11.1 Introduction

Arguments and conflict involve disagreement or opposition between different parties. In this chapter, we discuss the way in which the initial disagreeing or opposing move is itself very often triggered by some kind of (perceived) offence on the part of another party and how construing the conduct of others as offensive can thus occasion conflict.

Consider Excerpt 11.1 from a recording of a telephone conversation between two friends. Beth has been talking with Alison about posts to a Christian discussion list about prayers and how participants are sometimes sanctioned for inappropriate posts. At the point the excerpt begins, Beth starts recounting how such sanctions, and the offending actions that are being sanctioned themselves, can occasion arguments among members of the discussion list. In this case, it was a “sexually perverted kinda jokey” posting (lines 5–6) that caused “everyone” to be offended (lines 6–7) and ensuing argument about whether the post should have been the object of sanction (lines 7–8).  

(11.1) CallHome: eng4624: 1:38

1 B: there was this big thing on last year and I- I
2 took myself off because I didn’t want to deal
3 with it this um sister she wrote about uh
4 this like cookie dough thing you know one of
5 those like sexually perverted kinda jokey kinda
6 postings thing and so, everyone was so
7 offended an- and like (1.3) you know (0.6) a lot
8 of people arguing back and forth, they got really
9 [pet]ty and
10 A: [mm]
11 B: it happens a lot you know? it happens a lot.
12 (0.4)
13 B: stuff gets (0.5) you know g- taken out
14 of context and people get offended and stuff
Two key points about the relationship between offence and conflict become apparent in Beth’s recounting of the events on the discussion list. First, taking offence can lead to acrimonious conflict, even in a community of practice where the focus is (nominally at least) on supporting others in the group (Graham, 2007). It is notable that the offensiveness of the “jokey” posting itself is reported here as the object of widespread dispute (lines 7–8) and that the parties involved became “petty” (lines 8–9).

Second, reporting about transgressions, and the responses of others to those offences, creates opportunities for moralising or moral talk, that is, (dis)affiliating with (shared) moral values (Bergmann, 1998; Luckmann, 1995), as well as for positioning the moral self vis-à-vis others (Douglas, 1970; Garfinkel, 1956). In the course of Beth’s telling, there are ample opportunities for Alison to express support for the (tacit) stances Beth takes here that such arguments are unpleasant and should be avoided (lines 1–3), or that people take offence too easily (implicit in lines 5–7, given Beth does not appear to include herself amongst those who were offended) or that offence is caused by things being “taken out of context” (lines 13–15). However, Alison passes up these opportunities. For instance, in the relatively long pause of 1.3 seconds (Jefferson 1989) in line 7, Alison withholds taking a stance on Beth’s report that “everyone was so offended”, while in line 10, Alison only offers a continuer (“mm”) rather than indicating her stance on Beth’s reporting of the ensuing argument.

Indeed, Alison does not take any particular evaluative or affective stance on the legitimacy of taking offence at all, but rather offers an additional account as to why offence-taking in that group can lead to conflict (lines 16–18): that is, that there are different kinds of people with presumably different sets of beliefs. Beth endorses this account, ostensibly as something she did not previously realise (lines 19–21). In short, an opportunity for affiliation between these two parties about the right/wrongness of what happened on the discussion list is not interactionally accomplished here. Instead, the two participants interactionally accomplish moral grounds for not taking a stance vis-à-vis the (allegedly) offensive posting and ensuing arguments. What we can see, then, is that whether interactants themselves end up taking a moral stance or not, the conflicts that ensue when people do take offence offer an opportunity for both the involved parties, and those observing those conflicts, to “interactively construct and/or reconfirm a common moral ground” (Günthner, 1995, p.170).

It is also evident from the above brief discussion that the notion of offence itself is multifaceted. This reflects the relatively complex semantics (in English) of the related terms “offence”/“offense”, “offend”, “offended” and “offensive”. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018), for instance, “offense” has multiple senses relevant to the study of conflict talk:

1. something that outrages the moral or physical senses;
2. a breach of a moral or social code;
3. the state of being insulted or morally outraged;
The notion of offence can thus refer to: (1) interpersonally transgressive conduct; (2) a (perceived) moral breach or transgression; (3) a complex moral emotion occasioned by (perceived) transgressions; (4) the acts of “causing” and/or “taking” of offence – actions which are themselves morally loaded, as they both implicate moral evaluations and are themselves open to moral evaluation; as well as (5) the act of verbally attacking someone (as opposed to defending oneself).

