “a type of conflict talk which we might call argument ‘for its own sake’” frequently emerging in the discourse of talk radio shows. For his
part, Nelson (2001, p.7) argues that dispute is a type of oppositional interaction and that, in certain contexts, dispute can be used as a synonym of controversy, argument or debate, that is, as a kind of verbal competition but also as a synonym of quarrel, that is, exchanges involving hostility. He further adds that dispute is largely similar to confrontation. As Jeong (2008, p.6) notes, even though conflict and dispute have been used synonymously, conflict entails “a serious nature of challenges” whereas dispute is related to management issues. All these terms are related in that they involve some kind of opposition which can be brief and mild or prolonged, intense and even hostile.

Argument is a frequently used term as it has a long history in the tradition of argumentation (Antaki, 1994). Goodwin (2006, p.446) notes that a central feature characterising an argument is the marked absence of agreement evident in the opposition. Relatedly, Muntigl and Turnbull (1998, p.225) see disagreement as basic to argument since it is understood as “the conversational interactivity of making claims, disagreeing with claims, countering disagreements, and the processes by which such disagreements arise, are dealt with, and resolved”. In addition, they see disputing, conflict talk, verbal discord and oppositional argument, among others, as terms referring to similar activities. Goodwin (2006, p.446) further notes that arguments are characterised by rapid shifts from one topic to another whereas disputes tend to sustain a single topic of contention. For Schegloff (2007, p.73), it appears that arguing is closely related to fighting.

The variable use of these terms has led scholars to draw distinctions and modify the terms they use. For instance, some have talked about “strong” and “weak” disagreements (e.g. Pomerantz, 1984). Leech (1983, p.183) talks about “partial” and “complete” disagreements, Angouri (2012) discusses “marked” and “unmarked” disagreement and Langlotz and Locher (2012) explore “conflictual disagreements” (i.e. unsupportive disagreements) in on-line data and also “sociable arguments” (Locher, 2004). Luzón (2013, p.113) suggests the term “conflictual act” for “any discourse act where disagreement, criticism or dissension is explicitly marked by different discursive or lexical devices”.

Using structural and pragmatic criteria, Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) identify four types of disagreements in their corpus of naturally occurring conversations: “irrelevancy claims”, “challenges”, “contradictions” and “counterclaims”. Scott (2002) distinguishes between “backgrounded”, “mixed”, and “foregrounded” disagreements based on relative explicitness and degree of hostility. She further contends that within foregrounded disagreements, three patterns emerged in her data from adult American professionals: “collegial disagreements”, “personal challenge disagreements” and “personal attack disagreements”.

Allwood and Ahlsén (2015) identify seven possible taxonomies of conflict including “overt” and “covert” conflicts and “normative” and “descriptive” conflicts, among others. Honda (2002, p.574) distinguishes between two senses of conflict, a narrow and a broad one. The former relates to conflict as “a speech activity that consists of the manifestation of opposition (including exchanges of opposition termed ‘confrontation’)” and the latter to conflict as “a process of opposition which includes not only the manifestation of opposition, but the whole process of inducement, initiation, development, and management of opposition”. Hartwick and Barki (2002, p.11) refer to a common distinction between cognitive and affective conflict: the former referring to “task-oriented conflict that focuses on judgmental differences about how to achieve common objectives” and the latter being defined as “conflict that involves personalized, individually-oriented disputes”. Despite its being difficult to always clearly distinguish between the two, this seems to be a significant distinction and is also found in research on disagreement as content- and relationship-oriented disagreement (Koester, 2017, p.274). Infante and Rancer (1996) discern two traits in aggressive
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communication: (a) attack on the position taken by others, which they call “argumentativeness” and (b) attack on the other’s self-concept, which they call “verbal aggressiveness”. One may assume that attacks on the position taken by one's interlocutor will be evaluated less negatively by the recipient than those on his/her overall self-concept.

To emphasise interactivity, some scholars prefer broader terms like “conflict talk” (Grimshaw, 1990; Honda, 2002; Norrick and Spitz, 2008) and “oppositional talk” (Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury, 2004), that is, cases in which interlocutors “express opposing views” through “disagreements, challenges, denials, accusations, threats, and insults” (Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury, 2004, p.200). Another related broad term is that of “verbal aggression” which has been a staple term in im/politeness research (Dynel, 2015, p.339). Most researchers agree that all these terms are related, the underlying unifying notion being that of opposition, but disagree as to whether they are primarily positive or negative phenomena.

To be fair, in most cases, there is a consensus that terms such as conflict have “the potential to be productive or destructive” (see Nelson 2001, p.3) and differences relate mostly to the focus of what is perceived as dominant in specific settings.

