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# Conflict Talk in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Peter Muntigl\*

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## Abstract

Zu Ehren von Helmut Gruber und eingedenk seiner langjährigen Karriere als Diskursforscher greife ich ein wichtiges Thema auf, mit dem sowohl Helmut als auch ich uns zu Beginn unserer Laufbahn beschäftigt haben: das Streitgespräch. In diesem Artikel zeichne ich einen kurzen Abriss dazu, wie sich das Feld des »konversationellen Argumentierens« entwickelt hat, und lege ich einige der wichtigsten Themen und Kontroversen dar, die sich in dieser Forschungsphase herauskristallisierten. Ich erörtere auch, wie sich das Feld weiterentwickelt hat und zeige abschließend einige Tendenzen auf, die sich in der interaktionalen Forschung zum Argumentieren in Zukunft abzeichnen könnten.

**Schlagwörter:** Konflikt, Konversationsanalyse, Opposition, Streitgespräche

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## 1 Introduction

The 1980s and 1990s saw a flurry of research activity on the topic of arguing and conflict from discursive and interactional perspectives and many classic studies can be found in Grimshaw's (1990) edited volume. In 1980, Jackson & Jacobs published their influential article on "Structure of Conversational Argument", which pretty much set the stage for ensuing work that tried to capture how arguments between conversationalists in face-to-face situations are accomplished through talk. Jackson and Jacobs emphasized that arguing is a collaborative endeavor that centrally involves disagreement. In their words, "arguments are disagreement relevant speech events; they are characterized by the projection, avoidance, production, or resolution of disagreements" (Jackson & Jacobs 1980: 254). This general definition still holds today, although it has, over the years, been elaborated upon in important ways.

I became interested in conversational arguing when I was an undergraduate at Simon Fraser University in the early 1990s. At that time, I was just getting acquainted with a field known as conversation analysis/CA and became interested in Anita Pomerantz' (1984) work on disagreements following first assessments. I got the idea that the 3rd turn in sequence, the one immediately after the disagreement to the assessment (or claim), was crucial for understanding how arguments get launched. I tried to develop this idea in a seminar paper that focused on arguing from a CA perspective,<sup>1</sup> which was later turned into an MA thesis and eventually published in the *Journal of Pragmatics* (Muntigl & Turnbull 1998).

It was in the period when I began my PhD, around 1995-96, that I became acquainted with Helmut Gruber's work. In early 1997, I had moved to Vienna to begin working as a researcher on Ruth Wodak's Wittgenstein-funded project on EU unemployment policy and it was then that I discovered that Helmut had written his Habilitation on the subject of arguing ("*Streitgespräche: Zur Pragmatik einer Diskursform*", 1996) and that he was preparing articles for publication in high-ranking

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1 The seminar was held by William Turnbull.

discourse journals (e.g., Gruber 1998, 2001). To my surprise and delight, I had stumbled upon another researcher with a shared alignment in conflict research.

I will be using this article to revisit some of the important findings that surfaced during the time in which Helmut and I were principally engaged in conflict research. What are some of the main issues pertaining to conversational arguing, how have we advanced and, importantly, what work is still left to do?

## 2 Conversational Arguing: A minimal 3-part sequence<sup>2</sup>

My inspiration for looking at conversational arguing as a sequence came from Pomerantz' (1984) book chapter, in which she examined assessment and self-deprecation sequences that contained disagreement (or agreement) as a response. I became interested in what happened next; that is, how did the next speaker orient to the disagreement? With further disagreement or in some other manner? To be in an argument, I thought that a disagreement from the recipient (Speaker B) to an assessment or claim made by speaker A would not be enough. A third move would be needed in which speaker A must also perform a disagreement of some sort, either through opposition or by supporting their initial claim. From a corpus of everyday interactions involving family arguing, I proceeded to identify three-move sequences involving disagreements in the second and third sequence slots, as shown in extracts 1 and 2 (F=father; D=14 year-old daughter; M=mother).

### Extract 1 (Muntigl & Turnbull 1998: 235)

- F: It wasn't much to ask for you to come in early (0.7) just one night.  
(0.7) Nine-thirty, ten o'clock is not that out of line.  
(0.5)
- D: Yeah, it is out of line.
- F: No, it's not.

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2 Many terms have been proposed to refer to this activity of arguing. Some examples include: disputing, conflict talk, verbal discord, oppositional argument and confrontation.

## Extract 2 (Muntigl &amp; Turnbull 1998: 227)

- F: I haven't got an objection to a ten-thirty phone and eleven-thirty come in (1.3) seems half way between your present curfew and your friends' some of your friends' curfew.
- D: Yeah but its its still not, hhhh (.8) what I like.
- M: Well, its not exactly what we like.

Both extracts involve a discussion of the daughter's curfew, which is a contentious topic for many teenagers. In extract 1, the father suggests that a "Nine-thirty, ten o'clock" curfew is reasonable, which is followed by the daughter's contradiction and a return contradiction by the father. This form of arguing, commonly referred to as *primitive argument* and *quarreling* (Jackson & Jacobs 1980:254), mainly involves the recycling of opposing propositions. In Extract 2, involving a different family, the father begins the sequence by expressing diplomacy, stating that "a ten-thirty phone and eleven-thirty come in" would be a fair compromise. In the next turn, the daughter displays disagreement not by simply contradicting the father (*no, it's not*), but by voicing her displeasure. As a response, the mother then chimes in by stating that the parents are also not completely satisfied with this solution, thus implying that with this compromise both parties have something to gain and to lose.<sup>3</sup> This extract is a nice example of what has been termed *format tying*, through which participants are able to organize their argumentative moves by forming cohesive, lexico-grammatical connections to prior turns at talk (Goodwin 1990; Rogers & Fasula 2022).

This 3-part arguing sequence had, however, already been noted before I became engaged in conflict research (see for example, Antaki 1994: 178; Coulter 1990: 187; Maynard 1985: 3). Helmut had also argued for this sequence type in 1998, when analyzing a diverse corpus comprising mainly institutional or 'pseudo-natural' talk. It should be noted, however, that the 3-part sequence has not received explicit support from all conflict talk scholars. For instance, Jackson & Jackobs (1980)

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3 It has been noted that in multiparty conversations (i.e., beyond the dyad), speakers sometimes form alignments against another party (cf. Muntigl 2013)

refer mainly to ‘disagreement’ and Bilmes (1991) seems to suggest that disagreement is enough to get arguing underway:

Participants are in a “state of argument” once an explicit disagreement, with accompanying reasons, occurs. (Bilmes 1991: 7)

For Bilmes, once disagreement occurs, it is expected that there will be further disagreement and it is this *preference for disagreement* that drives argument forward – the concept of *preference* will be taken up in the next section. It may be, however, that the required number of sequential parts needed to constitute an argument will depend on such conditions as the conversational setting and the participants. For example, in Gruber’s (1998) analysis of televised *Club 2 discussions*, involving six to eight invited persons who were noted to hold different opinions on some social, political or cultural issue, it may be that a single disagreement will be enough to constitute an argument or to explicitly flag that the two speakers are in opposition.

Nonetheless, the third turn, following the initial disagreement, is an important slot through which the first speaker may confirm that a dispute is now in progress. In this way, the first speaker makes a public display of opposition by doing a return disagreement rather than conceding or downplaying the other’s point of view, changing the topic and so on. The third turn, therefore, marks the position in which the first speaker may commit to being in opposition.

There are sequences, however, that seem to jumpstart a conflict episode, already in the first part of the sequence. Dersley & Wooton (2001), for example, have shown how complaints may trigger arguments with deleterious outcomes. More generally, Haugh & Sinkeviciute (2019: 202) have argued that actions that take offence – complaining, criticizing, reproaching, blaming, denouncing and accusing – are important argument triggers. Such actions not only place the recipient in a defensive position, often making some form of denial or disagreement relevant, but also result in two displayed opposing positions already after the second turn. Although we could say that the third turn is still the deciding factor in terms of whether the first speaker (i.e., the one who complains, reproaches, etc.) wishes to back down, and thus

avoid a direct and continued confrontation, the gravity and intensity of the offense may make this difficult.