Given the inherent conceptual complexity of offence, it is perhaps no surprise that the research literature on offence is dispersed across a range of different disciplines, including linguistics (e.g. Culpeper, 2011; Günthner, 1995), media and communication (e.g. Durant, 2010; Tagg, Seargeant and Brown, 2017), philosophy (e.g. Barrow, 2005; Weckert, 2007), social psychology (e.g. Poggi and D’Errico, 2018; Smith, Phillips and King, 2010), law (e.g. von Hirsch and Simester, 2006) and sociology (e.g. Bergmann, 1998; Campbell and Manning, 2014), among others. In light of the vast scope of this literature, then, our aim in this chapter is to draw attention to a number of key distinctions that are of particular import when studying the relationship between offence and conflict talk. More precisely, we focus on the distinctions between “causing”/“giving” and “taking” offence, and with respect to the latter, between “feeling”/“being” offended as a kind of moral-affective stance and “taking” offence as a form of social action, that is, “claiming”/“indicating” that (some)one is offended. We argue that the latter, in particular, is what gives rise to overt conflict and so is deserving of more in-depth study.

The chapter begins by reviewing extant work on causing offence and what counts as “offensive”. We then argue, in Section 11.3, that “causing offence” should be distinguished from “taking offence”, and that the latter can constitute a social action that is itself open to moral evaluation, and for that reason can seed conflict. We next briefly review, in Section 11.4, studies that have focused on the way in which taking offence can lead to conflict in various kinds of situated discourse. We draw together some of the theoretical threads that emerge from these studies through a brief case study focusing on accusations and conflict talk arising in the Australian version of the reality television show Big Brother. We conclude by suggesting possible future avenues of research and the importance of examining causing offence, whether it involves giving, claiming or taking offence, in a range of situated discourse settings in different languages and varieties therein.

11.2 Causing offence

The analysis of causing/giving offence, as the term suggests, focuses on how particular forms of conduct can be treated as transgressions that are potentially offensive to other parties.

A transgression involves a breach of some form of (perceived) moral, social or legal code that can be variously referred to as an affront, fault, infraction, infringement, misdeed, misdemeanour, offence, sin, wrongdoing and so on. A line is commonly drawn between legal and moral transgressions (or offences). Notably, in Western societies, “being offended is still generally recognised as something in principle to be balanced against benefits of freedom of expression” (Durant, 2010, pp.200–1), although this ideological commitment does not extend, as Weckert (2007) points out, to all societies around the world. There is also sometimes political pressure for the line between the two to be shifted (Smith, Phillips and King, 2010; von Hirsch and Simester, 2006).
Moral transgressions have, of course, a different basis from legal ones. One key question for researchers seeking to better understand the causes of offence is thus: what are the moral grounds invoked by interactants in order to construe some conduct as a form of transgression? Durant (2010, p.202) suggests that “much of the day-to-day arbitration of alleged ‘offensiveness’ does not rely on formal regulation or law at all. Instead it is a matter of adaptation by individuals and groups to tacit conventions governing communicative behaviour”. However, this begs the question of what constitutes these “tacit conventions” and how are they instantiated and regulated in ordinary day-to-day interaction? For the most part, moral transgressions are conceptualised as threats to the moral (Douglas, 1970) or sacred self (Goffman, 1967). These threats to the moral self (or the group to which self belongs) are theorised to varying degrees of granularity, ranging from relatively undifferentiated notions such as personal dignity (Wierzbicka, 2001) or face (Bousfield, 2008), through to more complex frameworks that make distinctions between different types of face and solidarity rights (Culpeper, 2011) or different types of interpersonal expectations (Tayebi, 2016). Culpeper et al. (2010), for instance, who draw on Spencer-Oatey’s (2005) rapport management framework to examine types of offence across British, Chinese, Finish, German and Turkish informants, distinguish between seven loci of moral breaches or transgressions: quality face, (social) identity face, relational face, equity rights, association rights, (cultural) taboos and physical self. Tayebi (2016), on the other hand, employs a bottom-up approach to tease out the different interpersonal expectations that are held to underpin moral transgressions by Persian speakers, namely, relational expectations (foreseeability, equity, face-saving expectations), deference entitlement expectations, reciprocity expectations and ritual-based expectations. In all cases, however, the perceived or attributed degree of intentionality (Culpeper, 2011; see also Barrow, 2005), as well as the relational history of those participants involved (Tayebi, 2016), is argued to influence the degree to which the conduct in question is regarded as offensive.

Studies of causing offence have also focused on the forms of conduct that lend themselves to being regarded as offensive. Different typologies of these transgressive forms of conduct broadly fall into two camps: behaviourist and linguistic.2 Behaviourist typologies of offensive conduct attempt to pinpoint specific forms of behaviour, or the non-performance of expected behaviours, that cause offence. Such behaviours are treated as (proto)typically offensive, either to some people or to all people in a society (Barrow, 2005). They range from bad language, insults, hate speech, incitement, unspeakable ideas and blasphemy (Durant, 2010), through to invasions of privacy, failed humour, inappropriate behaviour or simply “values and opinions one disagrees with” (Tagg, Seargeant and Brown, 2017, p.71). Notably, some forms of behaviour, such as racist language, are claimed to be “inherently offensive” irrespective of whether anyone has actually taken offence (Barrow, 2005). Whether these forms of conduct are treated as offensive to some or all, or as inherently offensive, can, of course, be subject to considerable dispute. Through such disputes, the ideological discourses underlying arguments about what can be legitimately treated as offensive conduct become apparent (Moulinou, 2014; O’Driscoll, 2013).

