An Analysis of the Linguistic Features of Conflict Talks in Polylogues of English Majors

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Abstract: The present study seeks to explore the linguistic features within conflict talks in English majors' polylogues, namely group discussions, under the theoretical framework proposed by Scott Suzanne, and outline the multiple linguistic features which work together to index conflict talks. It has been found that negations, discourse markers, and modals are the top three most frequently used in the lexical level, and a long turn is always dominant in the conflict talks which apparently is different from the ones in Scott's study.

1. Preface

Goffman, sociologist, holds that the interactive pattern in daily life can reflect social structure, and the interactive pattern can embody the trend or rules in the continuous construction or reconstruction of the social order. Conflict talks are undoubtedly quite common in the interactive verbal communication everywhere and it can reflect the potential patterns of social order and the relationship between the interlocutors, individuals and the institutions, and among institutions.

Although quite a few papers, which are about the regularity of conversational interaction, have been published in recent years domestically and abroad, rarely has the attention been given to conflict talks. "Conflict talk" was firstly adopted by Grimshaw in 1990 in his edited book, *Conflict Talk: Sociolinguistic Investigations of Arguments in conversation*. Since then, researchers have been trying to uncover this field in various apsects: Honda examined the interactional structure of conflict talk in Japanese talk show of public affairs; In 2011, Hanh thi Nguyen published *Boundary and alignment in multiparty conflict talk*, exploring the multiparty conflict talks in the pharmacy patient consultation by using conversation analysis. In China, scholars have made efforts in the research, like *Pragmatic Approach to Conflict Talk between Couples in Desperate Housewives* (Zhu Xiaoqin) which is based on the American TV series, and it mainly seeks to ascertain the language strategies used in it, conflict terminating mode and the characteristics of conflict between couples; Zhao Zhongde and Zhang Lin analyzed the reasons of the occurrence of conflict talk under the theoretical framework of Relevance Theory; Du Lingli first investigated the conflict talk in the online chatting room and summarized the initial, maintaining and terminating stages. Zhao Yingling published *A Study of Conflict Talk in Chinese*, which focused on the construction models and cohesive devices of conflict talks. In 2008, Zhao published her dissertation of doctor degree, *Pragma-rhetoric Study of Conflict Talk in Chinese*, which is a systematical and profound research of Chinese conflict talk. Zhao Yongqing has made the research about the basic sequence structure and the linguistic features of multi-party conflict talk with a socio-pragmatic orientation, and the dissertation adopts the working corpus from BNC with altogether 47,982 words(token), and the polylogues are mainly from TV talk shows, public government conferences, and hearings.

Nonetheless, the research of conflict talks is far from satisfaction. It can be clearly found that rarely research has been done from the Chinese English learners' perspective, and the studies mainly are based upon the scripts of novel or drama which can be unnatural. Polylogue, proposed by Kerbrat-Orecchioni in 2004 in *Journal of Pragmatics*, means the verbal communication among at least three participants or three parties. The polylogues among the English majors, the English learners, should be given due attention, since the unedited texts, with the characteristics of situational

the contextual details, are crucial to valid and meaningful analysis. The present study can be of practical value to English pedagogy, and improve language learners' learning efficiency, etc.

2. Research Background
2.1. Conflict Talk

Conflict talk, a common language phenomenon, can be found in everyday life, courts, business negotiations, hospitals, etc. Van and Grootendorst wrote that conflict talk, which was first used by Grimshaw in 1990, refers to a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint. In addition, Eisenberg and Garvey define conflicts as, "…the interaction which grows out of an opposition to a request for action, an assertion, or an action…The negating responses or oppositions include refusals, disagreements, denials, and objections. Thus, an adversative episode is a sequence which begins with an opposition and ends with a resolution or dissipation of conflict."

