Conflict interaction
Insights from conversation analysis

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A primary location for human conflict is in real-time, spoken interaction. Whatever else might attract interest for conflict scholars—strategies, decision games, large-scale intergroup conflict, intrapersonal conflict or email disputes—a great deal of what we might think of as conflict gets expressed, managed and resolved (or not) in and through talk, whether conducted face to face or through some channel. More than articulation of language, talk interweaves vocal, visual, temporal and spatial behaviours as people get things done, create meanings, calibrate relationships and manage identities.

Conversation analysis (hereafter CA; also called the study of talk-in-interaction) offers a rich accumulation of more than 50 years of research studies providing detailed findings regarding how people organise and accomplish activities through their interactions with each other. This chapter reviews findings from CA studies of interactional phenomena that constitute or play prominent roles in what would likely be regarded as conflict. We begin by considering ways in which much interaction is built to “prefer” agreement and minimise the likelihood of conflict. Within this preference system, participants nevertheless routinely complain, correct or resist a prior action, challenge each other’s knowledge and rights to know, attempt to repair or correct what preceded and more. Through these actions located in unfolding courses of talk, participants may come to constitute themselves as being in conflict. Disagreement may develop into antagonistic argument or get managed through negotiation or mediation guided by a third party. In reviewing research in each of these areas, transcribed excerpts from real life interactions will illustrate key findings. A sample analysis of a couple’s dinner table talk will show participants’ practices for occasioning, maintaining and closing a conflict prompted by a complaint. In the following section, a brief overview of the conceptual and methodological commitments of CA highlights some markedly distinct stances CA researchers take toward the study of human linguistic conduct.

12.1 Overview of CA

Working from close investigation of recordings and transcripts of actual interactions, CA studies attend to vocal and embodied details, characterising how people jointly create order
and meaning in context. Deeply influenced by Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodological investigations of the systematic ways people organise and account for actions and Goffman’s detailed descriptions of social actors’ behaviours in a variety of settings (e.g. 1959), Harvey Sacks and colleagues Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson began investigating interaction as a locus of social order. They turned to recordings, which would allow repeated inspection and encourage attention to the actual details of talk rather than abstractions thereof. Jefferson developed a transcription protocol that captures words, paralinguistic details and sounds, as well as temporal features such as overlaps and silences (see examples below). Early studies tended to focus more on telephone conversations in which participants had no visual access to each other. With the advent of inexpensive, widely available video recordings, visual and embodied features gained prominence in CA transcripts and analyses of face-to-face interactions. From these beginnings, CA has grown into a substantial, international research enterprise spanning many academic fields (see, e.g. Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2010; Sidnell and Stivers, 2013).

Three core principles inform CA research (Heritage, 1984, pp.241–4):

1. interaction is orderly and participants both create and orient to the always-unfolding social order;
2. each next action or turn at talk displays a sense of what is going on and shapes what is relevant next. In this way, participants continually both create and renew context;
3. the interaction order may be evident in the most minute features of talk; accordingly, no detail can be dismissed a priori as being random or irrelevant.

Reflecting roots in ethnomethodology, CA studies employ analytic terms (e.g. repair, preference, adjacency pair) intended to capture how in their conduct “participants” orient to and create what is going on at any moment. “Meaning” is rooted in actions, located in sequences and courses of unfolding activity. Analysis proceeds inductively. Single case studies may precede analysis of collections of similar instances, accounting for canonical practices as well as deviant cases.

Relying on recordings and transcripts for analysis, as well as for presenting findings, reflects an insistence on grounding claims in inspectable details of interaction. In this regard, CA differs from social scientific methods that rely on self-reports, interviews, focus groups, surveys, experiments, hypothetical examples and other data sources further removed from first-order social life. CA studies eschew “psychologising” or making analytic claims about participants’ motives, feelings and attitudes. However, analysis may take into account how participants communicatively occasion and orient to features of “mind”. For example, one prominent focus in CA research concerns how participants orient to relative states of and rights to knowledge, or epistemic stance and status (discussed below; see Heritage, 2012a, 2012b).

These methodological commitments – relying on recordings and transcripts as primary data, documenting evidence for analytic claims in participants’ displayed orientations and avoiding mentalistic inferences – distinguish CA research and give CA studies considerable explanatory power and durability. CA research represents a marked departure from approaches to conflict that focus on individual behaviours, “inner” features such as cognition or emotion, abstract process conceptions such as phases or styles or causal links between strategies and outcomes.

The related term “discourse analysis” (hereafter DA) refers to a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches that tend to investigate how meaning and action get
accomplished in discrete linguistic units. Discourse is sometimes operationalised to refer to the interpretive or cultural contexts identifiable in particular texts (as in the critical discourse analytic writings of Fairclough, Foucault, etc.). Speech Act Theory-driven discourse studies draw on Wittgenstein’s ordinary language philosophy, J.L. Austin’s lectures on the force of linguistic actions and John Searle’s sustained inquiries. Research seeks to specify the conditions under which single utterances perform actions such as “assertives, directives, commissives, declaratives, expressives, and accreditives” (Fairhurst and Cooren, 2004, p.136). DA represents a prominent strain in organisational studies (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Grant et al., 2004) and in language and social interaction research (Fitch, 2005). A substantial body of discourse analytic research investigates language use in conflict and negotiation situations (see Putnam, 2005). Topics of inquiry have included strategy use, relationship development, identity management, emotional expression, issue development and framing, often as linked to outcomes (Putnam, 2010, p.146). Action-implicative discourse analysis (Tracy, 2005) blends sequential analysis with ethnographic methods and compares actual discursive practices with strategies and ideals within communities of practice. Across these variations, DA studies have much to say about how language works in conflict situations. Yet there are foundational differences between CA and other approaches represented by the label discourse analysis. Distinctions in the data sources investigated, the level of analytic detail, the units of analysis, the treatments of context and perhaps most crucially, CA’s insistence on grounding claims in participants’ displayed orientations (the ethnomethodological commitment) motivate treating DA studies as separate research traditions from CA, deserving of their own review (Glenn and Susskind, 2010, p.121).

The same research commitments that distinguish CA from other discourse analytic or pragmatics traditions also limit what CA studies can say directly about conflict, particularly if it is operationalised as a cognitive phenomenon, as consisting of single acts analysed in isolation or as displaying meaningful order at the level of abstract patterns distributed over time and context. In general, CA studies have not employed “conflict” as an analytic category or made it an object of investigation. For CA researchers the term “conflict” represents an abstraction or typification (Heritage, 1984, pp.144-50) that is insufficiently grounded in details of actual conduct and does not capture the orientation of the participants in the interaction. As an analytic notion, “conflict” may emphasise persons doing things to and with each other, while CA attends more closely to the unfolding of utterances, turns at talk and sequences (Schegloff, 2010). Nevertheless, people’s methods for organising interactions include methods for constituting and orienting to disagreement or misalignment. Surely these are among the key building blocks for what researchers and laypersons would think of as conflict. Thus, with a careful eye toward translation of findings, we turn now to reviewing CA research offering powerful tools for analysing how conflict-in-interaction unfolds.

### 12.2 How interaction promotes alignment and minimises conflict

Interaction, no matter how adversarial, requires some cooperation if it is to be coherent. Participants strive to achieve and maintain intersubjective understandings that enable them to do whatever it is they are doing together. As Levinson (2006, p.45) writes:

> Interaction is by and large cooperative. This is not a Panglossian claim that we all get on with one another. It is, rather, the claim that there is some level, not necessarily at the level of ulterior motivation, at which interactants intend their actions (a) to be
interpretable (the underlying intentions to be recoverable), and (b) to contribute to some larger joint undertaking (having a conversation, making a hut, even having a quarrel!).

More to the point, practices for organising talk facilitate alignment and minimise the emergence of resistance, correction or disagreement.

To see how this works, we must introduce a fundamental and pervasive building block of interaction. The “adjacency pair” is a sequence of two turns, produced by different speakers, adjacently placed, and relatively ordered into a first pair part (FPP) and a second pair part (SPP). These occur in pair types, such as greeting-greeting, question-answer or invitation-response. Although the adjacency pair constitutes a minimal, two-turn unit, expansions of it are common (Schegloff, 2007). Many of these expansions unfold in ways that limit the likelihood of overt misalignment or disagreement. “Pre-expansions” done before the FPP orient to avoiding problematic SPP responses. For example, if a speaker provides a preface before launching into a story or an announcement, that preface gives the recipient an opportunity to signal openness to hearing and “stance” towards the impending news. Similarly, pre-invitations and pre-offers give the recipient the opportunity to mark whether acceptance is likely. If the recipient signals that acceptance is not likely, the first speaker may take an early exit out of the sequence before reaching the point where overt declination might occur. “Insertions” can address some trouble after the FPP has appeared but prior to the SPP. A second speaker may initiate “repair”, making it relevant for the prior speaker to re-do or offer a different version of the FPP that is more likely to engender a second that aligns with it. “Post-expansions” can be as simple as a third turn that closes the sequence such as “okay” or “oh” or more elaborate developments of the FPP or SPP that indicate the sorts of trouble we might think of as conflict (explained further below).

