Afterword
Connecting linguistics and conflict research

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We are honoured to have been asked to add an afterword to this book from a conflict and peace studies perspective.

We begin with a brief introduction to conflict and peace studies in order to indicate some ways in which The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict opens important new spaces for collaboration between this field and professional linguistics.

Conflict and peace studies, as a distinct field of theory and practice, was established in the 1950s, mainly in the United States and Europe. It is now a worldwide enterprise, linking academic institutions, government departments in many countries, a range of international and regional organisations and innumerable non-governmental initiatives.

Given the multifaceted nature of human conflict, the field has from the beginning been multilevel and multidisciplinary. It has aspired to be multicultural. It has tried to combine theory and practice. As theory, it is analytic and uses quantitative methods and qualitative case studies. As practice, it brings together approaches that address underlying structural drivers of conflict, internal cultures of conflict and relational attitudes and practices that generate conflict. It is also normative – thus raising eyebrows in some academic circles. In the guise of conflict resolution, its aim is not to overcome conflict. Conflict cannot be overcome, because it is inseparable from change. And conflict should not be overcome because otherwise injustice cannot be combatted. But the aim rather is to overcome violence in all its forms – direct, structural and cultural. Depending on circumstances, conflict resolution includes peaceful management, settlement and transformation. The normative purpose of most of those who work in this field is to learn how best to transform actually or potentially violent or destructive conflict into non-violent processes of change.

In this enterprise, the global emergence of the field in the 1990s through expanded international agendas of peace-making, peace-keeping and peace-building drew theoretical criticism from realists, critical theorists, feminists, poststructuralists and cultural relativists, and met practical setbacks in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda. Northern Ireland was a success story. After initial hopes, Israel/Palestine was a failure. Today, against an ominous background of state crisis in some areas, increasing populism and authoritarianism, revived great power rivalry and threats to the post-1945 liberal international order, the same pattern of success in some places (Philippines, Colombia) and failure in others (Ukraine, Syria,
Yemen) persists. Despite these challenges, theorists and practitioners in the field from all over the world – learning from these criticisms and setbacks – continue to insist on the importance of this analysis and on the vital possibility and significance of the genuinely cosmopolitan future that it aspires to usher in.

Across all these arenas, the methodologies and insights offered in the Handbook demonstrate multiple linkages between professional linguistics and conflict and peace research/practice, thereby opening rich possibilities for future collaboration. We indicate some of these possibilities here, beginning with conflict analysis and conflict resolution.

First, the “linguistic turn” in conflict studies makes the field of conflict analysis fertile ground for a coming-together with professional linguistics. Few would dispute the judgement of the editors of the Handbook that language impinges on all aspects of communication involved in conflict situations at all levels, to the extent that in this sense “language constitutes conflict”. Human beings do not struggle silently. The conflict and peace studies field is used to handling the “internal” language of conflicting parties in the generation of political rationalisation, social construction, psychological projection, historico-cultural conditioning and the way in which this subsequently feeds in to create the “relational” language of mutual antagonism, enemy imaging, dehumanisation and hate so characteristic in the inception and escalation of the worst forms of violent and destructive conflict. Critical discourse analysis of the distortion of language in the interest of hegemons in asymmetric conflict arenas has been influential here, as have feminist insights. Central to the field, therefore, is the analysis and understanding of the multiple ways in which hegemonic systems perpetuate themselves to the grave detriment of the basic human needs of suppressed individuals and groups (identity, security, development, autonomy), generating one of the main long-term sources of conflict. There is also awareness of the significance of linguistic cultural identity/difference in fostering misunderstanding, both as a conflict issue in itself and as a vehicle for other issues – extending to structural grammatical and semantic differences between languages – and of entirely distinct understandings of conflict and approaches to accommodation across cultures.

All of these are illuminated by the rich set of studies in the Handbook. As recently as 1998, a book could still (albeit questionably) be published with the title Language and Conflict: A Neglected Relationship (Wright et al., 1998). Since then, important further contributions have been made, as noted by the editors of this book. But the Handbook shows clearly how much scope there still is for deeper and more extensive applications of the insights and methodologies of professional linguistics across these areas. The long history of linguistics and discourse analysis predates the formal initiation of the conflict analysis field and is still not properly assimilated. The Handbook shows the importance of close textual analysis (stylistics and pragmatics) in illuminating how texts are generated in conflict and how this affects and is affected by linguistic interaction between protagonists, both as producers and as recipients of textual messages. Argumentation theory is scrutinised and applied, thus exposing the mechanisms of conscious or unconscious mutual blindness and distortion in impassioned verbal exchanges. Hidden transcripts are often more important than surface manoeuvres, because they do not appear on the radar screen in the first place and are therefore not immediately amenable to adaptation. All of this, in turn, feeds into the wider context of linguistic processes that link levels of conflict (intra- and interpersonal to international) via sectoral dimensions of difference (political, socioeconomic, ethnic, psychological, historico-cultural) to the language-permeated structures and continuities that perpetuate destructive conflict and violence. These lessons from the Handbook are of great relevance to the conflict research and practice field.
Second, the scope for collaboration is also evident across the main arenas of communicative conflict resolution that try to combat direct, structural and cultural violence by modifying the language and behaviour of destructive conflict responses through alternative dispute resolution (ADR), and various forms of dialogue, interactive problem solving and negotiation for mutual accommodation. This extends to the deeper processes of reconciliation, education and healing.