### 3 A preference for disagreement

Pomerantz (1984) showed that, for assessment sequences, there is a preference for agreement. According to Bilmes (1991: 4), preference in CA has been characterized by the following criteria: (i) the delay of dispreferred responses; (ii) the presence or absence of accounts; and (iii) the absence criterion – i.e., in the absence of a response, the dispreferred action is inferred. Thus, disagreements to assessments are generally delayed and contain accounts. Further, if the recipient (speaker B) does not respond to A's initial assessment, it is inferred that B is disagreeing. For Bilmes (1991), preference is best defined by the absence criterion, as the other two criteria relate to other phenomena such as delays signalling reluctance. Briefly put, Bilmes (1991: 6) argues that once a disagreement has been made by B, the preference changes from agreement to disagreement and, "if A does not express disagreement, then we may take it that he has tacitly (although perhaps reluctantly) accepted our point, or at least that A has found no plausible way to contest it." In her examination of conversations involving dyads of students and lecturers, Kotthoff (1993: 194) supported Bilmes' (1991) claim that disagreement is preferred in arguing, albeit using Bilmes' first criterion in which disagreements contained few reluctance markers.

The question of whether absence of a response in the third position in arguing implies agreement is, I think, not so clear cut. Let us consider Pomerantz' (1984) famous "fruitcake" example:

#### Extract 3 (Pomerantz 1984:77)

B: ... an' that's not an awful lotta fruitcake.

(1.0)

B: Course it is. A little piece goes a long way.

A: Well that's right

In this well-known example, A is selling fruitcakes and had been telling B how she had been getting complaints about the exorbitant price of a fruitcake. To counter these complaints, she then decided to cut them in half and reduce the price. In response, B attempted to align with A in her criticism of some of the customers, but then ended her turn with “an’ that’s not an awful lotta fruitcake.”, which may be taken as a criticism of the now small size of the fruitcake and, therefore, a disagreement concerning A’s decision. What ensues is a 1-second silence, a delayed response from A, which seems to be signalling some interactional trouble. B then orients to this ‘trouble’ by reversing her assessment, now emphasizing the adequacy of the amount of fruitcake, which then receives immediate agreement from A. The absence of a response from A, rather than implying agreement, seems to signal upcoming disagreement. The preference is therefore for agreement and not disagreement. It is true that this segment of talk involves a misalignment in understanding rather than two persons with divergent points of view, but I don’t think this should really matter. What this extract shows, I believe, is that the third position is an opportunity to go on-record for displaying a commitment to begin disputing or to refrain from disputing by engaging in some other, more consensus-oriented action. Once speakers have publicly displayed a commitment towards being in opposition, the preference for disagreement takes effect.

#### **4 Disagreement acts**

Various kinds of disagreement acts have been proposed for Child disputes (Brenneis & Lein 1977; Eisenberg & Garvey 1981; Goodwin 1990). Drawing from my data on family arguing, I came up with a classification that was based on function and turn-design, using grammatical, semantic and interactional criteria. These act types included: Challenges, Irrelevancy claims, Contradictions and Counterclaims. For example, the disagreements in Extract 1 are clear contradictions, where propositions become negated through opposition particles such as “no”, “not”, “yes” and others. The disagreements in

Extract 2 are, by contrast, counter-claims. These comprise disagreements that offer an alternative claim. For example, by saying “Yeah but its still not, hhhh (.8) what I like.”, disagreement is achieved by displaying one’s dissatisfaction with a former proposal, indicating that it will not be supported.

Helmut’s work on arguing provided a novel perspective on how disagreements function pragmatically in sequential contexts. He initially classified opposition in terms of *overt* and *pragmatic* disagreements (Gruber 1998) and later included a third category called *opposing questions* (Gruber 2001). Further, ‘opposing questions’ were further subdivided into *explicit/implicit*, *rhetorical* and *distorting*. Helmut also drew attention to the various kinds of ‘disagreement’ discourse markers that often appear in conflict episodes. Common markers, in German, were found to be: *nein*, *na* (“no”/ “nope”); *aber* (“but”); *na* (“well?”); *doch* (“oh yes” = contradiction); *moment* (“just a moment”) (Gruber 1998: 487).