In some adjacency pairs, more than one type of action works as a relevant SPP. In response to an invitation, both accepting and declining are relevant; in response to an assessment or evaluation, both agreement and disagreement are relevant. However, these alternative seconds “embody different alignments toward the project undertaken in the FPP” (Schegloff, 2007, p.59). They are not equivalent, equally valued, or symmetrical. After all, “Sequences are the vehicle for getting something accomplished, and that response to the FPP which embodies or favors furthering or the accomplishment of the activity is the favored – or, as we shall term it, the preferred – second pair part” (Schegloff, 2007, p.59; also see Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987). This sense of “preference” is not psychological but structural. “Dispreferred” turns show recurrent features (Schegloff, 2007, p.63). These may include mitigation or attenuation; elaboration in the form of an account, excuse, or disclaimer; a gap between the FPP and beginning of the SPP; or a turn-initial delay such as a pause or hedge.

These canonical markings of dispreferred SPPs allow the first speaker to monitor and, hearing trouble, reformulate the FPP with preference reversed, before the SPP is complete. It is not solely the second speaker’s job to align with a first speaker’s action: “Rather, it should be understood as a joint project of both parties to arrive at a sequence – an adjacency pair – whose parts are contiguous and in agreement, or in a preferred relationship. Trouble in achieving this outcome can be addressed by either (or any) party” (Schegloff, 2007, p.70). Thus, many FPPs that might draw a dispreferred response get stopped or redone in pre-expansion, and insertion expansions can “fix” problems that might otherwise lead to a dispreferred SPP. Similarly, when questions containing candidate answers (Pomerantz, 1988) do not get immediate confirmation, the questioner may redesign questions to enable confirmation (Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013, p.213). For example,
Pomerantz (1984a, p.76), in Pomerantz and Heritage (2013, p.214)

1 A: They have a good cook there?
2 ((pause))
3 A: Nothing special?
4 B: No, everybody takes their turns

Not surprisingly, across many cases, there is a “greater aggregate frequency” of preferred SPPs (Schegloff, 2007, p.72). This preference organisation “clearly serves as a vehicle through which initially ill-fitted positions, interests, etc. get mutually adjusted and even, on occasion, reconciled. And it clearly channels the forms which disagreement and misalignment take, even when they cannot be reconciled, and serves as a kind of metric for the seriousness which the parties wish to accord their misalignment” (Schegloff, 2007, pp.72–3).

The following example from a telephone conversation illustrates how these structures work together. Lisa offers to come to Ilene’s house (this line is marked as “FPP” below), and Ilene’s immediate and unmitigated acceptance (marked “SPP” below) shows preferred turn shape.

Heritage 1:3, simplified

Lisa: _what time in the ahfterno[on’r you go]ing out.
Ilene: [U h : : :m]
Ilene: Well I- all I- I go from one from two to three, .hh to- [to do the hospital trolley.
Lisa: [°(Oh.) °]
FPP→Lisa: Right. Well suppose we get tih you about hahlf past three.
SPP→Ilene: ↑That’s fine.[That’s lovely’n have[a cup a’tea= Lisa: [°(Yeh) °] [(Alright.)
Ilene: =’n a piece a’ca[ke.
Lisa: ↑L:↑Love[( )
Ilene: [Yeh,
Lisa: See you

However, this simple set of aligned pair parts arrives as the result of negotiations that unfold over the preceding moments. Space limitations preclude a full description, but one earlier passage will demonstrate how participants work toward alignment and agreement. Lisa has been keeping and caring for Ilene’s dog and they are making plans for returning the dog:

Ile: W’l look uh::m
(0.8)
Ile: .mk Kah- eh tomorrow’s Fri_day isn’t it.h
Lisa: [Yah.
Ile: .hhh Uh:m: (.) no:w u- can you come over in the morning? or the ahfternoon be[cause
Lisa: [Ah:’l haftih consult (Siiim)
Ile: eeYah. Because ah’l tell you what I:- uh .hh I’ve got Meals on Wheels in the morning but Edgizn might do that for me.
Phillip Glenn

Lis: Oh don’t worry about that if we came we’d leave her en go.

(0.3)

Ile: Oh well no we: h one of us’d be here anywa:y,

(0.4)

Ile: No cuz I’d like t’see ↓you↓.

Ilene issues a summons “W’ll look” that directs shared attention to what is to follow. She asks an FPP question confirming the day; Lisa confirms, returning the floor to Ilene to continue. Ilene proposes that Lisa come to her house in the morning; without waiting for a reply she adds “or the ahfternoon” and begins providing an account. In overlap, Lisa neither accepts nor rejects the proposal but states that she will need to check with another person. Ilene provides reports that she has morning obligations but that her husband might take care of them for her. Lisa encourages her not to worry and states that they to bring the dog, they would “leave her en go:” – thus minimising the burden to Ilene. Ilene’s reply challenges the implication that Lisa coming by would be burdensome; she reports that someone would be home anyway. After a brief pause, she adds that she wants to visit with Ilene.

In this passage, the pre-expansion turns work to secure the participants’ joint attention to making plans and confirming the date. The FPP proposal is built to get acceptance while perhaps providing Ilene the option of morning or afternoon. Lisa delays producing a SPP acceptance or rejection, instead adding a complicating factor. They negotiate the nature of the visit, Lisa offering simply to drop off the dog and Ilene rejecting this offer to ask for a social visit as well. Through these expansions before the FPP and between the FPP and the SPP, both parties work to resolve related misunderstandings and align intentions and schedules. The preliminary work done here enables the simple proposal – acceptance sequence that arrives a few moments later.

In brief, the preference structure built into adjacency pairs – the core structural units of conversation – favours and facilitates alignment. More broadly, the way FPPs are deployed, the pre-expansion actions that can redirect or foreclose them, the uses of insertion expansions before SPPs and the shape of preferred and dispreferred SPPs, all make it both easier and more likely that a first action seeking a second will get the second that it seeks. The research commitments of CA enable in-depth understandings of how these structures operate to produce non-conflictual talk as well as to examine how troubles emerge and get handled.

12.3 And yet … (how interaction may shape and manifest conflict)

Despite a system built to prefer aligning responses, participants still misalign, disagree, reject, argue and more. As Schegloff (2007, p.72) puts it, “there is no shortage of dispreferred responses in talk-in-interaction. Every social setting is a world full of diverse interests and turf and stances, all being managed (among other ways) in talk-in-interaction, and these are not suppressed or dominated by the organisation of preference/dispreference”. Indeed, conflict is rooted in the capacity of language to formulate different versions of events with different moral implications. “The very existence of conflict and schism in social life depends on the possibility of there being alternative and competing accounts of the same social event” (Drew, 1998, p.322).

As the figure against this ground of cooperation, conflict may emerge through actions that disagree with or oppose a position prior speaker has taken up, resist or try to change a
Conflict interaction

course of action, disaffiliate from the prior speaker, challenge knowledge and rights to know or complain about or criticise a co-present party. From these, depending on how subsequent actions treat them, the talk may develop into an argument that manifests interpersonal conflict. The following passage from a documentary film (Ganz and Ganz, 1988), illustrates several of these actions, as Jim and Barbara argue over how she is to spend money:

Couples arguing 12.1
1 Jim: ('f) I’m gonna give you eighty dollars a week I
2 want the car covered.
3 (0.4)
4 Barb: Not for trips
5 Jim: Hm?=
6 Barb: =Not for trips
7 Jim: Not for trips.=
8 Barb: =No.
9 Jim: But- for all around town.
10 Barb: Okay [(so) I’ll take care of that ]
11 Jim: [In other words if ↑I give you-] if ↑I
12 give you eighty dollars a week I don’t wanta
13 hear (0.6)
14 Barb: You don’t wanta [hear
15 Jim: [two- two- two days (.) short
16 of next time, .hh I did this ‘n I did that ‘n
17 I’d like a (0.5) a little advance.
18 Jim: Y’know?
19 Barb: Ohh I’m no(h)t gonna get any sla:ck huh?= =No:o!

