Language in Conflict

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The aim of this workshop is to initiate a conversation between conflict studies and linguistics which will enable future researchers to:

- delineate a new sub-field of linguistic investigation by developing existing linguistic theories and practices with reference to existing models of conflict;
- produce a usable set of parameters and methodologies by which researchers in conflict can identify significant communicative factors in creating – and in mitigating – conflict;
- carry out case studies of conflicts using the insights and methods developed by the project.

The research questions that the workshop will explore are:

- Which approaches and methodologies in linguistics can be usefully applied to the specifics of conflict situations, both to help understand how they arise and to offer some discourse-based opportunities for diffusing and resolving them?
- What insights into these models of linguistic communication does conflict data offer, and how might they contribute to a deeper understanding of human communication?

Research context

The contemporary social constructivist emphasis in the social sciences implies an integral role for language in constituting psychological and social realities (Shotter 1993). However, this recognition of the importance of language has barely touched the mainstream of conflict studies. The burgeoning numbers of courses on Conflict and Conflict Resolution at British universities have no place for it. One reason for this is that the mechanisms for studying how language is important to conflict and its study have not been made explicit. Pearce & Littlejohn advocate attention to “the particularities of the activity” (cf. Levinson [1979] 1992) within conflicts rather than constellations of clashing variables “in some abstract world of generalized persons” (1997: xii). But they offer no
methodology for exploring the nature of these ‘particularities’, how to define specific
types of 'activity' or how the abovementioned ‘persons’ can be degeneralised analytically.
Conflict studies has models of conflict, violence and peace (Galtung 1969/1996) and those of (de-)escalation, (a)symmetry and conflict involvement (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2005). These connect with the models that sociolinguistics has developed recently. It is at this point that the two disciplines can most fruitfully interact.

Much scholarship in linguistics takes on board the inevitability of conflict, addresses antagonistic communication and interaction and explores how oppositional stances are created and maintained. One example is the field of im/politeness studies (Culpeper 1996, 2005, Bousfield (2006, 2007), O’Driscoll (2001, 2007). Another strand studies confrontational broadcast talk and the manipulation of situational norms and language resources to set up the potential for conflict (Piirainen-Marsh 2005). Chilton (2004) attempted to apply linguistic insights to the (inherently conflictual) political arena. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995, 2001 [1989]) has always been socially engaged and, addressing itself to the study of how hegemony, inequality and power are enacted, often has conflict in its sights.

The overall contribution to conflict studies from sociolinguistic and pragmatic scholarship so far has been relatively disparate, concentrating either on particular issues or events in order to advance theory or on particular settings in order to describe the nature of interaction within it. We wish to fuse these types of scholarship, training their insights, theories and associated modes of analysis specifically on the matter of conflict.

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