Muntigl and Turnbull hold that the conflict arises when a current speaker A's ongoing talk is contested by a speaker B, and speaker A then produces a counter-oppositional turn toward speaker B. Meanwhile, conflict talk only exists when with the second opposing turn, which retrospectively marks the arguable move as the beginning of the conflict talk sequence. The following 3 moves structure is proposed by Muntigl and Turnbull:

a. A: statement
b. B: counterstatement (i.e. B disagrees with A)
c. A: counterstatement to B (i.e. A disagrees with B, and possible insists on Turn 1, statement)

The third move plays a crucial role in the happening of a conflict talk, for the fact that if A gives in or apologizes or just remains silent instead of performing a counterstatement to B in the third turn, no conflict will develop and no conflict talk will occur.

It also needs mentioning that the 3 move structure proposed by Muntigl and Turnbull embodies only a conversation or dialogue, and the present study is based on the corpus built upon the English majors' group discussions which include at least 4 participants in the talks. But the 3 move structure can still be applied to the recognition and selection of the discourse of conflict talks since the present study aims to outline the linguistic features of English majors' conflict talks.

2.2. Scott's Research

Scott Suzanne published her article in 2002, Linguistic feature variation within disagreements: An empirical investigation, in Text, which is a qualitative and quantitative study of the linguistic features of oral disagreements which indexes disagreements. It has identified the co-occurring linguistic makeup of conflict talks and analyzed the feature systematically.

The corpus she adopts are from the four transcribed editions of the unscripted 30 minutes long American Cable News Network (CNN) television news show, Crossfire, which is about the public affairs and participated by two hosts and one to three knowledgeable guests discussing one controversial topic of current interest. The corpus is natural because the scripts in the programs are not scripted, which is in line with the corpus adopted by the present study.

By referring to related literatures on disagreement, Scott has outlined the linguistic features which might index disagreement. Altogether, she has summarized 12 types, which are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Scott's classification of linguistic features in disagreement

	linguistic features	language forms in details
1	absolutes	all, anybody, everything, anywhere, etc.
2	negations	affixal: anti-, de-. dis-; nonaffixal: no, not, n't, etc.
3	discourse markers	well, but, now
4	emphatics	a lot, at all, for sure, so+adjectives, etc.
5	floor bids	let me/him, just a minute, wait a minute, etc.
6	flow	overlapping and latching combined
7	indexical 2nd-person pronouns	your, you, yourself
8	modals	could, shall, will, must, going to, has to, etc.
9	repetitions	lexical/phrasal/clausal/sentential
10	questions	interrogatives with S-V inversions, and/or wh-markers
11	turn length	in number of words per turn
12	uptake avoidance	avoidance of previous topic

3. Research Design

The present study is to analyze the corpus built from the transcribed 10-hours English majors' polylogues participated by at least 5 students each time. Altogether, the corpus is composed of 107,534 words, which is also unscripted and natural and can ultimately reflect the language proficiency of advanced English learners. According to the 3 move structure of conflict talks proposed by Muntigl and Turnbull, 73 conflict talks have been identified.

By referring to Scott's classification and summary, this empirical study attempts to investigate quantitatively and qualitatively what linguistic features can be found in the English majors' polylogues, and whether there is(are) difference(s) between Scott's research findings and the present study.

4. Research Findings

This part is to summarize the research findings after viewing the corpus from two perspectives: lexical level and turns.

4.1. Lexical Level

It has been found that (in Figure 1), negations, discourse markers, modals, absolutes, emphatics are relatively common in the conflict talks between the English majors. To some extent, it is comforting to find that students can apply the words to realize the pragmatic functions consciously or unconsciously.
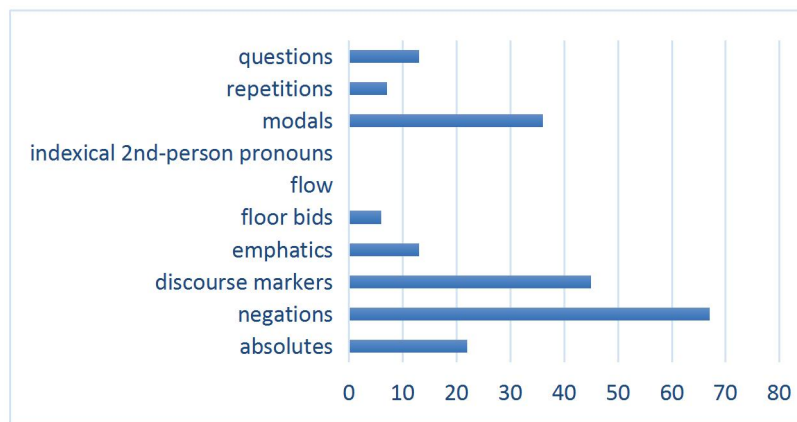