Briefly: Jim offers to give his wife 80 dollars per week with the condition that it covers her car expenses. Barbara does not challenge the amount, but she counter proposes that “trips” be treated separately. He accepts this amendment and reasserts what is to be covered (line 9), and Barbara agrees to this. In overlap, Jim reformulates what is to be covered into a complaint about how she comes to him to ask for additional money (lines 11–13, 15–17). She counter complains, characterising his position as perhaps unreasonable (line 19). The laugh particle within the word “no(h)t” may further mark her awareness of and critical stance toward his position, but she does not actively oppose it. He affirms bluntly, with emphasis.

Much more can be noted about this passage, but for the moment we can usefully contrast it to the preceding excerpt between Lisa and Ilene. There, participants deployed aspects of sequence organisation to work towards alignment and agreement on social plans. Here, the participants challenge each other and disaffiliate.

In the sections that follow, we will review research on repair, dispreference, misalignment, disaffiliation, epistemic challenges and complaints – the building blocks from which people constitute resistance or trouble in talk. We will then review research on how these actions can lead to full-fledged disagreements and arguments. A case study will show how these elements work together during the course of a couple’s dinner table conflict. In the closing discussion, we will touch briefly on negotiation and mediation as formal, institutional interactions devoted to resolving differences.
12.3.1 Repair

Repair refers to interrupting the ongoing course of action in order to deal with possible troubles in speaking, accuracy, hearing, understanding or more (Kitzinger, 2012, p.229; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1977). Repairing is omnirelevant, applicable at any moment, to any utterance or action. Yet speakers routinely bypass opportunities to initiate repair (Robinson, 2014). Extensive research has demonstrated that repair represents a generic practice of talk-in-interaction across many languages, although its particular manifestations reflect influences of available grammatical forms and linguistic resources (Kitzinger, 2012). Participants orient to “initiating” repair and the actual repair itself as distinct practices. Broadly, either “self” (the speaker of the trouble source) or “other” may initiate or provide repair; however, the preference for self- over other-repair operates so pervasively in interaction that even to think of these as alternatives proves misleading (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1977, p.377). Other-initiation and other-repair may point to incipient disagreement and thus provide clues to the emergence of conflict. Other initiations can happen in the next (second) position following the trouble-source turn, in the fourth position, or even later in the unfolding sequence (Schegloff, 2000). Here, as two former camp counsellors are discussing a camper, Sta provides a negative assessment of that camper (lines 2–3), and Ala initiates repair on it (line 4):

1  Sta: That’s all. But you know what happened that night
2  we went to camp. Forget it. She wouldn’t behave for
3  anything.
4  Ala: W-when.
5  Sta: When we went to camp
6  Ala: She behaved okay.
7  Sta: She did?
8  Ala: Yeah. She could’ve been a lot worse.

The repair initiation demonstrates some trouble in providing the preferred agreement. After Sta’s answer clarifying the time frame, Ala overtly disagrees with the assessment (line 6). This instance illustrates how repair can address problems as possible misunderstandings, reducing the likelihood that conflict will emerge:

For one basic way that humans have of dealing with disagreement and conflict is to treat it as a problem in hearing or understanding, and try to “fix” that problem. Not, then, that misunderstanding breeds conflict; but that conflict is handled by trying to treat it as a problem of misunderstanding. And the instruments for so treating it are the practices of repair.

(Schegloff, 2007, p.151)

As a first pair part itself, an other-initiation of repair initiator makes a response relevant, giving the prior speaker a space in which to review and possibly produce a redone version of the prior turn. Given this close relationship, it is not surprising that repair sequences commonly occur in the environment of, and may serve as harbingers of, the occurrence of dispreferred SPPs.
12.3.2 Dispreference

A dispreferred SPP provides an on-record mechanism for signalling disagreement and trouble. Dispreference refers not to psychological desire but to structural features including production delays, mitigations or attenuations and accompanying accounts or excuses. Delays can be accomplished by pauses or vocal fillers prior to or during beginning of the SPP. Wording such as “well” in turn-initial position routinely prefaces disagreement, marking the “unstraightforwardness” of the turn to follow (Schegloff and Lerner, 2009). In general, preferred or aligning SPPs are “closure-relevant” while sequences with dispreferred or misaligning SPPs are “expansion” relevant (Schegloff, 2007, p.149). Following a dispreferred second, the first speaker may disagree, challenge or reject in the third turn. In the fourth turn, the second speaker may back down or hold that position (Schegloff, 2007, p.159). Through these structural regularities, disagreement may generate more talk more readily than does agreement. Dispreferred SPPs can be understood as misaligning with the FPP. As such, they represent one of a range of misaligning actions, discussed in greater detail in the following section.

12.3.3 Misaligning actions

The term alignment describes cooperation at the structural level. Aligning responses forward what the prior action sets into motion or proposes, accept the presuppositions and terms of the proposed action and match the formal design preference (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011, pp. 20–1). A greeting to a greeting, or a type-conforming answer to a yes/no question represent SPPs aligning with FPPs. Preferred SPPs align with the FPP. Yet these categories are not airtight; for example, requesting can be understood as one of a range of ways speakers may recruit a co-participant into providing assistance (Kendrick and Drew, 2016). Thus, any understanding of nonalignment must take into account the ways firsts and seconds fit together, including the degree of obligation and joint responsibility implied by the first. More broadly, any action aligns by ratifying (and not disrupting) the activity in progress; thus, a continuer such as “mm hm” aligns with a story-in-progress. Even the failure to provide an SPP when one is expected could indicate misalignment, for example, abruptly ending an interaction (Schegloff, 2007, p.115). Misaligning then provides another way to mark trouble and perhaps incipient conflict.

For example, advice-giving appears commonly in mundane interaction and in certain institutional interactions. Because it represents a claim that the advice-giver is more knowledgeable, participants may treat it as problematising the recipient’s competence (Heritage and Sefi, 1992). Orienting to a moral dimension of advice that conveys deficiency or fault, potential advice recipients will work to display their knowledge (Shaw and Hepburn, 2013). For these and other reasons, across a number of situations participants show “reluctance” to occupy the role of advice recipient (Shaw and Hepburn, 2013). Resisting advice may include explicit claims of competence and knowledge or actions that claim having already had prior commitment to the advice. Recipients may also more passively or ambiguously resist through unmarked acknowledgments such as “mm” and “yeah” (Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Shaw and Hepburn, 2013). While claiming prior commitment still endorses the advice but calibrates the degree to which it is influencing knowledge or commitment to a course of action, unmarked acknowledgments resist the “action” of being advised. The choice of these responses links to the ways advice is packaged. Giving advice formulates something that should be done but does not claim that it will be; it implies that the recipient has choice.
Advice giving appears in stronger to weaker forms and in forms that mark more or less symmetry of knowledge claimed by the giver relative to the recipient. The way advice is packaged can provide more or less latitude for the recipient to respond (Shaw and Hepburn, 2013). In ordinary conversations, troubles-tellers will reject advice if it is given too soon, before they have been able to fully deliver and work up their account of the troubles. This contrasts to institutional interactions where, as soon as the advice starts, the recipient generally stops telling (Jefferson and Lee, 2015/1981).

Similar to the mid-range of passive resistance to advice, Moerman (1988) shows villagers resisting a state official’s directions through minimal agreement tokens. Glenn (2003, chapter 6) shows how laughing may accompany and mark implicit resistance to a course of action. In summary, a variety of actions from preferred to dispreferred, from overt to ambiguous, show participants misaligning with an unfolding course of action.

There is no clear line from misaligning FPPs and SPPs to what we might think of as conflict. Nevertheless, misaligning turns provide moments of social life where a structurally disruptive or resistant responsive move takes place. Misaligning with a turn is not the same as misaligning with a speaker (Schegloff, 2007, pp.59–60). To characterise the latter, we turn to the related notion of disaffiliation.

12.3.4 Disaffiliating from prior speaker

When a speaker displays an affective stance towards the topic or action in progress, this provides an opportunity for a co-participant to affiliate with that stance. In such a context, the second speaker can “disaffiliate” by withholding the congruent stance marker or even actively displaying an alternative stance. For example, jointly built complaint sequences about a third party or situation routinely provide opportunities for displaying affiliation. Complaints tend to emerge progressively with the complainer gradually securing the other’s participation; participants affiliate through collaboratively complaining. Sometimes, however, one speaker may complain on behalf of another but the second does not affiliate, instead resisting going so far (Drew and Walker, 2009). Laughing can demonstrate affiliation when responding to a prior turn that displays a non-serious stance or contains first laugh particles (Glenn, 2003, pp.29–30). A speaker talking about troubles may laugh to show “troubles-resistance”; following such laughs, recurrently recipients affiliative by not laughing along (Jefferson, 1984). Yet laughing can disaffiliate in teasing environments (Drew, 1987). In multi-party interactions, a first laugh at one participant can invite others to join in, disaffiliating from that person while affiliating with others. Recipient laughter that plays a role in defusing complaints by another (Holt, 2012) disaffiliates from the complaining stance. Audience laughter during political debates displays partisan affiliation and disaffiliation (Clayman, 1992). Laughter may also stake out an ambiguous position between outright affiliation and disaffiliation (Glenn and Holt, 2013, pp.16–17). In response to improprieties, recipient laughter occupies a midpoint on a continuum from outright resistance to outright affiliation (Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff, 1987). The terms “laughing at” and “laughing with” (Jefferson, 1972; Glenn, 2003, pp.112–21) capture this dual capacity of laughter.

Alignment and affiliation are closely linked concepts. Despite inconsistencies across studies in the uses of these terms (Lindstrom and Sorjonen, 2014), they offer important analytic tools for tracking incipient conflict. For our purposes, a distinction between the “structural” character of alignment and the “evaluative” character of affiliation allows focus on each and on the ways that they intersect. While aligning actions cooperate at the
Conflict interaction structural level, affiliative responses cooperate at the level of action and affective stance (Stivers, Mondada and Steensig, 2011, p.21). For example, in the context of storytelling, aligning responses ratify and further the asymmetrical distribution of turns into teller and recipient(s). A disaligning response competes for the floor. Respondents affiliate by displaying support for the teller’s conveyed stance (Stivers, 2008). In some instances, a disaligning action may actually display stronger affiliation than an aligning action would. Alignment is omnirelevant; affiliation is not. For much routine talk that occurs without any particular affective stance marker, an affiliative response would likely seem strange. (Lindstrom and Sorjonen, 2012, pp.352–3). Thus, affiliation represents a more restricted domain (Drew and Walker, 2009, p.2412).

12.3.5 Challenging knowledge and rights to know: epistemic authority and epistemic stance

Participants continually display their epistemic “status” relative to each other: who knows what, who has rights to know what, and to what degrees participants are well-informed, ill-informed or loosely or strongly committed to what they are saying. These matters become manifest through epistemic stance displayed in word choice, turn design and action formation (Heritage, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). In general, speakers attempt to maintain congruency between the epistemic stance evident in a turn at talk and their displayed epistemic status relative to the topic and to the status of a recipient (Heritage, 2013, p.559.) However, epistemic misalignments are common. These matters can override the ways that grammar and syntax shape what a turn at talk is doing and what is expected next. For example, Heritage (2012a) shows that a statement produced with declarative syntax will be heard as delivering information if the topic lies within the speaker’s epistemic domain. Comparing these three utterances:

“So I went to the store”
“So you went to the store”
“Did you go to the store?”

the first, made with declarative syntax, reports one’s action as if the recipient did not previously know this. The second, also made with declarative syntax, references something lying primarily within the recipient’s epistemic domain; it is likely to be treated as seeking confirmation from the recipient. The third with interrogative syntax more explicitly seeks confirmation.

Speakers work out whose “view is the more significant or more authoritative with respect to the matter at hand” (Heritage and Raymond, 2005, p.15). Heritage and Raymond identify four practices by which a second speaker can mark that a second assessment is independent from the preceding one (e.g. “I know” as a response to “There was a beautiful sunset last night”) thus resisting the first speaker’s claim to greater epistemic authority. The sequential organisation of talk reflects logics of epistemics as well as adjacency and relevance. That is, “imbalances of knowledge drive sequences” (Drew, 2012, p.65). When the initiator is informed and the other is not (and again, these are not objectively stable categories, but understandings participants continually display), the first speaker will tend to share information explicitly and marked by a pre-announcement (e.g. “Guess what?”) or implicitly. When an uninformed initiator seeks information from an informed other, initiations can be explicit such as interrogative questions, or more implicit such as “my side” tellings and inferential
declaratives (“You haven’t spoken to her recently”). These sequences close when there is a claim of knowledge equilibrium for all practical purposes (Heritage, 2012b).

Although epistemic considerations fundamentally drive much of human interaction, a passage in which orientation to epistemic matters is particularly salient will illustrate how matters of knowledge shape an emerging dispute. This excerpt occurs early in an extended conversation between a grandmother (Gramma) and her granddaughter (Sissy) (analysed in Beach, 1996).

[SDCL: Gramma/Sissy. Beach (1996)]
27 G: Well honey you’re so thin: no:w:
28 (0.6)
29 G: I don’(t) know (. ) I think you’re just (0.2)
30 *(well you’re)*° just wearin yourself out with
31 all your activity >I think if you slo:w down a
32 li(t)t)e bit and rest a little bit more,
33 (0.4)
34 S: GRA: [M M A] YOU’RE SO WEIRD!
35 G: [Maybe]
36 S: >I don’t even know why you say that I-<
37 ’hh I am f:i:ve thr:ee:: and I still weigh
38 a hundred an’ te[ n- fif ]teen po:unds?
39 [((noise))]
40 (0.6)
41 G: O:h ↓you don’t weigh a °hundred an’°
42 fifteen °pounds ’hh all your clothes are
43 fallin off of ya everybody tells you ya look thi:n?
44 S: Ya:: but fin[ally I ]
45 G: [You’re b]lo:ny look at acrosed
46 your chest an yer ’hh your co:llar bo:nes
47 stickin o:ut . . . .

Gramma assesses Sissy’s appearance (line 27), claiming without mitigation that she knows that Sissy is too thin and implying that she has the right to assert this knowledge. Her account for Sissy’s behaviour and recommendation for action (lines 29–32) display a downgrade in certainty, marked by “I think”. Sissy negatively assesses Gramma (line 34) asserting without mitigation her knowledge and right to know. This turn parallels Gramma’s (“honey, you’re so thin”; “Gramma, you’re so weird”; see Goodwin and Goodwin, 1990, on “format tying”) while shifting the referent from her own appearance to Gramma’s behaviour. Sissy reports her height and weight (lines 37–38) as knowledge she has and has primary right to know. This report challenges the import of Gramma’s assertion (that Sissy is dangerously thin) by shifting the epistemic grounds from appearance to numerical ratio. Gramma disputes Sissy’s claim directly (lines 41–42), implicitly rejecting Sissy’s primary right to knowledge of weight and thus the legitimacy of this evidence for Sissy’s argument. Gramma reasserts visual evidence and invokes “everybody” as sharing her knowledge (lines 42–43, 45–47). Thus, a substantive conflict concerning Sissy’s eating disorder plays out during these moments primarily on matters foregrounding epistemic status and stance.

To summarise so far, we have reviewed research on a range of practices by which participants display opposition or resistance. Repair initiations delay progressivity to mark some
Conflict interaction

prior action as problematic and provide an opportunity for it to be amended. Dispreferred second pair parts, activity disruptions and even laughter can show misalignment between the course of action a prior speaker is pursuing and the action produced by the recipient. Disaffiliating makes evident that a recipient does not share in or endorse the affective stance displayed by a prior speaker. Challenges to epistemic authority manifest potential disagreements about who knows what and who has the rights to know what. Our review so far has emphasised actions that are largely responsive to something in the immediately preceding environment. We now turn to complaints as a sequence-initiating practice that includes a moral dimension implying or directly conveying judgment.

12.3.6 Complaints

Although pervasive in talk, negative assessments of an interlocutor are especially likely to occur during disagreements or talk that participants treat as delicate (Pomerantz, 1984). Negative assessments appear commonly in the form of complaints (also investigated under related terms such as criticisms, accusations, and blaming: Drew, 1998; Drew and Holt, 1988; Drew and Walker, 2009; Edwards, 2005; Heinemann, 2009; Jefferson, 2015; Laforest, 2009; Pillet-Shore, 2015, 2016; Pomerantz, 1986; Pomerantz, 1987; Schegloff, 2005; Whitehead, 2013). Complaints may directly concern a co-present recipient or indirectly concern some non-present third party (see Laforest, 2009; Monzoni, 2009). For this review, we are particularly concerned with direct complaints, which may indicate or constitute expression of conflict. Complaints draw on moral reasoning to render judgments, and they may implicate the complainer who can be subject to evaluation for “propriety or fairness or justice or accuracy” of the complaint (Drew, 1998, p.295). Thus, complaints make assessments of right/wrong or good/bad particularly salient.