Language-based typologies of offensive conduct focus on identifying “act[s] of communication intended to be interpreted by the hearer as one that makes him/her experience a negative affective response, such as feeling hurt, humiliated, debased or in some way degraded” (Piskorska, 2017, p.52). These causes of offence are often theorised as impoliteness strategies (Culpeper, 2015). Such strategies are generally divided into those that arise “on record” through conventionalised formulae and those that arise “off record” through implication (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2011; Piskorska, 2017). Examples of the former
(in British English) include insults (e.g. “You are so stupid”), dismissals (e.g. “Get lost”) and threats (e.g. “I’m gonna box your ears if you don’t [X]”). More granular typologies of impoliteness strategies that place such strategies on an explicit–implicit continuum have also been proposed. Mateo and Yus (2013), for instance, develop a taxonomy of conventional through to innovative insults that are recognised by the interactants as being used in order to offend them. Being offended and, as a result, acting in an emotionally aggressive way has been associated with insults directed at one’s perception of honour (i.e. diminishing one’s status) (Mosquera et al., 2002).

In contrast to the growing number of studies of impoliteness formulae or more explicit types of impoliteness strategies, there have been relatively fewer studies to date of indirect forms of impoliteness. Culpeper (2011, 2015), for instance, distinguishes between convention-driven, form-driven and context-driven forms of implicational impoliteness, but draws his examples primarily from reports of “offensive” incidents. The relative lack of studies focused on the analysis of implicated impoliteness in interaction is somewhat surprising given the fact that implicitly communicated offence may be more biting or hurtful than explicitly communicated offence (Culpeper, 2011; Haugh, 2015a; Piskorska, 2017; Tayebi, 2018). However, this is perhaps a function of the fact that inferences are much more challenging for researchers to locate in discourse compared with conventionalised formulae.

A key assumption made by many researchers in regard to the causing of offence is that no language is inherently impolite or offensive, and thus not everything that is potentially offensive will be perceived as such in every situation. Indeed, there are various forms of discourses in which the aforementioned impoliteness strategies are more likely to occur, such as in military and civilian police training (e.g. Culpeper, 2011), parking disputes (e.g. Bousfield, 2008) or in exploitative television shows where impoliteness is treated as a form of spectacle (e.g. Culpeper, 2005; Culpeper and Holmes, 2013; Lorenzo-Dus, 2009; Lorenzo-Dus, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013). It has been claimed that impoliteness in such contexts is sanctioned as a form of “normal and expectable communicative behaviour” (Kienpointner, 2008, p.244) or “rule-governed rudeness” (Lakoff, 1989, p.123), and therefore no offence is caused, at least on-record or publicly.

However, even in discourse contexts where impoliteness is claimed to be sanctioned, people can and evidently “do still take offence” (Culpeper, 2011, p.217; see also Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus, 2013; Sinkeviciute, 2015). This begs the question of when these kinds of impoliteness strategies give rise to conflict. Given arguments or conflict arise when one party opposes an antecedent (non-)verbal action (Coulter, 1990; Maynard, 1985), analysing the responses of parties to (perceived) offences is critical to answering this question. In order to further our understanding of the relationship between offence and conflict talk, then, it is important to consider how people also take offence.

11.3 Taking offence

While communication scholars and linguists have tended to focus on the causes of offence, moral philosophers have generally focused their attention on the taking of offence (e.g. Barrow, 2005; Haydon, 2006; Weckert, 2007). An important point made by these scholars is that:

the term “taking offence” is ambiguous. It may apply only to the subjective perception: a person is offended by, or – we can say – takes offence at the remark of another, but says and does nothing about it. We could call this “passively taking offence”, though an
everyday and less ambiguous term for it is simply “being offended”. On the other hand, a person may take offence in the sense of actually registering, to the other, the fact that they have been offended. I shall call this “actively taking offence”.


In other words, to take offence involves either a negative affective state (i.e. feeling/being offended) or a negatively valenced stance (i.e. claiming/indicating (some)one has taken offence). The former is subjective and so only formally knowable to the party concerned (although we might make inferences about how others feel based on their response to an offending event), while the latter is intersubjective in that an evaluative stance is interactionally accomplished with other parties (Du Bois, 2007). In both cases, however, what is involved is not simply some kind of negative emotion (e.g. anger, annoyance, displeasure, hurt, indignation, resentment, etc.), but a moral judgment that the conduct in question is somehow bad, wrong, inappropriate (Barrow, 2005, pp.268–9; Weckert, 2007, p.27) and so constitutes a moral transgression (affront, fault, infraction, infringement, misdeed, misdemeanor, wrongdoing, etc.). Taking offence thus involves a moral emotion (Haidt, 2003), that is, an emotion grounded in (tacit) claims about the rightness/wrongness of the conduct in question.