Even though broader terms, such as “conflict talk” and “oppositional talk”, highlight the idea that conflict or opposition involves conversational interactivity rather than single acts, this should not be taken to mean that single terms like “dispute”, “argument” or “disagreement” refer to single acts. For instance, viewing disagreements as single acts is one way of conceptualising them as when we talk, for instance, of the speech act of disagreeing. However, disagreement also refers to a situated activity, interactionally managed by interlocutors. Kakavá (2002, p.1539) contends that opposition is a general category under which disagreement falls and argues that more than two oppositional turns constitute an argument or a dispute. For their part, Norrick and Spitz (2008, p.1661) state that “a dialogue counts as a conflict sequence only when participants contradict each other in three consecutive turns”. Moreover, these broader terms (e.g. “conflict talk” and “oppositional talk”) are seen as umbrella terms which can be manifested through various means. For instance, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2018) sees conflict talk as a more comprehensive term to capture a whole range of phenomena spanning from disagreement to hate speech. Taking this a step further, Koester (2017, p.274) argues that conflict should be distinguished from conflict talk and quoting Gruber (1996), she states that verbal conflict is one of the ways through which conflict can be realised and, therefore, the term “disagreement sequence” is preferred (see also Kotthoff, 1993).

The view that, in contrast to disagreement, conflict extends over a number of turns is discussed in the relevant literature (see, e.g. Koester, 2017). However, as Nguyen (2011, p.1768) argues, in multiparty interactions in particular, “conflict talk is by no means a neatly bound unit: it emerges incipiently and gradually over a series of turns” and further adds that “the classic three moves in conflict initiation – arguable move, initial opposition, and counter-opposition (Maynard, 1985; Vuchinich, 1986, 1990) – are not always discrete but may intersperse with one another, especially when both nonverbal and verbal actions are taken into consideration”. In other words, she contends that an opposition may extend over a number of turns and involve both verbal and non-verbal (e.g. eye contact, gestures) actions. Moreover, even a resolved conflict may influence/be oriented to in the ensuing interaction or may be renewed later. In this last case, the number of moves may be reduced.

As it transpires from the above discussion, some scholars use these terms without a definition and others use one or more of these terms to define some other, this being especially evident in the case of conflict and disagreement. Georgakopoulou (2001, p.1882) makes this point stating that argument, conflict talk and dispute are seen in the relevant literature as concepts closely related to disagreements and are either used interchangeably (see also
Dynel, 2015, p.340) or their boundaries are left confusingly fuzzy. Along similar lines, Angouri (2012, p.1566) contends that “[d]isagreement and conflict are conceptually related but the exact relationship between them is not always explicitly discussed”.

My aim here is not to provide definitions for these conceptually interrelated terms or try to disentangle their complex interrelationship and “inconsistent” use but simply problematise the issue. Part of the apparent inconsistency is rather forcefully attributed by Nelson (2001) to the polysemy of these terms which are further examined outside specific contexts of use, thus leading to confusion. More specifically, for Nelson (2001, p.4), this confusion results from the conflation of the various senses of the term ‘conflict’ with each other and with senses of “competition”, “dispute” and “negotiation”. From a broader philosophical perspective, Janicki (2017) argues that since word meanings are arbitrary and conventional, it is not only difficult but also futile to invest effort in attempting to provide all-encompassing definitions. One could argue here that conventionality might facilitate the provision of overarching definitions but what definitely makes such a task complex is that there are cultural, group, gender and even individual differences in perceptions as to whether conflict should be expressed (Allwood, 1993, p.4) or whether conflict has occurred in a specific interaction. Georgakopoulou (2012, p.1624) notes in her epilogue to the *Journal of Pragmatics* special issue on disagreements “the extra resistance of the concept of disagreement as to any consensus on what it actually is, let alone how it is identified and analysed”, an observation that could be equally valid for the concept of ‘conflict’ since it draws from various disciplinary traditions (e.g. social psychology, sociology, conflict studies) and research interests. This has implications as to how conflict is understood and defined.

10.3 Conflict and disagreement

Perusing the relevant literature and even some of the above definitions, one can easily discern the close relationship attributed to conflict and disagreement, the two being either interchangeably used or conflict being defined in terms of disagreement, a common assumption being that disagreement leads to conflict. This is boldly stated by Kennedy and Pronin (2008) in the opening sentence of their abstract, which reads: “It is almost a truism that disagreement produces conflict”. Kakavá (1993, p.36) shares this view, but rightly expresses it more cautiously when she says: “Since disagreement can lead to a form of confrontation that may develop into an argument or dispute, disagreement can be seen as a potential generator of conflict”, especially when there is low affinity between interlocutors (McCroskey and Wheless 1976, cited in Teven, McCroskey and Richmond, 1998, p.210). Jones (2001, p.90) states that “[m]ost conflict scholars believe that conflict is a disagreement between two or more parties who perceive incompatible goals or means of achieving those goals”. Closely related is Putnam’s (2001, p.11) definition which views conflict as referring “to the expressed disagreements between people who see incompatible goals and potential interference in achieving these goals”. Waldron and Applegate (1994, quoted in Locher, 2004, p.94) clearly define disagreement as “a form of conflict [...] taxing communication events”. However, such conceptualisations should not be taken to mean that disagreement and conflict fall on a continuum with the former always being the antecedent, as Angouri (2012, p.1566) argues.