A complaint turn commonly includes an explicit formulation of a transgression and an expression of indignation. As first pair parts, complaints make responses relevant and can occur within longer sequences (Drew, 1998; Dersley and Wootton, 2000; Laforest, 2009). Participants may treat the minimal two turn sequence of complaint-response as complete by moving on to next matters, and that is commonly the case when the object of complaint (the “complainable”) action occurs immediately prior (Laforest, 2009) (e.g. “You stepped on my foot!” “Sorry!”). Complaint sequences may also expand through SPPs that offer a remedy, deny, reject, account or counter complain. In sequences featuring complaints to and about a co-participant, outright denials are rare. Far more commonly, in second position, the accused implicitly accepts the charge but offers a “not at fault” mitigation or account, Following the second turn response, the original complainer may engage the response by acknowledging, reasserting the complaint, modifying it and so on. In fourth position, the respondent may expand further, and in this way, complaints can develop into longer discussions or full-fledged arguments. In almost all cases, however, the participants align in preserving the roles of complainer and accused (Dersley and Wootton, 2000).

In the passage below, Elvyn complains to Ernie about his behaviour with Robert (her teenage son and Ernie’s stepson). The term “nag.” conveys the transgression, and the idiom “sick and tired” conveys her indignation (lines 1–3). After a pause, Elvyn continues with a combined demand and complaint (lines 5–7). Starting at line 9, Ernie replies with a “not at fault” (Dersley and Wootton, 2000) counter-complaint placing blame on the teenager’s behaviour. Following a long pause (line 15), Elvyn completes Ernie’s abandoned description of Robert’s actions in a way that defends Robert, thereby implicitly reasserting the complaint against Ernie. Ernie lodges an additional complaint against Robert (line 18), as the two participants continue their adversarial argument:
Couples arguing 12.2

Elvyn: I am sick and tired (.) of having the first thing out of your mouth (..) when you come downstairs is a nag.

Elvyn: I want ↑you and Rob↑ert (..) to go and settle that some other way so that I don’t have to hear you come downstairs and nag.

Ernie: My experience is >he’s sitting there at the goddamn kitchen tab- di- (..) dining room table< (..) until I come down then all the sudden the great light flashes in his eyes that it’s time to go, He gits up an’ he scrapes the chairs and he (..) makes clatter getting out of the house,

Elvyn: And he gets out the door and he ↑gets there. (0.3)

Ernie: °thh° (0.3) His ↑shoes are dangling from his mouth.

Speakers package complaints in ways that mark their orientation or stance towards what they are saying. As Edwards (2005, p.5) puts it:

A complaint can be done in ways that enhance its objectivity and seriousness, and its chances of being taken seriously. On the other hand, rather than simply reporting factual and complainable matters, a complainer may (also, or instead) be heard as moaning, whinging, ranting, biased, prone to complaining, paranoid, invested, over-reacting, over-sensitive, or whatever other vernacular category might apply.

As this passage suggests, from the evident stance may derive potential judgments of not only the object of the complaint but the complainer – what Edwards calls the “subjective” side of complaining. These displays also cue the recipient about how to respond, for example, with expressions of concern, sympathetic laughter, disaffiliation and so on.

CA research on “extreme case formulations” (ECF) shows how speakers employ superlatives and extreme adjectives, adverbs, and noun phrases as they complain and accuse, or defend and justify in the face of complaints and accusations (Edwards, 2000; Pomerantz, 1986). An extreme case formulation can propose that something is generally the case rather than a product of circumstance, for example, “You’re never here on time!” It can also propose that some behaviour is right by virtue of its commonality, for example, “Everybody else is going!” Similarly, complaints may be worded in especially detailed ways that contribute to the moral case being made:

Thus the description is overdetermined in the sense that it includes a prior action that might be regarded as a necessary, constituent part of doing the principal action and hence one that can be taken for granted and not need reporting. However, as these examples suggest, such descriptions seem to be designed to portray the particular care or deliberateness with which the principal action was taken.

(Drew, 1998, p.319)
Conflict interaction

As stance markers, extreme case formulations can provide a kind of index of investment in what is being said. That is, stating something in an extreme way may be taken less as a literal claim about the world and more as an indication of the intensity of one’s stance. Going to extremes also provides a way to tease, joke or employ irony. In contrast to ECFs, speakers can use softeners in descriptions such as “mostly”, “almost”, “few” or “hardly any” (Edwards, 2000, p.352). Interestingly, these make for weaker claims, yet they make a description or claim less easy to refute. ECFs, on the other hand, are “factually brittle” in that they can easily be falsified.

Turns that oppose, misalign, challenge, disaffiliate or complain invite inspection as islands of difference popping up in the waters of an interactional system built in various ways to encourage cooperation and agreement and minimise conflict. Their occurrence creates contingencies that participants manage through sequence expansion and closure. Sometimes, participants will sustain stances marking difference, and these may develop into what we can understand more directly as disagreements or arguments. We take these up in the next section.

12.4 From disagreement to argument: extending difference

Arguments in interaction begin as a minimal three-part sequence consisting of an arguable, opposition and ratification (Hutchby, 1996). We start with the second turn, understanding it as an action that in some way opposes the action of something that precedes. Thus, an arguable is only identified as such when someone argues with or opposes it. Occurrence of an arguable-opposition pair is not sufficient to constitute participants as being in an argument. After all, in the third turn position, the first speaker might fail to defend, agree with the action or stance of the second speaker or apologise. Instead, argument requires a third-turn ratification by the first speaker. Once constituted by this three-turn sequence, expansion is possible. This can take the form of simple, aggravated correction and disagreement turns (Goodwin, M.H., 1983). Parties can maintain their opposition across topics, activities, and encounters (Goodwin, C., and Goodwin, M.H., 1990, pp.96–8).

Second turn opposition might take the form of some of the actions reviewed in previous sections: initiating repair or repairing, disagreeing with an assessment, rejecting advice, misaligning, disaffiliating, downgrading or upgrading one’s own epistemic stance, and reformulating positions (Hosoda and Aline, 2015). Each of these moves contributes to sustaining a position or orienting to another party’s prior action in a way that retroactively constitutes it as problematic or arguable. In children’s arguments, opposition turns contain such elements as expression of polarity (“no”), repetition of key components, person descriptors, insult terms, corrections, tit for tat return moves, format tying, disclaimers (“I don’t care”) and recycling of positions (Goodwin, M.H., 1990, p.145; Maynard, 1985). While it is possible to imagine extended interactions consisting solely of opposition turns, actual arguments may include a more complex array of actions and sequences. For example, in Reynolds’ (2011) study of arguments in public places amidst protests, participants routinely ask their adversary a non-challenging, “enticing” question. The adversary produces an answer which the asker treats as already-known and uncontroversial, even obvious. Then the asker uses that answer to attack or challenge in the third position. Thus, a brief moment of agreement fuels a next opposition move.

Researchers have noticed that in some open disagreements and hostile arguments, oppositional moves come packaged in “preferred” turn shapes: unmitigated, without delays, without accounts, and with intensified disagreement components. Pomerantz’s (1984) research documented the context-sensitivity of the preference for agreement with assessments. A structural preference for agreement might warrant agreeing when one receives
a compliment (which is a kind of assessment). Simultaneously, a structural preference for minimizing boasting or self-praise might warrant disagreeing with or downplaying the compliment. Put another way, more than one preference structure may be relevant at a single point. Interaction in certain environments appears built to favor a structural preference for disagreement, with agreements showing dispreferred turn shapes. For example, in children’s street arguments, unmitigated opposition turns show preferred structures (Goodwin, M.H., 1990). Among institutional interactions, television panel interviews featuring a moderator and participants who are selected to represent a variety of views will tend to emphasize disagreement. A variety of practices in the conduct of the participants as well as in how producers design and frame the programs serve to forecast, facilitate and intensify disagreements among panellists (Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013, p.225). A study of adversarial radio talk shows featuring a host and telephone callers reveals practices for intensifying disagreements, presumably for entertainment value (Hutchby, 1996). In oral arguments by attorneys to an appellate court, adversarial arguing and questioning show a preference for disagreement through which participants enact their roles (Tracy, 2011).

There has been some analytic interest in how arguments that arise in an agreement-preferred environment might transform into arguments in which participants treat disagreement as preferred. Kotthoff’s (1993) study of German and Anglo-American interactions between lecturers and students in a university shows how preference structures might shift towards disagreement once an argument sequence involving dissent is underway. As disagreements continue, markers of reluctance to disagree diminish and markers of reluctance to agree will tend to accompany concessions. Dersley and Wootton (2000), on the other hand, challenge the notion that “argument” shows a reverse preference for disagreement. They argue that this claim has been based largely on children’s arguments and institutional interactions in which there is a special incentive for bald, preferred-shape disagreement. If there is such a reverse polarity preference, it is unclear how participants might make the transition. Schegloff (2007, p.73) points cautiously to the issue of preference transformation in arguments:

For example, there can be a point in the development of a disagreement or conflict at which the practices described here as characteristic of doing dispreferred responses are abandoned, and parties begin to formulate their positions and stances in unmitigated and full-blooded forms, not delayed but prompt and even overlapping their interlocutor’s talk. We can see in this a ‘graduation’ from disagreement/conflict being reined in into full-fledged ‘arguing or fighting’. And the activity of ‘arguing or fighting’, as an activity in its own right, may have its own preferences and dispreferences. Yelling, interrupting, not modulating one’s position, etc., can thus serve as an indication of the vehicle within which differences are to be worked through, and thereby potentially serve as an indicator of severity. We have, however, virtually no naturalistically grounded analyses of actual arguing of this sort, and the account in this note must be regarded as impressionistic and casual at best, and wrong at worst.