In interactional work, there is always a danger of adopting a complacent attitude when ‘act types’ are used to explain social action. These disagreement act types, however, were mainly meant to serve a heuristic function, providing the analyst with a starting point (rather than an end point) for understanding what the disagreement is doing. More attention to the specifics of turn-design must be further explored, to grasp the intricacies of how the disagreement is being responsive to what came before and is providing further opportunities for the next speaker to respond.

Different studies have examined the broader forms of interactional work achieved by disagreements in conflict episodes. One common theme involves how disagreeing may impact the social relationship between speakers. There now seems to be broad agreement that conflict can either be supportive or detrimental to speakers’ relations, and that this will not only depend on how speakers disagree, but also whether the relationship is generally empathetic or antagonistic (Sifianou 2019). One area of investigation concerning the relationship involves how disagreement may impact speakers’ *face* (Goffman 1967). For example, disagreement turn design may either work to aggravate or mitigate threats to face during conflict (Gruber 2001; Muntigl & Turnbull 1998).

Amplified threats to the relationship may occur when disagreements are constructed as offenses that focus on other's faults and when emotional displays become intensified through intonational (e.g., pitch, loudness) and non-vocal resources or acts such as walking out or away (Dersley & Wootton 2001). Other research has shown how conflict is dealt with or kept 'under control' through specific interactional practices. In their examination of couples conversations in mainland China, Yu, Wu & Drew (2019) have shown how couples often use a range of mitigating practices that are referred to as 'bickering' – repair initiation through repetition, type-conforming responses, turn-ending double particles – to prevent the escalation of conflict and to manage the relationship. Another study by Clift & Pino (2020) has illustrated another kind of practice, termed *conduct formulations*, that may work to mitigate conflict. When, for example, speaker A makes a complaint about B's conduct, B may formulate the complaint-in-progress using expressions such as "why you shouting" or "I dunno why you're being so aggressive". What this does is 'turn the tables' by pointing out something negative in A's conduct and making it accountable. They argue that these formulations can provide a 'check' on A's current course of action, leading A to perhaps 'turn down the volume', back down and proceed in a less emotionally heightened manner.

## 5 Terminating and avoiding an argument

Recall Bilmes' (1991: 7) claim that the preference for disagreement drives argument onwards, which makes it difficult to stop arguing without someone having clearly lost the battle. In his study of conflict talk during family dinners, Vuchinich (1990) formulates the conflict termination problem as follows:

The closing problem in verbal conflict is how to organize the arrival of the opponents at a point where one speaker's oppositional turn will not elicit an oppositional turn from the other (Vuchinich 1990: 121)

Terminating a conflict episode can thus be a delicate matter. How can the argument end without loss of face or, in intensively heated encounters, without the relationship becoming severely damaged? Vuchinich (1990) identified five practices for closing a conflict episode: submission, dominant third-party intervention, compromise, stand-off and withdrawal. The extracts dealt with by Dersley & Wootton (2001) were clear examples of withdrawal, in which one of the parties closed – but did not resolve – the conflict by walking away. Another type of conflict closure, compromise, is shown from my family arguing data in extract 4:

Extract 4 (Muntigl 1998:)

- F: Well, why did you think it's a moral issue?  
(3.5)
- D: Because it's my righ::ts. (2.4) It's my rights to go out.
- F: Yeah, but it's our rights to have to uh,
- M: So that we don't [have to worry about you
- F: [be able to go and have a decent night's sleep and not
- F: worry about where you [are::
- M: [I mean you know I I can't get to sleep until I
- M: know that you're in, even if you're babysitting or what (.3) I cannot sleep.  
(1.0)
- D: Well, tough.  
(0.8)
- M: Well, it shouldn't be just tough I don't think that's very, [its your attitude.
- F: [That's, that's its your whole attitude is wrong.  
(6.4)
- F: W- well I I actually think we're we're doing all right the way we are at the moment, the that is as far as uhm you know I think we're letting you out enough aren't we?