Attempts at distinguishing between the two (i.e. conflict and disagreement) can be found in McCroskey and Wheless (1976, cited in Teven, McCroskey and Richmond, 1998, p.210), who define disagreement as “differences of opinion on issues” and associate conflict with negative features, such as “competition, hostility, suspicion, distrust and self-perpetuation”. Negative aspects are also attributed to conflict by Kennedy and Pronin (2008, p.834) who
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state that they view conflict “as the state of opposition, quarreling, strife, or competition” and disagreement “as a difference between parties in their views or opinions”, adding that such differences may (but may not) lead to conflict. Angouri’s (2012, pp.1567, 1576) view is similar since she advocates that conflict is negatively marked whereas disagreement refers to “opposing views” or “deviating opinions” and as such they are not inherently bonding or damaging to the interlocutors.

Another such attempt at distinguishing between disagreement and conflict is that of Knutson et al. (1979, cited in Teven, McCroskey and Richmond, 1998, p.210) who defined disagreement as “a disagreement of opinion on substantive or procedural matters” and conflict as “disagreement plus negative interpersonal affect”.

Hartwick and Barki (2002) report on three properties that have been found to underlie conflict: disagreement, interference (with the attainment of one’s goals) and negative emotions. They argue that all three should be present to label an event as conflictual but note that scholars differ as to whether they deem sufficient the presence of one, two or all three of these. They (2002, p.8) illustrate this with cases they call “pure” disagreements where opinions may differ, but such differences are not very important to the individuals concerned or they are easily solvable and as such they do not lead to conflict since, as they add, just “because people disagree does not mean that they are in conflict”.

The significance of emotion in conflict and disagreement is brought up in a number of studies. Bonelli (2015) argues that not only different opinions but also the lack of “interpersonal convergence” can become sources of conflict, that is, when interlocutors fail to relate emotionally both linguistically and paralinguistically. Kienpointner (2008) also underlines the significance of accounting for emotions in impoliteness research since they are seen as a vital factor influencing the overall climate of any interaction. Locher and Langlotz (2008) and Langlotz and Locher (2012) are among the first to systematically explore emotions in discourse and argue for the neglected significance of emotions, especially when analysing conflictual discourse. Langlotz and Locher (2012, p.1591) argue that conflictual disagreement incites negative feelings such as annoyance, irritation, anger or contempt directed at one’s interlocutor. More specifically, the authors discuss the role of emotions in construing disagreements and argue that they are crucial in understanding their quality. The significance of such negative emotional stances is also evident in that they may even be extraneous to the particular situation and may not be a reaction but the source of a disagreement.

Relatedly, Adams and Laursen (2007, p.2) argue for the importance of the kind of relationship in which conflict and disagreement occur because in supportive relationships, conflict can be beneficial whereas in unsupportive ones, it can be detrimental. Thus, in my view, two issues arise here, which are worthy of consideration for the analysis of conflict and disagreement: (a) the contribution of emotions which points to the necessity of a multidisciplinary and a multimodal approach and relatedly (b) the exploration of their source and development not only in relation to the current interaction but also in relation to previous ones since any current disagreement or conflict may stem from previous ones. More generally, a current disagreement or conflict may stem from an overall disaffiliative relationship and/or may foster conflict in the future (Sifianou, 2012). These claims point to the significance of context in understanding disagreement and conflict, which will be discussed in the following section.

10.4 The significance of context

As Mey (2011, p.172) states, “there is no text without context” and adds that “speech acts, in themselves, are not ‘real’: they have to be situated in reality, that is, in the context in which
they were produced”, a statement which does not apply only to speech acts. Understanding conflict and disagreement necessitates consideration of both the linguistic and extra-linguistic context in which an interaction occurs. Context itself is a broad, multifaceted and much-debated issue (see, for example, Fetzer and Oishi, 2011; Locher, 2004; McHoul et al., 2008; van Dijk, 2008). As has been argued, “how to theorize context and how to treat context in analysis is perhaps one of the most enduring controversies in pragmatics, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics” (Kasper, 2006, p.301; see also Finkbeiner, Meibauer and Schumacher, 2012; van Dijk, 2007).

Context here should be understood in very broad terms to include what van Dijk (2007, p.286) calls local (or micro) and global (or macro) context. The former includes the actual verbal activity, the setting, the participants and their relationships and the audience, if any present, whereas the latter includes the broader social, cultural and historical surroundings. Between these two ends lie various genres, that is, various kinds of texts, such as an interview, a panel discussion or an academic meeting. They constitute a kind of meso-level which relates and facilitates the production and interpretation of the language produced (see, e.g. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou, forthcoming; Moser and Panaretou, 2011). The distinction between these three levels is obviously an academic convenience since they are all closely interrelated. As Bargela-Chiappini and Harris (1997, p.19) concede, “[a]ction within the immediate context is […] affected by causes operating in the wider context”. In our interactions, who the participants are is of utmost significance. Once participants enter the scene, it becomes extremely difficult to account for what they carry with them, in terms of experience and knowledge (socio-cultural and encyclopaedic) which is relevant or activated on the particular occasion and in terms of personal traits, emotional states and relational histories. Such features then point to the need for a context-specific, multimodal and multidisciplinary approach to the study of both disagreement and conflict. I will start with a brief consideration of the local context and proceed with more global aspects.

### 10.4.1 Local context

As is well known, some people are more argumentative than others, and some may be averse to any kind of opposition. As Teven, McCroskey and Richmond (1998) state, individuals have different degrees of tolerance to disagreement, thus some may avoid entering into conflict and others may be prone to it. Some people may construct relationships where they frequently argue and others where they do not. Moreover, and significantly so, speakers in solidarity relationships will (dis)agree differently and the impact of their disagreement will be different from that of speakers in distant or antagonistic relationships. The affinity between interlocutors has been attributed high significance as to whether disagreement will develop into being destructive or constructive (Teven, McCroskey and Richmond, 1998). The topic of the discussion is obviously significant, but topics are not inherently contentious; whether they are interpreted as such depends, to a great extent, on the identity and the relationship of the participants. Evidently, the distinction between cognitive and affective conflict or task and relationship disagreement, that is, if the conflict or the disagreement is related to the task at hand or the relationship, become highly relevant here. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009, p.282) underlines the significance of one’s interlocutor’s identity in the interpretation of what is said and also in understanding whether the topic discussed is significant or controversial.

Unlike other speech acts, such as requests, disagreements are acts produced in reaction to a preceding prompt (Kakavá, 1993a, p.36; Locher, 2004, p.99), which is not of a specific kind, since any verbal or non-verbal previous act type (or even a notable absence)
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can serve as a trigger of disagreement, if such a prompt is contradicted (Maynard, 1985, p.3) or challenged. This feature makes the emergence of a disagreement highly unpredictable. Besides, disagreements are not simply accepted or rejected but tend to initiate further sequences. Disagreeing responses are frequently followed by the original speaker's further contribution. These change the specifications of context, so that ensuing disagreements may become more and more explicit without mitigation (cf. Kotthoff, 1993, p.195). Research into both children’s disputes (see, e.g. Goodwin, 1993) and on conflict interactions between adults in both institutional and casual settings (see, for example, Gruber, 1998; Hutchby, 1996; Kotthoff, 1993) has shown a reversal of the preference pattern in such contexts. That is, disagreements are enacted as preferred acts, whereas agreements are enacted as dispreferred acts. Let me clarify here that in the discipline of Conversation Analysis, the concept of “preference” is used in different ways (see Bilmes, 1988) but most frequently the terms “preferred” and “dispreferred” seconds/turns/actions are used for cases in which more than one alternative responses are available for interlocutors, as, for instance, an assessment can be followed by an agreement or a disagreement and an invitation can be either accepted or declined. There are exceptions (e.g. responses to compliments or to self-denigrations), but in general, it is positive responses such as agreements and acceptances that are termed “preferred” seconds/turns/actions, whereas negative responses, such as disagreements and declinations are termed “dispreferred”. It should be noted that, according to conversation analysts, these terms do not refer to psychological desires but to structural properties of the interaction. These structural properties are understood in two complementary ways (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998, p.45). First, preference is built into the design of the first turns/utterances which determine the status of the response. In other words, first utterances are designed in ways that invite specific kinds of responses. For instance, a negatively phrased utterance like “You haven’t sent the card to James, have you?” appears to “prefer” a negative response whereas the opposite would be true of its positive counterpart (“You’ve sent the card to James, haven’t you?”). Second, preference is also built into the design features of the second turns (i.e. the responses) as preferred responses tend to be brief and immediate whereas dispreferred ones tend to be elaborate and delayed including hesitation markers, accounts and so on (see, for example, Levinson, 1983). A similar pattern to the one noted earlier of preference reversal is also reported by Blum-Kulka, Blondheima and Hacohenb (2002), who state that within an argument framework, disagreements appear to be preferred and any features of dispreference are viewed as a weakness in that one cannot defend their positions. Such findings indicate the significance of the local interactional context in which interlocutors may be expected to support their own positions rather than agree with their opponents (Kotthoff, 1993; Locher, 2004, p.143).

Viewed from a conversation analytic perspective (see, for example, Drew and Heritage, 1992), context involves the sequential organisation in which an action occurs allowing, in some cases, “certain restricted aspects of context to appear in the analysis” (McHoul, 2008, p.823). More specifically, context consists of the linguistic material preceding and following the action in question, since the details of the talk itself reveal what the interlocutors consider to be the salient features of context by orienting to them. This facilitates their identification by the analyst and renders recourse to external information unnecessary (Schegloff, 1992, p.110). However, it should be noted that a disagreement which emerges in the current interaction may have roots not just in previous turns of the same interaction but also in previous interactions or more broadly in the type of relationship between inter-actants. So, what I am claiming here is that most of our interactions with acquainted others are not complete and finished texts but have roots in previous ones and provide sources for
future ones. What is drawn from previous interactions may be assumed to be shared content and thus, may not surface in the current interaction, which, however, does not mean that it is not salient for the interlocutors. As Dersley and Wootton (2001, pp.612–13) contend, the termination of a current interaction does not mean that the dispute has been resolved. It sets up expectations that the issue may be readdressed on some future occasion.