The tentative tone and caution evident in Schegloff’s comment point to the preliminary nature of any such claims and the need for further research on this matter.

There has been little analytic attention in CA research to how arguments end. In part, this is because studies of the phenomena reviewed above (repair, complaint, dispreferred SPP) often document the ways participants exit from those sequences. Closure of longer, more bounded arguments may be understood as part of the larger “closing problem” of conversation (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Vuchinich, 1990). Put simply, with the mechanisms
for turn-taking providing ongoing procedures for selecting the next speaker, the closing problem becomes, how to have one speaker’s turn completion not engender a next turn and not have the following silence heard as the responsibility of some particular speaker. One study of family dinner table arguments (Vuchinich, 1990) identified two structural forms addressing the closing issue. The “submissive terminal exchange” features some kind of assent, agreement or compliance following an opposition turn. The “compromise terminal exchange” features one party offering some concession or modification of position, which is accepted by the disputing party. However, the vast majority of arguments in this study ended in some variation of a stand-off in which participants maintain their opposition while moving on to other topics and activities. Thus, these family members often do not resolve their arguments (and perhaps their conflicts) but instead set them aside. Similarly, children’s arguments will sometimes end with one party conceding and sometimes with standoffs; another exit approach involves playful and metaphorical frame switches (Goodwin, M.H., 1990). As in the family arguments studied by Vuchinich, through these ending types, participants may orient to winning or losing. More work remains to be done specifying how participants move out of such sequences into other matters.

12.5 Sample analysis

During part of a dinner table conversation, one partner (Jay) in a couple complains to the other (Kay) about something she did. The issue seems to be that on a previous evening, when they were visiting friends, Kay began looking at a photo album that contained pictures of her with a former partner. Jay felt uncomfortable and isolated, and he blamed her for having done so intentionally or at least thoughtlessly. Following his complaint, Kay apologises, and Jay expands the complaint. They disagree about what exactly happened. Implying that she sought out the photo album on purpose, he highlights the moral nature of her transgression. They invoke relationship rules about whether it is okay to look at, or to have, pictures of former romantic partners. Closing this topic with agreement that “you can have pictures of friends” but with the matter of her accountability unresolved, they turn to talking about the meal in front of them. The entire excerpt lasts about four and a half minutes. For the sake of economy, this analysis will focus on selected passages that illustrate the phenomena reviewed above.

12.5.1 Launching a complaint sequence

Kay has returned to the conversation after taking a phone call from Gretchen, whom she characterises as “someone I never really liked”. As this excerpt begins, Kay reports Gretchen’s negative assessment of Iowa City people (lines 1, 2, 4, 6). Offering her own, more mixed assessment (lines 25, 27, 28), Kay disaffiliates from Gretchen’s negative stance. Jay topicalises Kay’s assessment (line 31) and his allusion to “something” that made him feel good about Rick (lines 32, 34, 35) projects a forthcoming story or report. With the quick-tempo “>Why<” Kay aligns with what he has projected by returning the floor to him for the telling, while at the same time marking a challenging or sceptical stance towards what he is doing (Bolden and Robinson, 2011).


Kay: Gretchen (2.0) said that she _hates_ (.) people
1 Iowa City except for university people.
Kay: But she thinks the townspeople are really awful.

Jay: =How long’s she ↑been here?

Kay: ↑Well she was here (0.6) ↓nineteen seventy one to seventy (1.6) four >or something like that< and then [nine

Jay: [And where did she come from?

Kay: North Dakota

Kay: They are more friendly there.

Jay: [Especially coming back from Belgium but-

Kay: They’re- (0.4) a- a little different though.

Jay: [E s i]pecially coming back from Belgium but-

Kay: I told her, that (0.8) you know I- she- asked m:e what I thought (of) people in *Iowa City*

Jay: [Mm hm

Kay: They’re just not cu:rious (0.4) about-

Kay: And I just told her- what my impressions were

Jay: [Mm hm

Kay: [Especially coming back from Belgium but-

Jay: (0.6) I don’t think they’re that bad.

Jay: (2.1)

Kay: They’re just not cu:rious (0.4) about-

Jay: (0.4) [Hm

Jay: Now ↑that’s interesting >that you say that< because that ↑[‘s s:]omething (0.6)

Kay: [W h y]

Jay: that- (0.2) made me feel v:ery very good (0.8)

Jay: (1.0)

Kay: >Why<

Jay: Cause when we got there,

Kay: Mm hm=

Jay: =An’ we sat down, (2.5) you: immediately I
Conflict interaction

Following her apology, Jay intensifies the complaint, first by claiming that her action impacted their hosts as well as him and then by stating a rule of conduct that by implication she violated (lines 51–53). Kay is silent (line 54), and after a pause he modifies the rule to grant that perhaps “eventually” one can look at the photo albums of people one is visiting. He positively assesses Rick’s actions as “really nice” (line 60) and aligns (“as you say”) with Kay’s previous negative assessment of local people lacking curiosity – even while he expands the category assessed from Iowa City people to “Americans in general”. Thus, Rick’s reported curiosity now becomes even more noteworthy, coming as it did from a member of a group lacking curiosity. Kay’s response (line 63) seems misaligned. In claiming she already knows, she treats his prior turn as claiming to inform her of something; yet if his prior turn were indeed the SPP agreeing with her original assessment, it would not carry such a claim. Perhaps orienting to this misalignment, he reformulates the assessment about Americans (lines 64–65). She offers no reply. With the “Oh-” (line 67) he marks a sudden realisation and assesses his own prior assessment as a generalisation – a stance marker that allows him to put the opinion forward while acknowledging that doing so is perhaps somewhat inappropriate. A long pause follows.

It may be helpful to summarise, for this is a complex moment with multiple relevancies. Jay has produced an example, aligning with and reinforcing Kay’s negative assessment about local people. In providing that example he has complained about Kay’s behaviour, and she...
has apologised. In assessing his own talk as a generalisation, he may make it relevant for her to agree or disagree; however, to agree might imply sanctioning all such talk, including her own prior assessments.

12.5.2 Arguing over what happened: apology and defence

In what follows, Kay’s first defends her actions as having been reasonable in the course of events. This launches a disagreement about what happened, following which Kay defends her intentions and culpability:

69 Kay: But Elena was the one that said (0.3) Here’re the pictures from Thanksgiving,
70
71 (1.6)
72 Jay: No:::
73 Kay: [She did- she said ’hhh We have all those pictures from Thanksgiving (. ) in the ( )
74
75 Jay: [No: Elena (. )
76 said (1.9) that- (1.8) what she’d been doing (.) for the last coupla weeks her project was to put all those=
77
78 Kay: =Mm hm?
79 Jay: =Mm hm?
80 Kay: =Mm hm?
81
82 (2.2)
83 Jay: And you start- happen to start lookin’ at-
84 (0.4) them and she said ’hh Oh all the pictures from Thanksgiving are in there
85
86 (1.4) / ((two noises))
87 Kay: Well- (0.2) I’m sorry I didn’t think it was rude,
88
89 (0.9)
90 Jay: W*ell-
91
92 Kay: pt might- very well ’might’ve been but I didn’t-

With the word “But” (line 69) marking contrast with what preceded, Kay reports that Elena had in effect invited them to look at pictures. In this she does not deny having looked at photos but challenges the blame Jay has placed on her for having done so. After a pause, Jay rejects this claim (line 72), thereby constituting it as arguable. Kay reasserts her claim, but with a modified version of what Elena said (lines 73–74). Jay again disagrees and presents his own version (lines 75–78), in which Elena announced that she had created photo albums but did not invite her guests to look at them (thereby placing blame again on Kay). Note that this now has developed into an argument with sustained opposition turns that displayed preferred turn features such as absence of delay and mitigation. However, Kay abandons arguing for her position in favour of noncommittal continuers that return the floor to Jay to keep talking (lines 79, 81). Having rejected her self-defence, he reasserts the complaint. In self-repairing from “start-” to “happen to start” (line 83) he overbuilds the complaint
Conflict interaction

(Drew, 1998), implying that she acted intentionally. His version of events, in which Kay started looking at photos prior to Elena’s announcement about them, continues to hold Kay morally culpable. Kay again apologises (lines 87–88). She disagrees with the “rude” assessment of her action, providing a “not at fault” defence (Dersley and Wootton, 2000) against any implication that at the time she acted rudely on purpose. With “W*ell-” (line 90) Jay marks a continued stance of opposition but adds no more; following a lengthy pause, Kay concedes possible rudeness while seeming to reassert her “not at fault” defence, now with a downgrading epistemic stance (lines 90–92).

