Introduction

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This introduction to the final section of the Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict is shorter than the others, as the chapters included here range across many of the approaches that we have seen earlier, which do not need introducing a second time. However, there is one feature that unites the chapters in this section, which is their much closer link to the ‘real’ world. Two of the chapters, Archer et al. (Chapter 25) and Mac Coinnigh et al. (Chapter 30) detail actual interventions in the world through the medium of language. Gales (Chapter 26) demonstrates the importance of being able to linguistically identify text-based threats in a real situation. Archer et al. (Chapter 25), Maxwell and Anderson (Chapter 27), Hanna (Chapter 28) and Tipton (Chapter 29) examine the role of particular participants in processes where conflict is a real possibility.

Of course, all of the chapters in the volume examine actual language use or draw on real situations for their arguments. The marginal difference in the cases presented here is that they have either been acted upon already or are seen as directly applicable in specific communicative situations. This distinction is not absolute – many of the chapters in earlier sections are also applicable to actual situations – but here we get just a little closer to the aim that all the authors in this volume share: to make human society more able to deal with conflict through an understanding of language.

There is one issue that becomes more relevant as we get closer to using linguistics in the world. This is the question of how to remain ethical in the face of the need to collect data and in advising people how to behave in conflict situations. Over recent years, ethical guidelines in linguistic research have become more stringent and reflect similar developments in other social sciences. Any research that concerns actual human subjects, whether through collecting their language data or their opinions about linguistic examples, is subject to strict procedures to ensure their safety, usually through anonymity and clarity in explaining what is involved, as well as the right to opt out of the research or withdraw their language data at any time in the process. While these practices are now well embedded into linguistic methodologies, they can produce tensions with the desire to produce the best quality of research, not least in overcoming the ‘observer’s paradox’, which historically was side-stepped by the practice of misleading the subjects as to the nature of the linguistic research under scrutiny, or even, in some cases, not telling them they were subjects at all.
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Linguistics researchers have found different ways to remain ethical while maximising their research accuracy, but in the case of conflict situations, the need to ensure the safety of subjects becomes even more acute, which is why it can be very difficult to obtain the kind of data that would be most helpful in understanding conflict communication. For good reason, negotiations in wars and mediations between neighbours or family members are seen as confidential, providing a safe space for the participants to express their views. However, this creates a problem for those of us trying to understand the nature of what is going on, communicatively speaking, in order to improve such communications in future. For example, Gales (Chapter 26) deals with threatening messages sent to individuals which are in the public domain as a result of being brought as evidence in court proceedings, but there are many similar texts whose examination in research would need to be subject to tight controls to avoid exacerbating the situation. Finding appropriate data which does not contravene ethical codes is one of the challenges of this work.

A related problem, which will be familiar to researchers in scientific fields, is the question of the use to which our research may be put. In Chapter 25, Archer et al. encounter this ethical issue head-on in their description of a project in which they were engaged in training Behavioural Detection Officers (BDOs) to spot Persons of Interest (POIs) in airport situations while remaining undercover themselves. The interaction between these participants can quickly become conflictual if the POI feels that a stranger is encroaching on their privacy for no good reason, so BDOs are trained, in this project, to notice clusters of behaviours likely to indicate deception on the part of the potential POI, without at the same time aggravating the innocent member of the public who may be caught up in procedures that are aimed at keeping them safe. Here, then, we have both the linguistic ethics (i.e. of not deceiving our subjects) and wider ethical issues (i.e. the balance between civil liberties and the need to keep the public safe) coming together in a single application of linguistics to the real world.

Gales examines the debate surrounding a real situation in which employees and executives were sent threatening emails and phone messages after their company almost collapsed and was bailed out by the US government, while at the same time paying out bonuses to senior staff (Chapter 26). The question here is how we distinguish, linguistically, between threats for which the perpetrator should be prosecuted and those that might be informally characterised as ‘empty’ threats. Drawing on speech act theory to distinguish between author’s intentions, textual meaning and recipient understanding, Gales shows how we need to nuance our understanding of apparent threats by looking at these linguistic factors in combination with contextual information.

Maxwell and Anderson approach the language of mediation through an examination of the role of metaphors and their potential for improving the outcomes of such encounters (Chapter 27). The impact potential of training mediators to use – and recognise – metaphors in deliberate ways in order to facilitate understanding and agreement is powerful and recognises the unique situation that such encounters represent.

Another real-life situation is examined by Hanna, who reports on her research into the official interviews of asylum seekers in the UK (Chapter 28). Her conclusions are based on her findings that asylum seekers are re-traumatised by the process, which is highly structured along policy lines and as a result does not allow for their own version of events to be recorded. She has clear advice for those responsible to change the nature of asylum interviews so that the interviewees are empowered to represent themselves and their story in the way that is most fitting for them.
Tipton considers the role of interpreters in war through memoirs and accounts written by people who have acted in that capacity (Chapter 29). Their situation often contrasts with the training and practice of interpreters in civilian situations, where they are expected to behave as an almost transparent conduit for language that they have no responsibility for – or opinion about. In violent conflicts, the myth of the neutral interpreter becomes much harder to maintain, particularly where the interpreter has local knowledge, and perhaps also loyalty to one side or the other. The material examined here demonstrates that there is a deeper understanding of the involvement of interpreters in warfare available if only those with power and responsibility for their involvement were informed by these texts.

The final chapter of the volume (Chapter 30) has been saved until last because it is an inspiring example of the importance of language – in this case, a particular language, Irish – in post-conflict community-building. Mac Coinnigh et al.’s account of the introduction of Irish language classes in Belfast, not only for Catholic communities, but also for Protestants, demonstrates the courage and vision of a small group of people who knew that a minority language, often associated with only one side in a long-running and very violent conflict, could be a force for good, rather than perpetuating divisions. Recognition of the Irishness of the Protestant community in the North of Ireland, including their claim on the language, has created a cultural bridge that enables more understanding between two communities who for so long have been divided from each other. While not strictly speaking a research project in conception, we see this project and its documentation here as a kind of research-in-action that can be an example to many other communities.