As mentioned earlier, conversation analysts also see disagreements in negative terms, that is, as dispreferred seconds/turns (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1973/1987), which should be mitigated since they are, “largely destructive for social solidarity” (Heritage, 1984, p.268). Even though they claim that the notion of “preference” relates to the internal structural organisation of turns and their sequential organisation, comments linking preference to social considerations are found even in early conversation analytic work. For instance, Pomerantz (1984, p.77) contends that disagreement is dispreferred because disagreeing with one another is uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, risking threat, insult or offence, whereas agreeing with one another is comfortable, supportive, reinforcing and perhaps sociable, since it demonstrates that interlocutors are like-minded. Sacks (1973/1987, p.69) also notes that the preference for agreement may stem from social expectations, because as he says “it is not that somebody or everybody psychologically does not like to disagree, but they may not like to disagree because they are supposed to not like to disagree; they are supposed to try to agree perhaps”. Interestingly, as Leung (2002, p.8, drawing on Holtgraves, 1997) notes, even though conversation analysts delineate preference organisation as a structural feature of the interaction and thus unrelated to psychological desires, many of the linguistic features marking dispreferred responses are similar to positive politeness strategies, that is, strategies promoting closeness and solidarity. Some such features are also seen as reluctance markers rather than markers of dispreference for Bilmes (1988) which may also be seen as markers of negative politeness, that is, strategies promoting social distance, as one reviewer suggested.

An issue that has been relatively ignored in studies of im/politeness and conflict is that of prosody and non-verbal cues in communication. Notable exceptions are Culpeper (Culpeper et al., 2003, and elsewhere) and Stadler (2006). Culpeper et al. (2003, p.1576) state that “[i]t is sometimes the prosody that makes an utterance impolite – giving truth to the common view that the offence lay in how something was said rather than what was said” (emphasis in the original). Along similar lines, Stadler (2006) argues that prosodic and non-verbal means can convey the opposite from what the verbal message does and drawing on Kendon (2000), she (2006, p.76) further adds that both prosodic and nonverbal cues “convey information about the emotional state of a speaker, about the speech itself, about a speaker’s attitude, about individual differences and interpersonal relationships”. The significance of non-verbal behaviour for the study of politeness is also noted by Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (2006) and Fukushima and Sifianou (2017). Thus, both prosody and non-verbal aspects of interaction constitute significant aspects of local context but there is no room to address them here in the full length and detail they deserve.

10.4.2 Global context

Discussing context at the global level, a significant aspect which has attracted scholarly attention is that of culture. Cultural preferences have been discussed in the relevant literature (see, for example, Kakavá 1993 and elsewhere; Paramasivan, 2007; Schiffrin, 1984; Ting-Toomey, 1994). For instance, early research on disagreement argued that interlocutors in certain national groups prefer disagreements over agreements in daily interactions whose function is sociability rather than disaffiliation. One such case is Schiffrin (1984), who argued that in Jewish culture, there is a preference for disagreement which displays
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interest in and involvement with other people. Blum-Kulka (1982) also observes that Israelis seem to prefer more directness than Americans and it is not uncommon to hear blunt disagreements in social interactions. In relation to Greeks, Kakavá (1993) and Tannen and Kakavá (1992) have shown that disagreements are not dispreferred acts but rather a means of expressing sociability, especially in intimate settings, such as among family members and friends. In contrast, Wierzbicka (1991, p.113, quoting Clancy, 1986) states that in Japanese “overt expression of conflicting opinions is taboo”. Smith (1987, p.2), drawing on Renwick’s (1983) findings, argues that such differences can be observed even in cases where the language is shared but not the culture, as is the case between Australians and Americans. Americans are more inclined to like people who agree with them, whereas Australians tend to be more interested in people who disagree with them. For the former, agreement implies liking and disagreement rejection, whereas for the latter, disagreement is a source of lively conversation. Despite their being overgeneralisations, such statements point to people's different understandings of the function of disagreements.

Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997, p.155) state that “[i]t is an ethnocentric illusion to think that all cultures value agreement more than disagreement” and Blum-Kulka, Blondheim and Hacohenb (2002) conclude that in conflict situations, politeness is not valued in all cultures. In discussing cultural differences, as has been repeatedly argued (see, for example, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 2006; Eelen, 2001; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Mills, 2003; Sifianou and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2017), one should bear in mind that presenting whole cultures as homogeneous and static is untenable. However, such research is useful in foregrounding “variation in what people understand as ‘disagreement’” as Angouri and Locher (2012, p.1561) rightly point out.

10.4.3 Different genres

In institutional contexts, such as workplaces, courtrooms or parliaments, individuals are constrained by the institutional roles they enact and the general contextual norms. These norms differ in the extent that they are rule-bound (Harris, 2001, p.454; Taylor, 2013, p.212). Various kinds of institutional discourse (see, for example, Harris, 2001; Perez de Ayala, 2001; Thornborrow, 2007; Tracy, 2008) and the degree to which they “have routinised the use of certain types of language” (Mills, 2003, p.125) allow for uses that would be interpreted as impolite in other contexts. For instance, the ubiquitous presence of disagreements and conflict in on-line contexts has been well attested in the relevant literature. This presence is context-bound and has been attributed to both the restrictions and the facilities (e.g. anonymity) of the media (see, for example, Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Luzón, 2011, 2013) and is seen as related to the norms of interaction of the specific community and the participants’ expectations (Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Luzón, 2013, p.112). Thus, their realisation bears both similarities and differences when compared with face-to-face encounters.

