

A Sociolinguistics Perspective on Family Conflict Talk—A Case Study of *Good Luck Charlie*

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Abstract: Conflicts are everywhere in social life, and when expressed in the form of language, they form discourse conflicts. Discourse conflict is a kind of linguistic behavior, which is the phenomenon of discourse non-cooperation that occurs in the process of language communication due to each person's personality, value orientation, and different views and attitudes towards someone or something. This article takes the family discourse conflicts in the American drama "Good Luck Charlie" as the expected source. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, it is more important for the American middle class in terms of face, power, gender, occupation and language factors in the intonation and lexicon. Analyzing the discourse conflicts of the nuclear family with children aims to summarize the basic characteristics and reasons of the family discourse conflicts. And the construction of gender, power and identity has a permeating effect in every kind of family conflict.

Keywords: Family Conflict Talk; Gender; Identity; Linguistic factors; Power; Sociolinguistics; Social Factors

1. Introduction

Conflict talk refers to disagreements, arguments, quarrels, opposition, rebuttals, objections and other antagonistic speech events and speech acts between communicative subjects in speech communication.

Conflict is a common occurrence. It is "pervasive" and "ubiquitous".^[1] Language, also, has the same characteristics. It is a tool that is distinctively human to express conflict. "Conflict talk" (hereafter referred to as simply CT) is a common speech act in society that everyone must have encountered in our daily life. It catches attention of various disciplines: anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, topology and most recently, linguistics. As the cradle of language, the fountain of everyday discourse, and a touchstone for talk in other circumstances, family, indeed is the first place we learn to socialize. Conflict is also evitable in this process. Understanding the mechanism of family conflict talk (hereafter referred to as simply FCT) is the first step in coping with other kinds of CT like verbal conflict between strangers, institutions or even nations.

2. Literature Review

The ability to speak language is an important feature that distinguishes us human species from other living beings. Yet this ability does not always bring out the best part of life. Just like the stereotype, it is more like a double-edged knife—it can bring mellow sweetness to everything we do or turn to be a troublemaker and lead to devastated outcomes like unsuccessful relationships, business failures, cross-cultural misunderstandings or even wars.

Different terms are used by different scholars to describe the linguistic phenomenon in which two opposing parties use language to express their different standpoints like dispute^[2], adversative episode^[3], disagreement^[4], oppositional argument^[5], conflict talk^[1], dialogical asymmetry^[6] and quarrel^[7]. And this paper chooses the term "conflict talk" which was firstly presented by Grimshaw in 1990 in his book: Conflict talk: A Sociolinguistic investigation in conversations. "Conflict talk" in this thesis is defined as follows: for one thing, it involves two parties holding opposite opinions yet not necessary two interlocutors (In FCT, it is common for children to stick together and fight against their parents); for another, there must be three stages, which are the initiation stage, the escalation stage and the termination

stage to form a complete conflict episode, which means "argument" like cursing back and forth will not be seen as a valid CT episode in this thesis.

3. Possible Causes of FCT—Case Analysis

In this section, possible causes of the occurrence of FCT are discussed socially and linguistically. The author identifies face, gender, power, and profession as the four protruding social factors and prosody, lexicon as well as move pattern as the three important linguistic factors which give rise to FCT. All the factors mentioned above are, inextricably intertwined with one another. One certain kind of factor may be the main cause of a certain family conflict episode. Nevertheless, it is never the only reason why a CT episode initiates.

3.1 Social Factors

Human beings are, in essence, social creatures. An individual cannot possibly survive in society without mastering at least one language to communicate with others. And as society revolves in its own order, people living in it are gradually fitting themselves into those orders. Social factors like nationality, race (in this thesis it is counted as a kind of social factors since the concept of "face" is originated from the society), social class, religion, age, level of education, occupation, gender, identity role all play their roles in shaping the way a certain individual communicate with others. All those variables and linguistic choice-making are inextricably intertwined during the conversation process. Yet since this is case study of FCT of a blue collar middle class in America, factors like nationality, ethnicity, religion, race and social class are ruled out because they are family members and those variables are exactly the same. The author mainly focuses on following social factors like-power, age, gender, identity role and occupation in FCT.