Since these are communicative approaches, all of them can benefit from the insights and methodologies presented in the Handbook. The editors are right to suggest that linguistic scholarship of the kind exemplified in this book can contribute centrally to “raising the levels of critical language awareness in the general population”, and that linguistic knowledge of this sort can help to increase the self-awareness of those actually involved in conflict about “what kinds of textual meaning they have created in their language use” and thus perhaps open spaces for adapting linguistic behaviour accordingly. As the editors say, this could in turn “improve the level of public (and private) debate in which people can respond to assumed ideologies by challenging them directly and can also recognise their own naturalised assumptions for what they are” – an important reminder at a time when lack of such awareness has been and is so evident in the damaging deficiencies of the so-called Brexit debate.

Turning to dialogue, problem-solving, game theory simulations, negotiation and mediation, which contain the core skills and processes of conflict resolution, there are also exciting opportunities for collaboration here. Conflict resolution specialists have for some time drawn on insights from other disciplines, including especially psychology, economics, anthropology and political science, to illuminate how knowledge and practice in all the above core skills can be improved. Given that much of the original rationale for developing multidisciplinary conflict research came from the view that destructive conflict was a result at least in part of failures in communication, it is clear now that linguistic analysis can add fruitful new areas of collaborative work that are of value to both the theory and practice of conflict resolution.

In addition, particularly severe problems are posed for those who aspire to promote conflict resolution in situations of asymmetric conflict. In conflict resolution, it has long been recognised that in asymmetric situations conscientisation (increasing awareness of inequalities, thus perhaps raising levels of conflict) must precede premature normalisation. Here again, as the Handbook makes plain in several of the contributions, close linguistic textual analysis can offer greater focus, precision and insight into these understandings and practices than can be attained in other ways. This is a central resource that conflict research and practice need to learn from.

Third, there are further opportunities for linking linguistics and conflict research and practice in relation to the role of third parties. This includes ways of accessing and analysing the language of confrontation/conflict and the language of accommodation/reconciliation (for example, by exploiting more the as yet under-used resources of the internet – see below), and addresses the challenge of combining confidentiality with the aim of making research findings publicly accessible. As the editors emphasise, there is also the fundamental question of how third-party expert analysts, facilitators and mediators themselves affect – and distort – their own investigations. This is a particular problem when the field of study is intense political conflict in which everything is challenged, contested and politicised – including third-party analysis and action. It might, for example, be best for many of us, both linguistic and conflict analysts, to “come clean” about the fact that in relation to asymmetric conflict our research – and attendant practice – is structurally biased towards exposing
(conscious or unconscious) modes of oppression and to emancipating the oppressed. This is built into our normative stance. Perhaps there are shared methodological questions here that we should address together.

Fourth, there is the question of what is happening and what can be done in situations where so far communicative conflict resolution does not work. Ramsbotham (2010, 2017) calls this radical disagreement. Radical disagreement is the main manifestation of what he terms linguistic intractability. Ramsbotham argues that in these circumstances conflict resolution prematurely tries to set this aside. For example, it largely ignores the phenomenon of what he calls agonistic dialogue – that part of radical disagreement in which conflicting parties directly engage each other’s utterances. Conflict resolution does not recognise this as genuine dialogue and aims from the outset to overcome it, not learn from it. As a result, it has no further recourse when dialogue, problem-solving and negotiation fail. Here, linguistic analysis of radical disagreement and agonistic dialogue could play a crucial role. It could help to pinpoint why dialogue, problem-solving and negotiation approaches so far gain no traction, and help to suggest what can be done about this. A study of radical disagreement shows how conflicting parties are not nearer, but much further apart than is otherwise realised (Ramsbotham, 2010, 2017). There is great scope for professional linguistic analysis to explore this further. In these cases, Ramsbotham suggests that there is more work to be done before conflict resolution can gain purchase. For example, we need to start where the conflicting parties are, not where third-parties want them to be. When conflict resolution does not yet work, we should promote collective strategic thinking within identity groups (where are they? Where do they want to be? How do they get there?), strategic engagement across and between them, and strategic involvement by third-parties.