11.3.1 Taking offence as moral emotion

Feeling offended is generally understood to involve subjective experience of a negative emotion that is grounded in moral evaluations of the conduct of another party who is perceived as an offender (Mosquera et al., 2002; Slaby and Stephan, 2008). As a result of someone taking offence, the target feels strong negative emotions, especially if the offensive action is seen as intentional, albeit not necessarily offence-intentional (Weckert, 2007). In other words, offence is primarily viewed as “some sort of hurt or pain, displeasure, disgust, mental distress or mental suffering of some variety” (Weckert, 2007, p.26). However, as Barrow (2005) argues, feeling offended should not be equated with something being offensive. While someone might feel offended, this does not necessarily mean that what produced that feeling was offensive in the eyes of others, and so it is not necessarily actionable.

Feeling offended is thus considered to be an inherently subjective experience, albeit rooted in that individual’s understanding of (shared) moral values. The inherent subjectivity of feeling offended raises a key analytical question, namely, for whom is this conduct considered offensive? For instance, refusing to assist a friend at a charity event might cause someone to feel offended, especially if they have tried hard to arrange the tickets in question, but even though this might be evaluated as inconsiderate by many, this is clearly only offensive to the party concerned (although others may well be recruited to agree that it is offensive).

In general, the focus of studies examining feelings of offence has been on interactions which take place in public or in multi-party settings where, apart from the offender and the offended, there are other interlocutors in front of whom the (perceived) offensive event takes place. Studies of (ostensibly) pro-social or jocular teasing, for instance, have found that targets of teases are more likely to take offence than expected by the producers of those teases (e.g. Kowalski, 2000). However, while tease-targets may feel offended, they often do not actively take offence (e.g. Bollmer et al., 2003), or they may do so “backstage” with third parties rather than with the offending party (Sinkeviciute, 2017a), particularly in multi-party settings. However, feeling offended is clearly not limited to public settings, but
can also be occasioned by (transgressive) conduct in private settings, especially in relation to the expectations associated with more intimate relationships (Poggi and D’Errico, 2018; Tayebi, 2016).

11.3.2 Taking offence as social action

Taking offence also refers to a form of social action where some conduct on the part of another party is construed as a moral transgression and/or offensive and grounds for expressing (moral) indignation (Garfinkel, 1956; Günthner, 1995; Moulinou, 2014). Taking offence in this sense is thus morally loaded, not only because it is grounded in a moral judgment, but also, as a consequence, the party taking offence is also open to moral judgment by others (Haugh, 2015b; Kádár and Márquez Reiter, 2015; Mitchell and Haugh, 2015).

The grounds for the moral judgments that underpin the taking of offence are instantiated and regulated through discourse in ordinary and institutional interactions (Bergmann, 1998; Garfinkel, 1967; Luckmann, 1995). One consequence of the inherently discursive nature of those moral grounds is that “one can choose not to make such a judgment” (Barrow, 2005, p.269; see also Mitchell and Haugh, 2015), which means the legitimacy of taking offence is itself open to moral evaluation (Haugh, 2015b). In other words, by taking offence, the interlocutors can also put themselves into a situation of being held morally accountable for this taking of offence (Haugh, 2015a, 2015b; Sinkeviciute, 2017b, 2017c), for instance, as someone who takes offence too readily or is overly sensitive. Claiming offence may, therefore, be oriented to, in some instances at least, as a delicate or sensitive social action (Günthner, 1995, p.172; Haugh, 2015b, p.42).

Offence can be taken more or less explicitly (Haugh, 2015b). One of the most explicit ways in which offence can be claimed is through metapragmatic comments where individuals refer to their own emotions or those of others (e.g. anger, frustration), or explicitly refer to the taking of offence through such phrases as “I was really offended”, “I take offence at that”, “that’s offensive” and so on (e.g. Spencer-Oatey, 2011; Sinkeviciute, 2017c; Tayebi, 2016). When taking offence in interaction, an individual engages in a pragmatic act in its own right; that is, they construct events as involving some kind of offence and construe another party as responsible for that moral transgression. In other words, irrespective of whether they actually feel offended or not, speakers choose to claim that an offending event has taken place and, as a consequence of that, refer to themselves as offended. Such claims can be occasioned by prior aggressive behaviours, humorous or not, which can, in turn, generate conflict, depending on the response of the party being held responsible for the (perceived) offensive conduct. However, it should be pointed out that explicitly claiming offence, like all metapragmatic comments (Hübler and Bublitz, 2007), may be strategic. For instance, when people deliberately claim offence, even if they do not really feel that way, in order to promote their own moral superiority (Lægaard, 2007).