3.1.1 Face

When it comes to face, people often think of Chinese people. Indeed, this notion does come from Chinese culture which means "status in the eyes of others". Goffman is the first western scholar who introduced this notion into the linguistic field, and then Brown & Levison develop Politeness theory with the concept of "face" as its core. They believe that "face" is a cultural-general concept. Then this term is widely used in linguistic of human interaction. Since conflict must involve the loss of face, face-loss can certainly be one of the reasons why CT starts in the first place. So certain face threatening act must be involved in triggering FCT.

Example (1)

- 1) BOB: PJ, why would take a job where you're gonna lose money?
- 2) PJ: Does everything always have to be about money? Are you gonna give me 200?
- 3) BOB: Sorry, son. You're gonna have to come up with the money some other way.

In this example, PJ tries to get into a club and he tells his father Bob that he is going to get a "job". The father who always worries about his somewhat naive son is actually very happy when he hears the news at first. But then he finds out that the job PJ describes is actually a DJ in a party and 200 dollars are needed to simply purchase outfits for this DJ role. Here, in this intergenerational conflict episode, Bob initiates the conversation by devaluing the job in a question—"Why would you take a job where you're gonna lose money?" In this way, he's threatening the positive face of PJ. As far as PJ's concerned, DJ is a fabulous job and with this job, he, himself can be seen as a one of the "cool kids" in the eyes of his peers. Yet his father holds a different opinion—money is the primary concern and also ultimate criterion in determining the value of a job. So if a job doesn't yield any financial benefit, it's hardly a job and certainly doesn't worth doing. In turn 2, PJ expresses his disapproval to his father's opinion by using a question to imply that the job isn't about money thus threatening his father's positive face. And this question is proceeded by a request for money again, which puts pressure on Bob to give him the money thus threatening the negative face of the father. Hence, the verbal conflict begins.

This section provides evidence from the data that face can be an important factor in initiating conflict talk. In the initiation stage, face threatening acts can lead to the loss of face. In order to restore their face, the interlocutors in CT have to defend themselves hence FCT occurs. It's one of the most important factors in family conflict talk. However, face alone can't trigger CT since face threatening act also appears in normal interaction.

3.1.2 Power

In this thesis, power is defined as the ability to control other people. And power imbalance between interlocutors is common. In the Duncan family's scenario, the parents, of course, are entitled to greater power, so children are in the constant challenge of their parents' authority thus CT between parent and children occurs; when it comes to CT between siblings, they are almost in the same age group so each one of them wants to be in charge; as for husband and wife conflict talk, Amy is always the Queen and Bob is somewhat henpecked, and both of the parties accept this norm.

Example (2)

1) TEDDY: Okay, listen up. Here's the plan. So, when they come through the front door, you guys are gonna hold up this banner. Here. Take that. And Charlie, you're gonna give Mommy these balloons. And I'm gonna blow the noisemaker. And then we're all gonna sing "welcome home, Toby" to the tune of the rock classic.

2) GABE: Why do you get to blow the noisemaker?

3) PJ: And why are we making such a big deal outta this? They bring a new baby home like every six months.

4) GABE: Yeah.

5) TEDDY: This is what we always do. We did it for Charlie.

Example (2) is a CT between Teddy and her two brothers. A new baby has been born to this family and Teddy wants to give the baby a welcome party. She tries her best to get everything under her control and hold this party successfully by giving orders. Yet in the brother's minds, Teddy is their sister and they are supposed to be equal in power instead of being inferior to her. In turn 2, Gabe is unsatisfied about distribution of "assignment", while PJ, in turn 3, as the eldest sibling, questions about the necessity of the party itself. And Gabe echoes with PJ's idea. In turn 5, Teddy refutes them by saying that the welcome-home party is actually a family tradition. Teddy is fighting for the power to get in charge and the two brothers are at least trying to restore the power distribution to its norm—that is—siblings are equal.