12.5.3 Elaborated complaint: disagreement over the rudeness of her action

In the next few moments, Jay repeatedly uses the word “think” (lines 94, 96, 98) as he challenges Kay’s epistemic authority as a way to maintain his position. In this turn, he begins but abandons formulating the complainable offense in generalised terms. In a partial concession, he grants the disputability of his “rude” assessment (lines 104–105) while emphasising the negative impact her actions had on him (lines 106–108). She does not reply. He expands the complaint by claiming that other people likely felt awkward, as did he.

94 Jay: Wul- ↑y'ow- (.) think [(of ih-)
95 Kay: [↑Okay
96 Jay: J- just think about it
97 Kay: [Mm hm
98 Jay: [Think abou the situation (0.5) when:-
99 yours*elf and anyone else or any tw*o
100 Kay: [Um::eh.
101 Jay:
102 people- going to do it.
103 (1.1)
104 Jay: An' you know to a (1.0) you may not think it
105 was rude but (4.0)
106 Jay: A- ↓look at the time I didn't think- (0.2) of
107 it being (0.3) r:ude 'hhh so much as making me
108 feel real awkward.
109 (0.7)
110 Jay: And- (0.2) >to a certain extent,< (3.0) I
111 would- think that maybe other people (.)*feel
112 awkward too=Rick and Elena and Paul (0.4)
113 possibly (did).°
114 (1.1)

12.5.4 Renewed disagreement over what happened

Kay claims that Jay was involved in a gaming activity, thereby defending her from charges that by looking at photo albums she left him awkward and alone. Jay challenges her and this leads to a series of disagreement turns (lines 115–131). Noteworthy in these moments is Kay’s complaint that she tried to get him to look at pictures with her (lines 124, 126, 128). With “Okay”, she seems to accept his preceding version of events, yet with “↓But.” she sustains opposition. Repeating the same word moments later (line 138) with marked emphasis
and questioning intonation may call attention to her use of it. In the lengthy silence that fol-
lows, they seem to be at a stand-off.

115 Kay: But you were playing that ↑game,
116 (1.1)
117 Jay: No: not on ↑Friday ↑ni:ght,
118 (0.3)
119 Kay: °↑Mm.°
120 (1.0)
121 Jay: °No°=
122 Kay: =Mm hm.
123 (0.6)
124 Kay: pt Because I kept-
125 Jay: bhh=
126 Kay: =trying to [↑show you things,
127 Jay: [`hh
128 Kay: And you kept going back to your ↑game.
129 (0.5)
130 Jay: Yeah but you started look'n at the pictures
131 before Ira came over with that th[ing
132 Kay: [Okay.
133 (0.2)
134 Kay: ↑But.
135 (0.3)
136 Jay: Yeah.
137 (0.7)
138 Jay: ↑Bt?
139 (4.4) ((possible unvoiced outbreaths))

12.5.5 The real problem with photos

Jay alludes to “good reasons” for not wanting to look at the photo album, and in providing this
account for his behaviour, he implicitly accepts her claim (lines 124, 126, 128) that she had
tried to get him to join her. Kay’s open-ended question (line 143) marks her as uninformed,
unable or unwilling to confirm the allusion (Schegloff, 1996). Jay answers with another
allusive formulation, self-repaired to overbuild a complaint about her (lines 145–147). Her
acknowledgement with laughter claims understanding but does not affiliate with his complain-
ing stance (as for example an apology might accomplish). Jay reports having “thought” she
was looking for “that” – again, using underspecified allusions. To this, she aligns epistemically
but denies the intent he has ascribed to her (lines 153, 156). Jay accepts her denial (line 159).

140 Jay: I had a lot of good reasons for not ↑wanting to
141 look at that photograph album.
142 (0.4)
143 Kay: Why,
144 (2.6)
145 Jay: We'll? (2.5) °it'uz° quite apparent what
146 would show up sooner or later (0.2) as you-
147 (0.2) manage to find one sooner or later.
Conflict interaction

148 Kay: hYe(h) [huh
149 Jay: [To show me
150  (2.5)
151 Jay: And in a way a lot- a lot of ways I thought
152 that was what you were ↑looking for.
153 Kay: h[n No: ] I ↑wasn’t
154 Jay: [(theh)]
155  (1.0)
156 Kay: [°No I ↑wasn’t°
157 Jay: [°Yeah°
158  (1.6)
159 Jay: pt ’hhhh °mn okay°

12.5.6 Compromise agreement and topic closure

Following a lengthy silence, Kay prompts Jay to speak. He produces a positive assessment about the fact that he destroys pictures of old girlfriends. With the tag ending “in’t it”, he invites agreement while treating her as already aware of this. She neither agrees nor disagrees with the assessment but misaligns epistemically by treating what he said as news to her (line 165). Jay’s claim and subsequent account (lines 163–164, 169) while shifting topic away from the complaint contrast his take-the-high-road stance with her morally complainable act of having sought out pictures in the photo album of her with a former partner, and, by implication, possibly still attaching meaning to the former relationship. Over several turns and in different forms, they sustain disagreement with Kay challenging his claim and Jay holding to it (lines 170–179). Notably, Kay asserts, in wording making a strong epistemic claim of certainty (line 177), that Jay still corresponds with a former girlfriend. A silence follows, and Kay claims this as evidence that the relationship is important to him. Jay does not deny the accusation but mitigates its status as a counter-example in the conflict, describing the person in question as “good frie[d] of mine” (in contrast to an “old girlfriend”, line 164). Kay accepts his account and formulates a rule, “You can have pictures of friends”. In this she offers a compromise of sorts: if it’s okay to correspond with a former partner, it’s okay to have pictures of one. Jay agrees, first tentatively, then after pursuit from Kay, definitively (line 195). Having secured this tenuous agreement, they shift to talking about the food, ending the extended complaint/disagreement sequence:

160  (5.7)
162  (1.2)
163 Jay: Just as well I- (0.2) tear up all my pictures
164 of old girlfriends n throw them away in’t it.
165 Kay: You do?
166  (0.2)
167 Kay: [°hn°]
168 Jay: [°hnn]
169 Jay: They don’t mean anything to me any more
170 Kay: You must have some.
171  (0.4)
172 Jay: >I don’t.<
173  (3.7)
To summarise: Kay negatively assesses local people who show no curiosity towards others. Jay creates an opportunity to complain about Kay by placing the complaint within an extended turn praising Rick for having shown interest in him – an example that affiliates with her assessment. Kay apologises then defends herself. Twice the defence takes the form of asserting a version of what happened that mitigates her blameworthiness; Jay opposes these claims, and disagreements ensue. At other moments, her defence rests on what might have been “rude” and what they thought of as rude at the time (compared with now). Each party concedes a bit while maintaining opposition. Cautiously alluding, Jay voices discomfort in knowing that the photo album in question would contain pictures of Kay with her former partner. Agreeing that it is okay to have pictures of “friends”, they move on to other matters.

Complaint sequences, epistemic misalignments and challenges, disaffiliations and disagreements all intermingle in this unfolding discussion. If “conflict” seems a reasonable label for this passage, it might represent a gloss for some package of these various actions and sequences. Through them, the “issue” evolves from her rudeness, to what happened, what she intended, how he felt, the impact on others and the rules for orienting to former partners. Kay and Jay manage a confrontation and they negotiate rules of the relationship. The conflict seems to have reach closure without resolution.8

12.6 Discussion

The review above represents not an exhaustive list but an initial organisation of some key areas of CA research that directly speak to phenomena likely to characterise interpersonal
Conflict interaction

Conflict interaction. The discussion until now has emphasised how participants create forms of talk that might constitute conflict in casual conversation and in a variety of institutional interactions. There is related research on institutional forms of interaction that are specifically devoted to managing conflicts or reaching agreements. In the preface to an edited volume, Firth (1995) construes “negotiating” broadly as talk devoted to making mutually acceptable decisions, not necessarily rooted in pre-existing and mutually recognised differences or overt conflict. However, more formal bargaining sessions do represent ways for parties with adversarial or competing interests to try to reach agreement and formal mediation sessions pursue the same goal with the guiding presence of a third party. These have been the focus of a number of CA studies. In a foundational study of plea bargaining in criminal courts, Maynard (1984) documented a core two-turn bargaining sequence between district attorneys and public defenders consisting of a proposal by one party and the response by the other. From this minimal pair, expansions can alter the pre-sequence environment, the first turn, the space between the first and second parts, the second turn, or subsequent talk. Generally, Maynard found, these bargaining sequences unfolded along one of three paths:

a. proposal met with acceptance (aligning response);

b. proposal met with rejection (disaligning);

c. proposal met with withholding of acceptance or rejection and a counterproposal.