One particularly contentious issue in studies on conflict and disagreement that clearly lends itself to reflecting on the significance of context is whether conflict and disagreement are constructive or destructive phenomena. Adams and Laursen’s (2007, p.2) suggestion for this impasse is that some disagreement is beneficial for addressing problems and facilitating change, but after a point, additional conflict is counterproductive. Thus, they see duration and the kind of relationship within which the disagreement takes place as significant in understanding the role of conflict. Similarly, Teven, McCroskey and Richmond (1998) report on research which relates perceptions of constructive or destructive conflict to individual differences such as communication skills and affinity between interlocutors. In the
same way that different genres generate different versions of politeness (Lakoff, 1989), different genres will produce different understandings of what conflict is and whether it is constructive or destructive.

Considering a specific genre, that of the Tuscan *Contrasto* duels, Pagliai (2009) illustrates how conflict and cooperation are inextricably interrelated and such verbal duels are highly cooperative achievements, not destructive but rather constructive of social interactions and social organisation. Investigating a different genre, that of the new news interview in the US, dubbed as “news as confrontation”, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009) argues that interviewers have become progressively adversarial abandoning their deference style, noting that this has become “the characteristic *par excellence*” (p.295) of this new genre. Through confrontation with interviewees, alliance is established between the host and his audience. In relation to this specific context, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010, p.47) states elsewhere that conflict is “construed as ultimately constitutive rather than disruptive of social interaction”. In her analysis of interaction in academic weblogs, Luzón (2011) makes a similar point arguing that anti-social markers are used not only to manifest conflict with scholars supporting rival views but also to signal allegiance with those readers who agree with the poster’s perspective. Elsewhere, Luzón (2013) observes that research has shown that in on-line interaction, conflict serves both identity construction and group allegiance. Alliance formation is also an issue addressed by Kangasharju (2002, p.276) in the context of a committee meeting in a Finnish town. She argues that in this context and in the process of disagreement, such alliances may be rewarding for the participants to the extent that they are sometimes tempted to engage in arguments which are not directly relevant to the issues discussed.

In yet another context, that of high school students focusing on solving an algebra problem, Chiu (2008) shows how diversity in group views and argumentation might enhance a group’s micro-creativity, defined as the kind of creativity ordinary people exhibit in everyday life. However, when arguments spill over from the content of the problem into social relationships, concern for the protection of face may adversely affect the problem-solving process. Moreover, he argues that the desire for agreement may be face-supportive but at the same time may inhibit the expression of novel ideas. This view is frequently found in business studies. For instance, Dyer and Song (1998, p.505) state that “[t]eamwork and harmony are worthy objectives but a healthy dose of conflict also plays an important role in fostering innovation” (italics removed) and disagreements far from being exceptional in the workplace constitute “a common daily reality and practice of the employees” (Angouri, 2012, p.1576, but see Marra, 2012).

These cases and many others one could cite indicate that conflict and disagreement cannot be seen a priori as constructive or destructive (Angouri and Locher, 2012). Moreover, there are genres where conflict and disagreement are endemic, such as army training discourse (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996), courtroom discourse (Lakoff, 1989), adolescent discourse (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1990), therapeutic discourse (Lakoff, 1989), parliamentary discourse (Harris, 2001; Perez de Ayala, 2001) and workplace discourse (Angouri, 2012; Angouri and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011), among others. So some scholars have talked about “sanctioned face-threatening activity” and “sanctioned aggressive facework” (Watts, 2003, p.248, p.260) or “sanctioned impoliteness” which is even rewarded in Prime Minister’s Question Time (Harris, 2001). Relatedly, Tracy (2008) argues that in certain contexts, such as local governance meetings, the common-place face-attacks can be accounted for by what she calls “reasonable hostility” (i.e. “emotionally marked criticism of the past and future actions of public persons”) rather than politeness or civility. Such systematic intentionally face-threatening acts could be considered impolite in other contexts.6
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In addition to context, the participants and the affinity between them, language use is vital to conflict. As Fisher and Sharp (2004, p.74) note, “[o]ne word or phrase can help either to resolve a conflict or feed the flames” (see also Janicki, 2015), and both resolution and escalation of conflict are seen as intricately interrelated with issues of im/politeness. This view is expounded by Brown and Levinson (1987, p.26) themselves when they state that research on conflict and confrontation has “obvious implications for any theory of politeness”. This relationship is a negative one in that politeness is viewed as a means to mitigate disagreement and conflict or the reason why they should be avoided in interpersonal contact.

Early politeness research has conceptualised politeness as a means of avoiding conflict and aggression in communication.7 Of the first to consider the issue of politeness, Lakoff (1990, p.34) defined politeness as “a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange”. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987, p.1) quite explicitly associate politeness with aggression stating that politeness “presupposes that potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties”. More specifically, in this model, politeness appears to be understood as redressive action, that is, action taken to counterbalance the damaging effect of face-threatening acts (FTAs), which are acts that have the potential to harm face. In Kasper’s (1990, p.194) terms, politeness understood in this way depicts communication “as a fundamentally dangerous and antagonistic endeavor”. According to Eelen (2001, p.21), one may even argue that this notion of politeness is not only “about the avoidance of potential conflict, but about the defusing of conflict that is intrinsic to the very act of communicating” (emphasis in the original). Likewise, for Leech (1983, p.113): “the function of the Tact maxim is a negative one: it is a means of avoiding conflict”. However, as Locher (2004, p.96) observes, if one is to follow not only Leech’s tact maxim but also his agreement and approbation maxims, one will try to redress disagreement.

Interestingly, even though, as it transpires from the above, conflict and disagreement constitute one of the underlying cornerstones of early theoretical frameworks of politeness, they have been treated as sub-strategies of positive politeness or as a maxim of secondary importance. More specifically, Brown and Levinson posit two complementary positive politeness strategies: “Seek agreement” and “Avoid disagreement”.8 By raising safe topics, such as the beauty of gardens or the incompetence of bureaucracies, one seeks ways to agree and thus to claim common ground with his/her interlocutor. Further, emotional agreement is stressed by repeating part of what the previous speaker has said (Brown and Levinson, 1987, ppl.112–13).9 So strong is the assumed significance for agreement in interaction that disagreement should be avoided through token agreement (“Yes, but …”), pseudo-agreement and even white lies (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pp.114–15).

Leech (1983) posits a Politeness Principle (PP) which is realised through a number of maxims, one of which is the Agreement maxim. Its two sub-maxims are (a) minimise disagreement between speaker and addressee and (b) maximise agreement between speaker and addressee. As Leech (1983, p.133) states, sub-maxim (a) seems more important than (b) because of the more general law that avoiding discord is a weightier consideration than seeking concord.

Though in different ways and to different degrees, early politeness research draws on Grice’s work and, in particular, from the Cooperative Principle (CP) and its attendant maxims. In this context, the CP is a technical term and does not mean that in their interactions people always agree with each other or that they are nice to each other. It rather means that they observe certain regularities and can thus interpret utterances which appear untrue, unnecessarily prolix or
irrelevant. If, for instance, speaker A asks a colleague “Is Jill in her office this morning?” and speaker B responds, “There is a red Clio outside”, on the face of it, the response sounds irrelevant. However, according to Grice, if speaker A assumes that speaker B has been cooperative (i.e. observing the CP) and has produced an appropriate response, s/he will try to find an alternative interpretation. The general assumption is that cooperative behaviour leads to harmonious interactions and amicable relationships with politeness being used to secure them. When cooperation and politeness are in conflict, it is the strict adherence to the maxims of the CP that is sacrificed because in the reverse case, the equilibrium of harmonious relationships is risked (Leech, 1983, p.82). This understanding probably results from the common mistaken assumption that Grice’s CP refers to genuine cooperation or even human benevolence (Leech and Thomas, 1990). However, as the authors (Leech and Thomas, 1990, p.181) note “nothing is further from the truth” and later Thomas (1995, p.62) similarly argues that in setting out this principle, Grice was not suggesting that “people are always good and kind or cooperative in any everyday sense of that word” (see also Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1992). Arguing against the frequent understanding of impoliteness being non-cooperative behaviour, Dynel (2013) claims that the CP always holds whether one is polite or impolite.

There are at least two consequences of this mistaken assumption. On the one hand, it has contributed to the marginalisation of interest in what was seen as disruptive, aggressive, conflictual behaviour (see, for example, Pagliai, 2010a) as well as impolite behaviour. The relatively recent discursive turn in politeness research has redirected attention to impoliteness phenomena, including aggressive and conflictual behaviour, which has been found to be frequent, especially in on-line contexts. On the other hand, it sidesteps the fact that even aggressive behaviour cannot thrive without coordination. Kienpointner (1997) discusses a number of types of rudeness, which should be seen, as he states (p.252), as cooperative communicative behaviour and calls them “cooperative rudeness” (e.g. mock impoliteness and ritual insults). Pagliai (2010b) illustrates this point arguing that cooperation and conflict are not to be seen as two extreme forms of social action but rather as inextricably interrelated, as in verbal duels, which are highly cooperative activities.