3.1.3 Gender

Gender and language has always been a thriving topic of academic study for last several decades. 73 percent of S&S FCTs occur between the opposite sexes. We can see from the previous section that FCT is a struggle for power. But fighting for power alone is not sufficient enough to explain the occurrence of FCT.

Example (3)

1) TEDDY: All right, so we divide it up evenly. We each get to spend an hour with Charlie.

Who wants to go first?

2) GABE: I think you should go first.

3) PJ: And second and third, since this was your idea.

4) TEDDY: Hey, I'm not doing this all by myself. You guys have to help out.

5) PJ: Fine, I'll go fourth.

6) TEDDY: There is no fourth.

7) PJ: I meant I shall go forth to the park to shoot some hoop.

8) TEDDY: You want to go to the park so badly, then why don't you just take Charlie?

9) PJ: What's a baby supposed to do at the park?

10) TEDDY: Babies love parks, you can show her the duck pond, the blue sky, clouds.

11) PJ: We're just gonna look at stuff? That's what TV for.

In this extract, Teddy, the female sibling proposes that she and her two younger brothers should take care of the new-born baby sister in turn with a simple statement which sounds like a command so it hurts the negative face of the two male siblings by telling them what they need to do next. And before the two brothers give any response to this proposal, she continues to give an order and this definitely further constraints the sphere of activity of the brothers later and at the same time hurting their self-face. Again

without getting any response from the brothers, she pops up with a question. Here the first three utterances can be seen as control maneuvers because Teddy here wants to get PJ and Gabe to take care of the baby and she has already divided the task, in her words, evenly. Then Gabe, the third male sibling in Duncan family, responds that Teddy herself should go first. It seems that he's already agreed with the presupposition in Teddy's proposal that they should take care of the baby together and divide the job evenly. Yet this is proceeded by PJ's refusal in turn 2 by following what Gabe says. So within just a few seconds, Gabe and PJ have already formed an alliance to fight against Teddy, which definitely brings the brothers even closer. Teddy, of course, reads their unwillingness and raises up her tone and gives out an order again in turn 4—"You guys have to help out." And the interlocutors continue to argue. In the process, apart from the two brother's instant forming of alliance, the sister is actually also trying to getting close to the brother, for example, she tries her best not once but twice to drag the topic back to babysitting when PJ's trying to avoiding the topic. Although CT is always concerning about fighting for power, it is also, and equally, concerning about the constant longing for connection. Yet in the process of connection, man and woman have different objectives and this also results in conflicts in their verbal communication.

3.1.4 Occupation

People from all walks of life register different linguistic features when they speak. Occupation, for one thing, defines the range of the topics and for another, influences the choice of words in people's daily interaction, especially when they get into a conflict. Professional knowledge of a certain career here may also hinder the process of interaction for the listener may not fully understand the speaker and at the same time the listener may simply not interested in the topic itself. When one of the interlocutors finds it's hard to relate with the other one's feeling of the work they do, CT occurs.

Example (4)

1) BOB: Brazilian termites. Very rare, very destructive and they've never been found in North America until now.

2) AMY: Well, if they're so destructive, why would you bring them into our house? Our wooden house?

3) BOB: Honey, I am not an idiot. This container—termite—proof.

4) AMY: Are you sure?

5) BOB: I am sure. Tomorrow I'm taking them to the University of Denver. This could land me in the exterminator hall of fame.

6) AMY: Honey, this doesn't exist.

7) BOB: Honey, yes, it does. It's in Detroit. Used to be in Cleveland, but they have to move it.

Rat problem.

In this family, the father, who is an exterminator and very proud of his job, always talks about his job-related subjects and also as a man of blue-collar class, he doesn't pay much attention to the words he uses when he gets involved in a CT with other family members. And the mother, who is a nurse and always wants to be a resident guest in the local television show, finds it hard to communicate with her husband when the topic is bug-centered.