This conflict revolving around the daughter's curfew seems to deteriorate when the daughter says "Well, tough.", displaying callousness and a lack of consideration of the mother's position. What follows is a reproach from both parents that target's the daughter's poor attitude. This

leads into a long 6.4-second silence in which the daughter does not respond to the reproach. The conversation is then taken up by the father, who works in a conciliatory fashion. First, he positively assesses their current activity (“I actually think we’re we’re doing all right”) and then makes a proposal that they (F and M) are providing the daughter with enough opportunities to go out. Through his confirmation-seeking question, the father is able to manage the conflict by i) positively assessing what they are doing and ii) orienting the talk towards consensus and away from the initial dispute.

One effective way to manage a dispute is simply to avoid getting into one. Many forms of institutional talk have developed sets of organized practices to minimize conflict and arguing to ensure, among other things, that the main interactional business will not be obstructed. Garcia (1991, 2019) has identified some of the core practices of mediation that help to achieve this aim:

The interactional organization of mediation minimizes arguing by separating accusations and denials, and providing for selective responses to accusations and the mitigation of accusations and denials (Garcia, 2019: 60)

Thus, because disputants cannot directly respond to accusations (e.g., by denying), the preference for disagreement in the next turn is cancelled out. This not only prevents an arguing sequence from materializing, but also prevents the production of aggravated accusations and denials, thus keeping the level of emotional intensity in check.

Psychotherapy is another professional practice that often works to minimize conflict. My work on person-centred therapy (client-centred and emotion-focused) has shown that therapists tend to respond to client disagreement by neutralizing the potential conflict (Muntigl, 2024; Muntigl et al, 2013). This practice is illustrated in Extract 5 (T=Therapist; K=Katie; *italics=non-vocal information*)

## Extract 5 (Muntigl et al. 2013:10)

T: very †alone it sounds like in (a hare)=

K: = I †was thinking about=IT-IS- I †don't know if it is: feeling alone I,  
(1.0)

K: .hhh it's more betrayed den alone.

t *slow multiple nods*→  
(5.7)

t *nods*

T: .hhh betrayed. yeah.  
(2.2)

T: >so he's [let you<] down.

K: [mm hm.]

K: mm hm

Katie had been discussing how her husband offers her very little support. In the first line, the therapist produces a formulation that characterizes how Katie may feel in these situations (“very †alone”). Katie then disagrees with the therapist by offering an alternative interpretation: “it’s more betrayed den alone.” To enter into a conflict, the therapist would have to respond with a move that signals disagreement (or at least that agreement is absent), but the therapist does not do this. Instead, she mobilizes a set of interactional resources that affiliate with the client’s new position. First, she nods during the disagreement and also throughout the ensuing silence, which conveys token affiliation with Katie’s contrasting position (see Muntigl, Knight & Watkins 2012: 18-24). Then the therapist provides verbal affiliation in two ways: First, through a *mirroring repeat* (Ferrara 1994: 118) that acknowledges Katie’s position and, second, by a formulation that names an implication of the husband’s betrayal (“>so he’s let you< down.”). To sum up, by refraining from taking up the third-part move of disagreement, the therapist is able to skillfully maintain an orientation towards consensus and a positive alignment toward the client’s troubles.

## 6 Future directions

I have tried to briefly show in this paper how an interactional perspective, mainly from conversation analysis, has played an important role in furthering our understanding of conflict talk and how Helmut's work (and others including my own) have contributed to this endeavor: How is arguing accomplished? Which resources are commonly used in arguing? How can arguing be managed in ways to keep emotions in check and prevent a rupture in the social relationship? How can arguments be avoided or minimized, in contexts where other activities may be more productive?

There are still many avenues that conversational arguing research may pursue, and space restricts me from elaborating on this. I will mention just a few that I feel are important. How can the CA concepts of *epistemics* and *affiliation*, which have received a lot of attention in the past decade, shed more light on how speakers argue? CA's attention to institutional talk may also add significantly to the discussion on how arguments are managed, avoided or intensified. But also, how can these institutional practices inform everyday practices and vice versa? Can CA studies also help us to better understand global conflicts, how they are occasioned and how they may be effectively dealt with through talk? These questions, in naming but a few, can serve as a beginning agenda for conflict talk research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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