Figure 1 Lexical level

<Asp4>OK, hello, everyone. ..... And I will start first. I think this phenomenon en-en really it because that the audience's taste is higher than before because of the improvement and of moral and civil educations the old en film and TV series er should will not satisfy the audience's taste…And who's next? </Asp4>......

<Asp3>So your point is that the remaking of these things are good. </Asp3>

<Asp4>En, yes.</Asp4>

<Asp3>But, en actually I support to make en like remake some TV series like Journey to the West, because the old one was quite old fashion that when Monkey King is flying we can see that he is like fly-flying on a piece of paper. But en actually I think nowadays the remaking is actually terrible, kind of terrible.</Asp3> preface disagreement

<Asp5>[I think]</Asp5><interrupted>

<Asp1>[But I can put it] to two categories. And the first category is the reshooting the classic such as 'Journey to the West' or the 'Dream of the Red Mansion',</Asp1></interrupted>

The excerpt above is from the topic "Film or TV series reshooting". Here, the conflict talk is mainly between Speaker 4 and 3, who hold totally different views about film reshooting. It can be seen that the Asp3 firstly repeated Asp4's speech by asking a question which summarizes or clarifies Asp4's personal stance and Asp3 got a positive answer. Asp3 adopts the combination of discourse marker (*but, and actually*), floor bids (*I think*), and emphatics (*actually*) to refute Asp4's stance. From the 73 episodes of conflict talks, the researcher has found that discourse marker, which is quite common in everyday English, is of high percentage or frequency, which can be drawn to the conclusion that most students can apply DMs to realize their pragmatic functions.

In addition, negations are also of high percentage, and the main form is the "verb+not" combination, which is easy to understand that the participants know from the very beginning of the English learning that negations like "verb+not" are surely to show disagreements or negative views. Modals like "should, could, etc." are always used in collocation with pronouns like "we", which could be explained that the speakers want to express their stance with the minimum effect of causing face-threats.

4.2. Turns

As for the turns, it has been found that, the turns in the conflict talks here are relatively long. In Scott's idea, the turn length is a potential index of disagreement and she found that in Crossfire, the participants usually adopt shorter turn when compared with the disagreement talks. However, long turn is always dominant here in the present study. The speakers usually adopt a long turn rather than a short one when they make their stances and refute others' stance. This can be explained from the relations of the speakers here since they are all from the same school or even the same class (The participants are selected randomly). They want to mitigate the face-threatening effect caused by their opposing views, or to avoid further conflicts verbally or even physically.

By adopting a long turn, they can provide them with ample and sufficient explanations to minimize the face-threatening effect. In Scott's study, participants are of different backgrounds with various purposes which may be under complicated influences. And that's what the people in front of the televisions want to get. A direct and short turn of disagreement is powerful enough to refute other's stances.

5. Conclusions

The present study is a tentative try in the study of linguistic features of conflict talks in terms of lexical level and turns. Being confined by the scale and provenance of the database, and also the language proficiency of the participants, the research result can't fully demonstrate the trend or situation of English learning among Chinese English learners. However, it has still filled up the gap, since rarely research has been done in this research angle. The present study is of value to the English pedagogy since students' learning needs should be taken into consideration. Students need to know the relationship between language features or forms and functions in order to enhance their

language learning efficiency, to apply effective language strategies to communicate effectively and efficiently.

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