Bob, again is talking about his ever-ending job related topic with his family again. And the very beginning of the conversation immediately brings out Amy's repugnant attitude for she doesn't want to talk about bugs and it also raises Amy's practical concern, that is, the termites might destroy their wooden house. The bugs seem to obsess him, instead of giving up on the topic and taking the termites out of the house as his wife wants, Bob, in turn 3, first, reassures to Amy about her safety concern and then in turn 7, picks up the topic again, thus the CT continues.

3.2 Linguistic Factors

Other from social factors, linguistic factors like prosody, lexicon and syntax can also contribute to FCT. The following section of this part elaborates on some linguistic factors that contribute to the initiation of FCT.

3.2.1 Prosody

Prosody in this context is really about intonation. It is a predominant contextual cue to reveal interpersonal relationship and a good demonstration of interlocutors' feelings at the moment. Intonation can help syntax structures becoming statements with low or falling contour or questions with high or rising contour. And in family conflict talk, it is used to express interlocutors' attitudes or feelings toward a certain thing thus further conforms their own stand in family conflict talk.

Example (5)

- 1) PJ: Oh! Hey, guys? Volume!
- 2) GABE: Oh, he's right. Let's crank it up.
- 3) PJ: No. Turn it down.
- 4) GABE: What?
- 5) PJ: Down. I can't hear myself think.
- 6) GABE: No one's ever heard you think.
- 7) PJ: You know what? That is it. I have had enough of you two. No more video games.
- 8) GABE: What?
- 9) PJ: No more video games. I'm trying to study for a test.
- 10) GABE: What are we supposed to do?
- 11) PJ: I don't care, as long as it's quiet.

The background of this example is that Gabe and his friends come over to PJ's place to play video games and PJ thinks they are too noisy and wants them to turn down the volume. In turn 1, PJ changes his intonation in his utterance within only four words three times to express his strong dissatisfaction toward Gabe's behavior. He applies 2 kinds of intonation. With "hey" in a falling contour, he wants to catch Gabe and his friends' attention and remind them that the very existence of another person in that room. And with a rising tone in "you guys?" He wants to let Gabe and his friend know that he thinks they are being too noisy and he is very unhappy about it. So as soon as Gabe hears what PJ says, in turn 6, Gabe responds in a sarcastic way and turn 7, PJ uses the rising intonation to show his feeling again which triggers the conflict talk.

3.2.2 Lexicon

Lexicons are the building blocks of semantic structures. Different lexicons carry different meanings. In family conflict talk, the most obvious examples are some negative words like "no" "never" which shows a firm refusal to the other party's requests or strong denial of the claims of the other party. Using these words means to openly and directly threaten the face of the other party which triggers a CT episode or even escalates the conflict itself.

Example (6)

- 1) GABE: Funny you should ask, Teddy, or should I say "mom"?
- 2) TEDDY: Oh, no, no, no, no.
- 3) GABE: It can totally work. Miss Monroe is old and has terrible eyesight.

Gabe accidentally finds out Teddy's secret and he gets into trouble in school again, so he asks Teddy to pretend to be his mom and talk to his teacher to avoid punishment. Teddy, certainly, without a second thought refuses his whimsical idea with a string of strong negative word "no" to indicate her strong objection to the idea at the same time implying that she thinks the idea is insane and it is very hard, if not impossible, to change her idea and get her on board. Gabe doesn't get cold feet because he accidentally finds out Teddy's secret and the negative words uttered by Teddy actually electrifies him to continue the CT between them.

4. Conclusion

This thesis tries to analysis family conflict talk of a middle-class nuclear family with more than one child, taking social factors into consideration.

It facilitates the cross-cultural communication. This study shed some light on the American family conflict talk and reveal how family members construct their identity and the features of parents and children conflict talk, sibling and sibling conflict talk and parent and parent conflict talk, which intends to help families with more than one child to better communicate with their family members.

As for the what may give rise to the family conflict talk, both social factors and linguistic factors are taken into consideration. Social factors like face, gender, power and occupation and linguistic ones like prosody, lexicon and move pattern are considered significant ones contributing to family conflict talk.

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