(Perceived) transgressions can also occasion a whole range of social actions through which offence is implicitly taken, including complaining (e.g. Drew, 1998; Schegloff, 2005), criticising (e.g. Morris, 1988), reproaching (Günthner, 1996), blaming (e.g. Pomerantz, 1978), denouncing (e.g. Garfinkel, 1956; Günthner, 1995) and accusing (e.g. Garcia, 1991; Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2018). Complaints about moral transgressions by third parties, in particular, have been the object of considerable work in the fields of conversation analysis and pragmatics (e.g. Boxer, 1993; Drew, 1998; Schegloff, 2005). These sorts of indirect/third party complaints are frequently designed to solicit affiliative responses, that is, a joint expression of indignation at the reported transgression (Drew, 1998).
Günthner (1995, p.170) raises the question of “why [do] members of a community react with rejection and strong indignation when they hear about morally deviant actions which do not directly affect themselves”. She then suggests that through doing so, not only do “participants interactively negotiate and confirm the ‘moral infrastructure of their social life-world’” (Günthner, 1995, p.157), but also position themselves as morally superior to the offender (and perhaps superior to those who do not or are not able to perceive the transgression in question) (see also Moulinou, 2014).

Direct complaints or reproaches, on the other hand, do not recurrently occasion affiliative responses. Günthner (1996) argues that this is because reproaches involve calling attention to misconduct on the part of the addressee, and in holding those addressees morally responsible for this misconduct, the producer of the reproach initiates a remedial interchange (Goffman, 1971), that is, where they are seeking an offer of redress (e.g. an apology) for that misconduct from that addressee. However, she goes on to argue that “the initiation of a remedial interchange inevitably opens up the possibility that instead of performing remedial work the co-participant may challenge the initiator’s legitimacy and a quarrel may ensue” (Günthner, 1996, p.276). Accusations have also been argued to prefer denials (Coulter, 1990; Garcia, 1991; Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2018) and so more likely to occasion conflict.

Overall, then, it has been found that some social actions through which offence is taken are less likely to give rise to conflict (e.g. indirect complaints) while others are more likely to occasion conflict (e.g. direct complaints, reproaches, accusations). In the remainder of this chapter, we thus move to examine in more detail situations in which causing and/or taking offence leads to conflict in order to further our understanding of the relationship between the two.

11.4 Offence and conflict in interaction

Conflict can occur at various levels – interpersonal, intergroup or international – where incompatibility in expectations about what counts as appropriate conduct between people, groups or nations can arise. As we have discussed in the previous sections, there are different pragmatic practices that can lead to offence being given and taken, which can, in turn, provoke conflict. Genuine impoliteness, including direct insults, name-calling and unmitigated (face) threats (e.g. Bernal, 2008; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Culpeper, 2011; Sinkeviciute, 2015) is frequently linked with conflict. Sinkeviciute (2015), for instance, lists three main triggers in interaction for perceiving something as genuinely impolite and thus likely to cause conflict: previous impolite (non-)verbal behaviours (e.g. using expletives), implied negativity (suggesting someone’s behaviour is inappropriate and indirectly criticising it) and personal dislike. However, conflictual situations can also be occasioned as a result of, for example, unfulfilled expectations in intimate relationships (e.g. Tayebi, 2016), disagreements, criticisms or accusations (e.g. Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2018) or different understandings of what counts as appropriate or acceptable humour (e.g. Haugh, 2017; Sinkeviciute, 2017b).

Conflict sequences have been argued to arise when the targets themselves (Bousfield, 2007, 2008; Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003) or co-present third parties (Dobs and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Kádár and Márquez Reiter, 2015) express opposition to an antecedent offending action through either “offensive” (e.g. insults, threats, etc.) or “defensive” (e.g. direct contradiction, dismissals, accounts, etc.) counter moves. Bousfield (2007, 2008) notes that such counter-responses (whether defensive or offensive) can be
considered as offending actions themselves, that is, as “impolite”, thus resulting in heated conflict. However, it is also clear that conflicts do not always arise despite offence being caused. The likelihood of (perceived) offence occasioning conflict is arguably dependent on the specific parties involved (including their relational history, if any, and their own individual proclivities), aspects of the situational context (including, for instance, the stakes involved in that interaction), as well as the specific design of the social actions through which offence is taken. The relationship between offence and conflict is evidently complex. In the remainder of this section, we thus focus on the different settings in which taking offence can give rise to conflict.

Conflict talk varies in the extent to which it is interpersonal or intergroup in nature, and the extent to which it occurs in private or public communications. Although there are numerous studies of conflict in interpersonal, private settings (e.g. Coulter, 1990; Dersley and Wootton, 2000; Hutchby, 1996; Maynard, 1985), studies of how (taking) offence can lead to conflict in such settings are remarkably few in number. Tayebi (2018), for instance, examines the taking of offence in intimate settings in response to what is termed *tikkeh* in Persian: a form of insinuation where the implication of an impolite belief is interpreted as intentionally communicated. Haugh (2015b), on the other hand, examines the taking of offence in settings where participants are getting acquainted. One noticeable difference between the two studies is that taking offence is treated as a sensitive or delicate social action in the latter case, but not in the former. There is not, however, a straightforward relationship between the degree of intimacy between participants and the extent to which conflict arises when disagreements occur (Ogiermann, 2019). While it is evident that the extant relationship between parties as well as the way in which offence is taken can impact on the likelihood of that taking of offence leading to conflict talk, the taking of offence is itself always a locally situated phenomenon.

In contrast to the paucity of studies of offence and conflict talk in private settings, studies of the relationship between offence and conflict talk are more numerous in the case of online, mediated settings and broadcast talk. Analyses of how offence can seed intergroup conflicts in discussion boards or Facebook (Ferenčík, 2017; Kádár, Haugh and Chang, 2013; Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2018; Sinkeviciute, 2018), for instance, have focused on the role of identity (politics) in the taking of offence. Studies of broadcast talk, in contrast, have demonstrated how interpersonal conflicts in televised fly-on-the-wall documentaries, game shows or reality shows often serve as a form of public “spectacle” or “entertainment” (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2005; Culpeper and Holmes, 2013; Lorenzo-Dus, 2009; Lorenzo-Dus, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013). We can nevertheless learn much about the relationship between offence and conflict talk through such studies. Kádár and Márquez Reiter (2015), for instance, show how offence can be taken on behalf of others through what they term “bystander intervention”. In another study, Haugh and Culpeper (2018) draw attention to the way in which the taking of offence in response to the (ostensibly) jocular use of a racial slur is treated as a sensitive, dispreferred social action in an interaction between housemates on the television reality game *Big Brother*, while a denunciation of that offence is delivered as a preferred social action in subsequent televised interviews with the offender in question. Such settings are also often rich in metapragmatic expressions relating to the taking of offence that allow us to explore how the relationship between ostensibly jocular teasing or mocking is nevertheless treated as offensive (Sinkeviciute, 2017c).

However, while interpersonal conflict is typically associated with private communications, and intergroup conflict with public communications (Douglas, 1970), the lines between
Offence and conflict talk

Interpersonal, intergroup and institutional conflict have become increasingly blurred with the rise of social media in both private and public life (Lakoff, 2005). O’Driscoll (2013, p.380), for instance, points to the publicisation of seemingly private, interpersonal offences, that is, where the privately offensive is treated as publicly offensive, thereby attracting institutional sanction. He suggests that this is indicative of a shift in public discourse away from valuing “freedom of expression” to one in which “decorum takes priority over free expression and possibly insulting attributions become inadmissible” (ibid., p.379). Nowhere is this more evident than in the rise of the phenomenon of reporting and documenting “microaggressions” (Campbell and Manning, 2014, p.693), that is, remarks or glances that are interpreted as communicating “hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” irrespective of whether or not any such slights or insults were intended. These phenomena are well worth investigating further from a linguistic perspective, given the taking of offence is an increasingly high-stakes move in both private and public life.

11.5 Accusations and conflict talk

In this section, we briefly conclude our overview of the relationship between offence and conflict talk with a case study focusing on a conflict sequence taken from the Australian version of the reality television show *Big Brother* in order to illustrate how some social actions, specifically accusations, appear designed to seed conflict.

Accusations involve an assertion that the accused has done something wrong (Castor, 2015; Coulter, 1990; Garcia, 1991). As Castor (2015, p.20) argues, “accusations label and assess actions and by extension, label and assess or blame agents”. Making an accusation thus involves holding the accused accountable for some form of moral transgression or wrongdoing, and so constitutes a means by which interactants indicate that they have taken offence (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2018). There is also evidence from studies of accusations in everyday interactions that they frequently lead to some kind of interpersonal conflict (Coulter, 1990; Garcia, 1991). This is because “accusations engender return accusations, counter-assertions [...] or denials” (Garcia, 1991, p.821).

Haugh and Sinkeviciute (2018) have recently argued that the propensity of accusations to provoke denials or counter-accusations explains, at least in part, the tendency for accusations to engender conflict talk. The sequence we examine here to illustrate this claim is taken from the Australian version of *Big Brother*. We have chosen this excerpt because a seemingly mild implication of a fairly trivial, low-stakes wrongdoing nevertheless results in extended conflict talk between two members of the household, Angie and Estelle. The conflict in this sequence is not as overt as others we have examined in which participants are shouting and swearing at each other (see e.g. Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2018), but the tension between the two is clearly palpable. Moreover, while both Angie and Estelle claim that they are not going to argue with the other party, it is nevertheless evident that this is exactly what they are doing. In the following brief analysis, we examine how this comes about. We draw particular attention to the way in which a denial in response to an implicated assertion of wrongdoing by Estelle – in this case, interrupting Angie – not only constructs that assertion as an accusation, but in so doing leads to subsequent conflict talk between the two.

The excerpt begins as Angie is talking to Ava (who is vegetarian) about what the latter can eat, because no tofu has been ordered for her. Six members of the household are in the kitchen at that time: A = Angie; E = Estelle; Av = Ava; R = Ray; G = George; B = Bradley.
AUS BB: A&E: 0:22

1 A: the <[sta:]ples?> (.) which you [can] eat but=
2 E: [yep ] [mm.]
3 A: =you’re not gonna wanna eat peaches and be=-
4 E: [looks at Ava, smiling]  
5 A: = bea[ns #every da:y#]
6 E: [the thing is we’re] like [I was ] just
7 Av: [no::·]
8 E: looking [at we’ve cook]ed
9 A: [u h h : : m ]
10 A: |raising hand|
11 E: we’re (. ) li[ke once from] today we’re gonna=
12 A: [ o k a : y ]
13 A: |abruptly drops hand|
14 E: =have=
15 R: =I’ve got [eggs and] tuna: and you eat fish=
16 E: [(only ) ]
17 R: =don’t you:
18 (0.3)
19 E: WHat An↓gie
20 A: I ↑just wa[s mid]-sentence ba::be
21 R: [ Ava ]
22 (0.3)
23 A: | smiling |
24 (0.7)
25 Av: ◦ohhh◦=
26 A: =[don’t worry ]
27 E: =>[I was ↑talk]ing at< the same ↑ti:me as you:
28 (. ) we both were talking at the [same ti]:me =
29 A: [ o k a y ]
30 A: ◦↑okay.◦
31 A: | not looking at Estelle, shaking her head|
32 A: [I’m h h like]
33 (1.4)
34 A: I’m not gonna argue
35 (0.2)
36 E: I’m not h- I’m not arguing with you I’m just
37 saying we were <both speaking> at the same
38 ti:[me]
39 A: [o: ]kay. #I just felt like I was just mid-
40 conversation just then#
41 G: [bangs cans on the table]
42 E: [L A D I E S>]
43 G: [<L A D I E S> ]
44 (0.2)
45 G: ↓that’s e][ough e[ough (at ease) ]
46 E: [we were both spea]king like
The transgression in question, the “interruption”, occurs in lines 5–6, when Estelle starts addressing Ava in overlap with Angie, who is also addressing Ava. Overlapping talk does not necessarily constitute interruption, as long argued by conversation analysts (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974), even in cases where it occurs some distance from a seemingly legitimate point for speaker change (Jefferson, 1986). It has thus been argued that there is no independent or objective definition of an interruption (Bilmes, 1997), but rather that it is a moral category where one party draws attention to a failing on the part of another party (Hutchby, 1992; Schegloff, 2001), specifically “a hostile transgression upon another person’s speaking rights” (Weatherall and Edmonds, 2018, p.11). Schegloff (2001) argues that construing prior talk as an “interruption” is grounds for complaint, which leaves that party open to the charge of being “inattentive”, “impolite” or “rude” (Drew, 2009, p.72; Hutchby, 2008, p.227). What is notable here is the way in which Angie introduces this charge.

Subsequent to Ava responding to Angie’s question (line 7), Angie alludes to the interruptive nature of Estelle’s prior talk (in line 6), through a gambit to re-take the floor (lines 9–10) that is delivered in overlap with Estelle’s ongoing talk (line 8). Estelle nevertheless continues her talk (line 11), and Angie alludes again to the interruptive nature of Estelle’s talk by this time abandoning this attempt to re-take the floor (lines 12–13), once again in overlap with Estelle’s talk (line 11). Ray appears to offer another proposal for what Ava can eat (line 15), which is also delivered in partial overlap with Estelle’s ongoing talk (lines 14, 16), but Estelle does not orient to this as interruptive. Instead, she orients to Angie’s prior attempts to re-take and then relinquish the floor as pre-complaints (Monzoni, 2008), through a “go-ahead” for Angie to make her complaint (line 19). By introducing the complainable matter in this implicit manner, Angie thereby positions Estelle to acknowledge that a transgression may have taken place (i.e. through a pre-complaint go-ahead that presupposes a potential transgression). Notably, this go-ahead is delivered by Estelle with marked prosody (increased loudness and emphatic stress) that indexes “annoyance” or “irritation” (Günthner, 1996), an indication that a conflict sequence is emerging here between the two.
Angie at this point proceeds to make a negative observation typical of complaints (Schegloff, 1988), namely, that she was “mid-sentence” (line 20), although withholds the upshot that she did not get to finish what she was saying. Instead, she proceeds to offer, in lines 23 and 27, what appears to be an absolution for a wrongdoing (Robinson, 2004), notably, in the absence of an apology (Drew and Hepburn, 2016). Once again, then, Angie implies but does not say that Estelle’s prior talk was “impolitely interruptive” (Hutchby, 2008, p.227). Estelle denies the implied charge that her prior talk was interruptive by formulating it as “talking at the same time” (line 28–9), thereby treating Angie’s implied negative observation not simply as a complaint but an accusation (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2018).

Angie then appears to concede this point (lines 30–1), although in shaking her head (lines 32) and then going on to assert that she’s “not gonna argue” (line 34), it becomes evident that she does not, in fact, agree with Estelle’s formulation of the event as simply “talking at the same time”. Estelle then construes Angie’s ostensible concession as another accusation in denying that she’s arguing (line 36) and then repeating her account of the event (lines 36–8). Angie repeats the charge through an implied negative observation that she was “mid-conversation” (lines 39–40), which is countered with the same claim by Estelle (line 42).

That conflict is indeed occurring here becomes apparent from George’s attempt to intervene through a joking call for them to stop (lines 41, 43, 45). However, Estelle ignores this, yet again repeating her formulation of the event as “speaking at the same time” (line 49), but then following this up with an implied accusation that Angie is overly sensitive, in claiming that although Angie cuts her off “all the time” (line 51), she does not complain (lines 52–3). Once again, Angie appears to concede this (line 54), but her facial expression (line 57) appears to signal otherwise. Estelle then repeats her formulation of the event as “talking at the same time” (line 58), and Angie responds with a platitude, “it’s all good”, and an account for their prior argument, namely, “it’s been a long day” (line 59), an account with which Estelle indicates hedged agreement (lines 60, 62). The argument is thus closed through ostensible submission by Angie (Bousfield, 2007; Vuchinich, 1990), although the sarcasm indexed through the subsequent hedging increment in line 64 as Estelle shifts her gaze away from Angie (line 65) indicates the conflict has not been resolved happily.

Through this brief excerpt we have drawn attention to a number of features of the relationship between offence and conflict talk. First, what counts as an offence is itself an interactional accomplishment. Overlapping talk constitutes a moral transgression, an interruption, when one or more parties construe it as such. Second, indicating one has taken offence through an implied complaint can lead to conflict when that complaint is construed as an accusation through denial and counter-claims. Third, conflict talk is not always marked through overt signals, such as shouting, overt threats, insults or swearing. Instead, it can be accomplished through seemingly mild disagreement about the formulation of prior events. Studying the relationship between offence and conflict talk thus allows us insights into the interactional accomplishment of less overt forms of conflict alongside the more overt cases that have been studied to date.

### 11.6 Future directions

In this chapter, we have focused on the relationship between offence and conflict talk. We have drawn attention to the multifaceted nature of offence itself and the importance of distinguishing between the causing and taking of offence as social actions. It is evident, however, that there is much more that remains to be done. There needs to be more systematic study of the ways in which offence is caused and taken across languages and cultures.
and its interpersonal – and, in some cases, institutional – consequences. We also need more systematic theorisation of the relationship between affective and moral dimensions of offence.

There are, inevitably, a number of challenges for researchers wishing to venture into this territory. One centres on cross-linguistic terminological issues. The past two decades of (im)politeness research have illustrated that we need to distinguish between emic (insider’s) and etic (outsider’s), as well as lay and scientific, perspectives on (im)politeness (Haugh 2016; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). The same likely applies in the case of studies of offence and conflict, as offence is conceptualised in different ways across languages and cultures. In this chapter, we have drawn from lay terms in English, but there are not necessarily straightforward equivalents in other languages. The potential conceptual overlaps and differences across languages are well worth further investigation. A second challenge relates to the paucity of studies investigating the taking of offence and conflict in everyday, interpersonal settings. While studying offence and conflict in publicly available forms of communication in online and broadcast settings has clearly been fruitful, there is still much to be understood about the nature of offence and its relationship with conflict in private settings. Although the line between the two is clearly blurring (O’Driscoll, 2013), we cannot effectively analyse and theorise this phenomenon without building on an understanding of the latter. Yet despite such challenges, or perhaps because of them, it is important to analyse conflict talk data in a whole range of different settings.

Transcription conventions

[ ] Overlapping speech.
(0.5) Numbers in brackets indicate pause length.
(·) Micropause.
(·) Elongation of vowel or consonant sound.
(·) Word cut-off.
(·) Falling or final intonation.
(·) Rising intonation.
(·) “Continuing” intonation.
(·) Latched utterances.
underlining Contrastive stress or emphasis.
CAPS Markedly louder.
° ° Markedly soft.
.hh In-breathing.
## Creaky voice.
↓ ↑ Sharp falling/rising intonation.
<> Talk is compressed or rushed.
< > Talk is markedly slowed or drawn out.
( ) Uncertainty about the transcription.
| | Gloss of non-verbal behaviour.

Notes

1 We use transcription conventions from Conversation Analysis (Jefferson, 2004) for data from spoken interactions in this chapter in order to allow us to draw attention to specific aspects of turn design and sequential positioning (see above for a list of those conventions). In this excerpt, however, the
transcript is somewhat simplified for the sake of expediency as the original recording is available for inspection through Talkbank (https://talkbank.org/).

2 In some cases, however, this distinction is not maintained. For example, Poggi and D’Errico (2018) group evaluations of conduct (e.g. lack of respect, distrust, betrayal, injustice) together with instances of conduct (e.g. accusation, insult and mockery).

3 Extensive overlapping talk, which might be glossed as “interruptive”, is, of course, a notable feature of conflict talk (Hutchby, 1996).

4 Ray’s talk (lines 15, 21) and Ava’s response (line 26) thus appear to constitute a conversational schism (Egbert, 1997), that is, a separate line of talk from that which emerges between Angie and Estelle, although not entirely unrelated.

References

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Offence and conflict talk


Offence and conflict talk


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