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Conflict

Conflict provides a unique opportunity to study the articulation of language and power. Conflict interrupts the normal course of social exchanges and can lead to interactional breakdowns and yet it provides a central force for the constitution of social relations. The process of managing conflict is fundamentally communicative and through conflict-related communicative performances (the Trobriander's yakala, Eskimo's song duels, U.S. adversarial cross-examinations), social networks are activated and social relationships reconfigured. From large-scale confrontations to family squabbles, conflict is constituted by the airing of more or less direct accusations for which speakers must take responsibility, which require answers, and which cannot be withdrawn without complicated negotiations. Conflict allows speakers' wills to power to be heard. Thus a full appreciation of this phenomenon depends on a thorough understanding of communicative practices.

Until recently, most legal anthropologists treated talk as a source of information about conflict rather than as a techno-political device used by participants in the conflict. From Malinowski to Hoebel to Gluckman, conflict—between social classes, ethnic groups, individuals, and society, or individual interactants—has always been one of the major concerns of sociocultural anthropology. Yet their studies yield very little knowledge of how people actually manage conflict in interaction. They suffer from an absence of detailed primary data, electing to present summaries, reports by informants, or reports from meetings held to resolve the conflict. In sum, these studies talked more about conflict than about conflict talk.

Conversely, conflict has been quite neglected in the study of language until recently. Even when language was considered a form of social action (as in sociolinguistics, speech act theory, or the ethnography of communication), it was analyzed for its conversational coherence and negotiated character, not for its disruptive potential. For instance, researchers concerned with inter-ethnic communication viewed communicative breakdowns as the

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result of interactants' interpretative failure due to cultural misunderstandings.

To overcome the limitations of earlier research, contemporary work on conflict talk looks at language as a contested field, more like a battlefield where interactants are acutely aware of the power of their (and others') words. Under the influence of social theorists such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, or Raymond Williams, this new brand of conflict studies cross-pollinates an analysis of language with an analysis of power. Talk is thus analyzed not only for devices that ensure coherence and cohesion, but also for those mechanisms by which speakers/hearers achieve a sudden shift and undermining of context and bring about a breakdown of conversational coherence. This will to control and dominate is part of the local technology of power and as such is informed by strategies indexing asymmetrical social relationships and tactics seeking interactional dominance.

Among the many techno-political devices employed in this will to power, special attention has been recently given to those that evoke or establish particular kinds of contexts. From public oratory to legal arbitration to ritual wailing, researchers have been focusing on the disruptive but empowering quality of direct speech ("straight talk") associated with conflict. Two such devices of primary importance are contextualization strategies and metapragmatic awareness.

Contextualization strategies refer to communicative practices that both produce representations of the social world in accord with a given ideology and seek to persuade others to comply with these representations. Such strategies are found in all societies and usually consist of three parts: the decontextualization of an event from its occurrence in a particular space and time, its entextualization into a discourse with more controllable set of truth-values, and the recontextualization of this discourse within a communicative frame set up to legitimize it (for instance, embedding an opponent's statement within one's own speech while inverting its referential value or adding a negative comment through intonational coloring—most instances of reported speech in argumentative situations conform to this strategy).

By metapragmatic awareness, I mean the awareness of how speech forms are used to establish specific participation frameworks: the indexical relationship between interactants, including the speaker's stance or attitudes; the social relations or relative status of the participants; and special attributes of particular individuals. In conflict, this awareness can turn vicious and manifest itself in a metapragmatic attack: a strategy of consciously and overtly calling attention to the specific use of linguistic mechanisms in the context of the interaction at hand for the purpose of interactional control. A metapragmatic attack can be used to comment on nonverbal behavior ("don't use that tone with me"), to draw attention to a particular word or style ("don't call me stupid" or "you sound like a broken record"), or to address the indexical relationship between speaker and hearer ("you don't know who you're talking to" or "you must call me sir"). An explicit accusation at the metapragmatic level produces a communicative break that escalates the stakes of the conflict. Metapragmatic attacks put an individual on the defense without having to level any specific accusations. They

unravel the raw fabric of communicative interactions, exposing the disputants' maneuvers as they struggle for control, respect, and interactional dominance.

From the study of conflict talk we can draw some broader conclusions about the relationship between language and power. First, we must understand that most techno-political devices are intentionally staged, performative acts. People in positions of dominance stage these acts in order to perform their power (with of course some helpful aids, such as a dilution of responsibility in case their performance fails). Thus the outcome of any attempt to gain control over communicative resources is never predetermined. Second, the study of conflict talk forces us to look at communication as verbal hygiene, in which proper and correct, "clean" forms of talk are activated as techniques for achieving cohesion and solidarity in a context of postcolonial and national languages, linguistic minorities, and class or gender consciousness. Third, conflict talk teaches us to avoid a simplistic correlation between speech forms and power: its techno-political devices are deployed from all positions, from the core as well as from the periphery, from the superior as well as from the inferior. Different forms of domination produce different configurations of language use. Any linguistic form gains different meanings and has different social and political effects within specific institutional and ideological contexts. Finally, conflict talk forces us to address the issue of the relationship between language and social change. Conflicts over language use change the repertoire of social meanings associated with power relations. Through these fights, social relationships are interactionally transformed, opening the way for more profound social transformations. The struggle in the United States over sexist language and the generic masculine pronoun provides an example for this potential for change: linguistic awareness of gender bias renders problematic the generic use of the masculine pronoun, and this newly produced sensitivity can be exploited during conflict, since it provides powerful weapons for the fight. It would be naive to claim that awareness of sexist language in itself changes gender relations. However, by focusing speakers' attention on the inner workings of language, it opens a reflection on the social meanings of particular linguistic repertoires, and this in turn can lead to structural change.

(See also *act, control, indexicality, participation, performativity, power)*

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