Not only disagreement but also conflict has been seen as beneficial within teams and family under certain circumstances (Adams and Laursen, 2007; Jehn, 1995). Considering discussion threads in political newsgroups, Papacharissi (2004) argues that a clear distinction should be drawn between politeness and civility since the former refers to interaction that flows smoothly but at the same time suppresses some of the participants’ emotions and opinions, whereas the latter allows the democratic plurality of conversation to emerge. This is seen as significant because “democracy can merit from heated disagreement” (p.262). This is related to what Tracy (2008) calls “reasonable hostility” which she sees as necessary for “the able functioning of democratic bodies” (p.169, italics removed). Papacharissi’s call for a distinction between civility and politeness is appealing because it reflects understandings outside the field of im/politeness research drawing more from lay understandings and those connecting politeness with formality. Along similar lines and drawing on earlier research (Hwang, 2008), Santana (2014, p.21) defines “discursive incivility” as “expressing disagreement that denies and disrespects the justice of others’ views” and further adds that “incivility can be defined as attacks that go beyond differences in opinion and that devolve into name-calling, contempt and derision”. To my mind, the call for a distinction between civility and politeness evidences the discursive struggle over the value of terms (Watts, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, politeness in early research has been conceptualised as presupposing the potential for aggression which it seeks to disarm (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.1). In this framework, failed attempts or no attempt at keeping aggression at bay are seen
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as cases of impoliteness. For Brown and Levinson (1987, p.5) “politeness has to be communicated, and the absence of communicated politeness may, ceteris paribus, be taken as absence of the polite attitude”. Even though not explicitly stated, this broad understanding implies that impoliteness is the opposite of politeness, a view that does not take into account either local or global contingencies. As a number of scholars (see, for example, Eelen, 2001; Kienpointner, 1997; Mills, 2003) have argued, politeness and impoliteness should not be seen as polar opposites since they function in different ways. Moreover, neither should politeness be seen only in positive terms nor impoliteness only in negative terms (Mills, 2003, p.125). As Kienpointner (1997, p.282) states “it does not seem self-evident to consider politeness as unmarked, normal communicative behavior, whereas rudeness, as a (partial) violation of politeness maxims, would always be marked and/or exceptional behavior”. For instance, in English-speaking societies, characterisations of politeness “range from socially ‘correct’ or appropriate behaviour, through cultivated behaviour, considerateness displayed to others, self-effacing behaviour, to negative attributions such as standoffishness, haughtiness, insincerity, etc.” (Watts, 2003, pp.8–9).

As is well-known, and as transpires from the above discussion, in early politeness research, disagreement and conflict by extension are seen to verge on impoliteness and should thus be mitigated or avoided. In conversation analytic terms, disagreement is typically understood as a dispreferred second (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1973/1987), which is, however, a rather restricted view of disagreements. Since politeness is a situated evaluation, we cannot decide a priori whether disagreement or even conflict is polite or impolite. In addition, conflict and disagreement are themselves situated evaluations. The situation becomes even more complicated because all three lexical items are used in everyday par-lance and are also used as technical notions in theoretical constructs.

10.6 Concluding remarks

Given the complex interplay of the various parameters (e.g. context, genres, participants) discussed above among others, it appears that disagreements and conflict cannot be given all-encompassing definitions. In addition, they cannot be straightforwardly labelled as (im)polite or (dis)preferred, nor as beneficial or detrimental actions. It is also worth noting that even though we appear to be discussing the issues involved in terms of dichotomies, it is clear that conflict and disagreement, much like im/politeness, form continua. In other words, neither conflict nor disagreement are either constructive or destructive, either polite or impolite.

On a purely theoretical level, it sounds reasonable to suggest that seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement and conflict (Brown and Levinson, 1987) are polite ways to behave since they contribute to harmonious relationships. However, if we consider not only genres of argumentative language (such as verbal duels) but also actual encounters with family and friends in both offline and online contexts, this appears to be a rather restricted understanding. Disagreements and conflict seem to reflect and be more related to broader face (or rather identity) issues, than to more restricted politeness concerns. As Papacharissi (2004, p.279) contends, “impoliteness is not so bad; it implies emotion, and emotion implies compassion, which in turn implies humanity”, it is rather “impeccable incivility”, that is, “incivility without a trace of politeness” that should worry us.

Moreover, the nature of the relationship between interlocutors and the nature of context significantly affect the construction and interpretation of (dis)agreement and whether it will escalate into conflict. Thus, a multimodal and multidisciplinary approach may assist in our better understanding of these phenomena.
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Notes

1 In relation to this distinction and in the context of academic seminars, Allwood (1993, p.6) suggests that emotional and personal conflicts should be prevented, whereas cognitive conflict should be encouraged.
2 In the relevant literature, individual differences have been discussed under the term “tolerance for disagreement” in an attempt to explain why some people will perceive the occurrence of conflict much sooner than others (Teven, McCroskey and Richmond, 1998).
3 As D’Errico et al. (2015, vii) argue, communication in conflict situations includes in addition to threatening language, threatening facial expressions, loud voice, angry gaze etc. all of which clearly point to its multimodality.
4 Gross et al. (2004, p.254) state that when team members distrust one another, they are more likely to ascribe conflict to personal rather than task-related issues.
5 For the relationship between preference and implicature, see Bilmes (1988).
6 Culpeper (2011, p.217) argues that even though such impoliteness is sanctioned or legitimated, this does not mean that people in such contexts do not take offence at perceived face-attacks.
7 This emphasis on politeness as a means of avoiding conflict and discord is problematic since it seems to ignore politeness as a means of maintaining or creating involvement and solidarity (see, for example, Sifianou, 1992, p.83; Locher, 2004, p.65).
8 Elsewhere (Sifianou, 1992, 2012), I express reservations as to whether these are actually positive politeness strategies, but this issue falls beyond the scope of this paper.
9 The issue of repetition is a clear case pointing to the significance of context, as has also been associated with conflict through format tying, i.e. the strategic reuse of material from previous moves (Corsaro and Maynard, 1996).
10 Kienpointner (1997) prefers the term “rudeness” for all kinds of verbal impoliteness.

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