In a case study of a negotiation between two realtors, Maynard (2010) documents three bargaining moves occurring within and as expansions of this core sequence. “Defer” moves postpone a relevant bargaining action that has been made relevant in order to insert explanatory materials relevant to the forthcoming action. When more than one action is relevant in a next position, bargainers will sometimes “demur” dealing with the lesser priority action. For example, an offer may also be treated as a news announcement. Following demur, the prior speaker may make the implied action more explicit. Third, agents bargaining on behalf of clients may attribute responses to proposals to their clients (a shift in “footing”; Goffman, 1979) as a way to “deter” expectations for alignment.

Other CA studies of formal conflict resolution activities have tended to identify core practices, challenges or dilemmas in single cases or small collections. A study of disagreements during jury deliberations contrasts practices by which participants avert acrimony with practices that escalate acrimonious disagreement (Pomerantz and Sanders, 2015). The choice by mediators to intervene or “selectively facilitate” raises issues (for participants as well as analysts) regarding their supposed impartiality (Greatbatch and Dingwall, 1989, 1994; see also Heisterkamp, 2006). A related issue concerns mediator responses to participants’ displays of affective stance (Glenn, 2010). As actions devoted to putting into words the essence or the implication of some previous talk, “formulations” have drawn analytic interest for how they work in labour-management negotiation (Drew, 2003; Walker, 1995) and in small claims court mediation (Glenn, 2016). Mediator practices for moving participants toward agreement include minimising argument (Garcia, 1991; Greatbatch and Dingwall, 1997), guiding proposal generation (Garcia, 1997) and producing resolution (Garcia, 2000).

One promising arena for additional CA research with implications for the study of conflict concerns how participants orient to and manifest displays of “emotion” (Ruusuvuori, 2014), such as anger, that are routinely associated with conflict situations. Likewise, promising work on epistemics particularly linked to “empathy” (Heritage, 2011) will yield insights about how participants respond to affective displays. Studies of the interplay of embodied action (Heath and Luff, 2014) with talk in face-to-face interactions, and the interplay of prosody with language use (Walker, 2014) will enrich understandings of the multimodal ways
that conflicts unfold. Investigation of stronger and weaker forms of disagreement, along the lines of strong and weak agreement with assessments studied by Pomerantz, offers a fruitful path for further research. Building on some promising initial forays, questions remain concerning how interactants may affect a shift from agreement-preferred to disagreement-preferred structures, as in antagonistic argument (Dersely and Wootton, 2000; Kotthoff, 1993; see above, p.230). A rich tradition of CA studies of accounts and accountability (see Robinson, 2016) will inform understandings of the moral dimensions of conflict situations. Almost any aspect of language use could provide a locus for human conflict. A recent study of interactions between persons with frontotemporal dementia (FTD) and their caregivers problematises clear distinctions between alignment (cooperation) and misalignment (conflict). In the moments analysed, the FTD individuals exhibit combinations of cooperative and conflictual behaviour in response to their caregivers’ directives and attempts to guide their actions (Mikesell, 2016). As this line of research demonstrates, the challenge for scholars lies in connecting detailed understandings of how participants organise their actual talk and activities with the abstract, elastic concept of conflict.

Understanding how to transform conflict rests on understanding conflict itself. While there is much accumulated wisdom, there is more to learn about the detailed, contingent sequences of actions that constitute interpersonal conflict. Conversation analytic research has made great strides in describing and analysing interaction; however, this work has until now remained relatively disconnected from conflict studies. Recent efforts show the efficacy of translating CA research into applied findings (doctor-patient interactions, therapy, learning environments, mediation sessions and more; see Antaki, 2011). Parallel to this review, a synthesis of CA research on phenomena related to humour acknowledges the challenges in linking ethnomethodological studies of actual practices to an abstract concept that may not capture participant orientations (Glenn and Holt, 2017). While detailed analysis of actual talk-in-interaction reveals a complexity not easily rendered into pre-existing conceptual categories or into prescription, it provides a depth and rigor to our understandings of the core phenomena of social life that merit inclusion in the study of language and conflict.

Transcribing symbols

[ ] Brackets indicate overlapping utterances.
= Equal marks indicate contiguous utterances, or continuation of the same utterance to the next line.
( . ) Period within parentheses indicates micropause.
(2.0) Indicates timed pause in approximate seconds.
yes Colon indicates stretching of sound it follows.
yes Period indicates falling intonation.
yes, Comma indicates relatively constant intonation.
yes? Question mark indicates upward intonation.
yes! Exclamation indicates animated tone.
yes- Single dash indicates abrupt sound cutoff.
yes Underlining indicates emphasis.
YES Capital letters indicate increased volume.
°yes° Degree marks indicate decreased volume of materials between.
hhh H’s indicate audible aspiration, possibly laughter.
•hhh Superscript period indicates inbreath audible aspiration, possibly laughter.
ye(hh)s H’s within parentheses indicate within-speech aspiration, possibly laughter.
Conflict interaction

Items within double parentheses indicate some sound or feature of talk which is not easily transcribable, e.g. “((in falsetto))”.

Parentheses indicate transcriber doubt about hearing of passage.

Arrow indicates marked change in intonation.

Pound signs indicate “smile voice” delivery of materials.

Notes

1 For a rich, conflict-related analysis in this tradition, see Agne and Tracy (2001).

2 However, an assessment does not necessarily make a response (either agreeing or disagreeing) relevant. Features of turn design contribute to stronger or lesser degrees of compelling a response (Stivers and Rossano, 2010).

3 There are other preference structures, such as a preference for offers over requests and for “type-confirming” answers to yes/no type interrogatives. See Schegloff (2007) and Pomerantz and Heritage, (2013) for reviews.

4 There are exceptions and complications. For example, following a self-deprecating assessment, disagreement may be preferred rather than agreement (Pomerantz, 1984). A dispreferred can be couched as preferred:

That’s where you live?
That’s where I was born

There can be *pro forma* agreement followed by disagreement (typified by the “yes but” formulation). There can be multiple preferences operating at one slot, e.g. assessments can seek agreement but can also compliment or self-deprecate, calling for disagreement and thus putting into play competing preference structures.

5 For readers new to CA, the transcripts can seem a bit opaque at first. The spellings and symbols represent the transcriber’s attempt to capture actual words and sounds, paralinguistic characteristics, temporal features such as pauses and overlaps and (where video is available) visual features. In this excerpt, the brackets and spacing of the first two lines show that Ilene’s vocal sound “U h : : :m” overlaps Lisa’s talk. Underlining indicates emphasised sound. Colons indicate stretched sound. Dashes indicate cut-off sound. Upward and downward arrows indicate intonational rises and falls. The parentheses indicate transcriber uncertainty that the transcription has accurately captured what’s inside. Please refer to the full list of symbols that appears in this chapter.

6 However, the direct-indirect distinction can become complicated, for participants as well as for analysts. In parent-teacher conferences, parents will praise their own children directly, while teachers will criticise the children delicately and hesitantly. By these structural regularities both treat the parent-child as a single party, such that evaluating the child can be treated as evaluating the parent (Pillet-Shore, 2016). Indirect complaints can “spill out” (Sacks, 1992, pp.599–600) to other persons who could be placed in the same category, e.g. a complaint about sales clerks made to a sales clerk might be treated as directly critical of that person.

7 A bit of background about the data: Bryan Crow obtained this recording of a dinner table conversation for his research on couples’ interactions. It is available online (https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/6347, Part 2, beginning at 12:50) in the University of Texas Conversation Library, a collection begun by the late Robert Hopper and maintained by Jurgen Streeck. I modified Crow’s original transcript. I selected this excerpt for analysis because it richly illustrates several of the practices described in this review.

8 In fact, Crow (1992) shows how Kay’s complaint about the fish, while changing the topic, provides a basis for sustaining conflict. It seems that Jay prepared the meal, which Kay interrupted to take a phone call, resulting in a lengthy delay and fish that could have been hotter.

References


Phillip Glenn


Conflict interaction


245