In all of this, the Handbook amply demonstrates how professional linguistics can be a potent tool of analysis and practical application. For example, close textual work on ideation and ideology can uncover what Ramsbotham calls the “moments of radical disagreeing” – what conflicting parties say individually in the process of radical disagreement. Here, recommendation for action and justification fuse fact, value and emotion, while refutation of what the other says and explanation for why the other nevertheless says it illuminates the central struggle to include the other’s discourse within what we are pointing at (what Ramsbotham calls ostensive). Based on this, close textual work on examples of agonistic dialogue can then further explore the dimensions of radical disagreement itself. As the editors of the Handbook say, this is the conflict in its communicative form (including gesture, intonation, etc.). The verbal conflict is thereby shown linguistically to be about what it is about, to extend as far as whatever may be appealed to in the process of argumentation, and to go as deep as the prior involvement of distinctions invoked (e.g. opinion/reality, fact/value, form/content, subject/object, etc.) (Ramsbotham, 2010). Linguistic analysis can illuminate all of this in focused textual detail and thereby greatly increase understanding in an area where, so far, conflict resolution does not reach.

Finally, overlapping all this is an arena where linguistics and conflict research and practice might be able to combine forces to potent effect – the whole universe of possibilities opened up through IT and the internet. So far this has hardly begun to be explored, although we note one or two contributions to the book, as well as languageinconflict.org.uk, the web-based forum for discussion of linguistic aspects of conflict mentioned by the editors in their introduction. The worldwide web and the communications revolution it has engendered has created an exciting set of opportunities and challenges for linguistics and conflict research and further scope for connection and collaboration between the two fields. Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall (2016) have explored this new world of
cyber-peacemaking in *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* and in its associated *Reader* (2015), and Woodhouse (2014) has developed this examination further in ‘Pacifying cyberspace in the age of the zettabyte’. The rate of growth and the processing and dissemination capacity of information and communications technologies represent an epic communications revolution, arguably greater than the industrial revolution of the 19th century in its speed, range and global impact. But the shift also presents a challenge that is as much concerned with values, ethics and epistemology as it is with disembodied science and technology, and one of the exciting challenges, as yet very under-explored, is how to ‘pacify cyberspace’. In the past ten years, new terminologies for conflict conducted through the Internet have entered the lexicon, such as “netwars” and “cyberwars”, with a whole subset of associated terms, such as “cyberattacks”, “cyberterrorism”, “cyberwarriors”, “cyberjihad” and “cybersecurity”. The challenge then is to ‘pacify cyberspace’ – to enhance the knowledge, tools, language and narratives for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The tools and methodologies for linguistic analysis demonstrated in the *Handbook* suggest a fertile area for collaboration here.

For example, within the field of theory and practice of conflict resolution, there have been notable innovative developments marking progress in this area. Projects and programmes are evolving in ways that suggest that cyber-peace-making, and cyber-conflict resolution, are emerging to form one of the most exciting new areas for conflict resolution praxis. Digital or virtual mobilisation via social media has been rightly claimed as a form of liberation technology with pro-democracy and human rights mobilisations organised rapidly via text messaging, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and so on. In Africa, where up to 70 percent of the population use mobile phones, the Ushahidi system was developed, using crowd-sourcing to track real-time events to provide crisis or conflict maps to help prevent conflict.

However, younger researchers in particular who are engaging in this work on the front end of systems design and implementation, are cautioning against uncritical acceptance of the positive impacts of web-based and social media technologies on people in conflict areas. Sutherlin (2013) identifies the problem of cultural and linguistic distortion in “the technological union of humans and software, known as crowdsourcing, to manage the flood of information produced during recent crises”. She analyses four crises – in Haiti 2010, Egypt and Libya 2011 and Somalia 2011/2012 – where design flaws stemming from linguistic and cultural differences resulted in poor decision-making by international actors. Her concern is that in the pursuit of quantifiable aggregate data to produce conflict maps, for example, international agencies involved in conflict resolution and humanitarian work strip out local context and narrative, a problem that is compounded by cultural misunderstanding and failure to translate communications from the ground (the source) to the data source managers. The same problem, often encountered in traditional or “non-digital” conflict resolution, can be replicated by conflict managers in the digital crowd-sourced world, so that distortion of meaning and understanding is inherent in much of the cognitive and linguistic design of ICT software in data gathering and analysis. In the examples and case studies provided in Sutherlin’s study, it is clear that what appear to be cutting-edge decision-making tools driven by various forms of social media technologies are also prone to disenfranchising the language, voices and narratives of the people affected by conflict, leading to poor conflict resolution outcomes. Here is another area in which collaboration between linguistics and conflict research may have significant impact.

These are only preliminary suggestions. Further collaboration would no doubt refine this and uncover all sorts of other possibilities.
In *The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict*, linguistic scholars and practitioners have built a bridge towards conflict and peace studies. In the process, they have illuminated many areas of common concern. In this afterword, authors from the field of conflict and peace studies respond by warmly welcoming this initiative. Some of us have been trying to build a bridge in the other direction. Now we have met in the middle. This important book opens new possibilities for innovative joint research and practice as a result.

**References**


A good idea of the range of topics in the conflict and peace studies field can be found in the *Routledge Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution* series edited by Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse.