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- The Internal Structure of Dialogues
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CONVERSATIONAL CONFLICTS AS GESTALTEN

Ramona Bongelli, Carla Canestrari & Ilaria Riccioni¹

1. Some Theoretical-Methodological References

We consider the Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis models as the closest ones to the Gestalt Theory both in terms of their basic assumptions and methodological framework (see Bongelli in this volume).

Linda A. Wood & Rolf O. Kroger (2000, 8), for example, when writing of discourse analysis approaches to language in use, state that they "*can be described as structural in that they do not treat specific elements of discourse in isolation from other elements, but rather attend to their combinations and arrangement [...]. The emphasis, however, is not simply on the arrangement of elements, but on structure as an active process, that is, on structure in the sense of construction*".

Just as in the Gestalt context, a *perceptive totality* is (recognized as) such in virtue of the functions and relations between parts, so each conversational script is (recognized as) such in virtue of the functions and relations between the linguistic and non linguistic elements which contribute jointly to its construction.

2. The Structure of Conflictual Conversations

In the following sections we will deal with the macrostructure of conflictual conversations, concentrating on the different levels of the conflict and on the different conflictual formats found in the corpus studied.

2.1 Levels of Conflict

The study of conflict and, in particular, verbal conflictual interactions is by no means a known subject of interest. In the psychological, linguistic-rhetorical and sociological fields, definitions, taxonomic theories and opinions on the question of the relation between co-operation and conflict have been elaborated.

Cristiano Castelfranchi (1998, 158) considers conflict as a form of social interaction with an autonomous structure which cannot be classified as having the structure of co-operative conversations. Although we agree with this view, in our opinion, the conflictual conversation implies a collaborative level which concerns the **ulterior psychological level** related to the psycho-dynamic aspects of the personality. We will not be dealing with this level here but it presupposes that roles are complementary and that there is a degree of co-ordination in assuming them, given that in a conflict, an individual pursues his/her hidden psychological needs through an interaction with another person.

There are those who consider that conflicts are due to *the fact that one wants to find a meeting point at all costs* and they must, therefore, be considered a last ditch attempt

¹ Section 4 was written jointly by the three authors. Sections 1, 2, 2.1, & 2.2 are the work of Bongelli and Canestrari; Sections 3 & 3.2 are by Bongelli, sections 3.1 & the conclusion are by Canestrari and section 3.3 is by Riccioni.

to collaborate. We are not of this opinion, as we believe that in conflicts there is very often a lack of co-operation which is expressed by the speakers in the pursuance of aims that are not only different, but often, even antithetical. Each conversant, then, tries to get the better of the other and establish a relational asymmetry (*one-up* and *one-down*), so that from the **communicative point of view** there is a lack of consensus.

In our view, co-operation and conflict represent the extreme poles of a continuum along which the performances can be situated in different and changeable positions in the course of the same interaction. We can say that in a conflict, the co-operative part is limited to purely **formal** aspects, such as those which start and carry on a discussion by the alternation of conversational turns (these can also occur in a non-linear fashion).

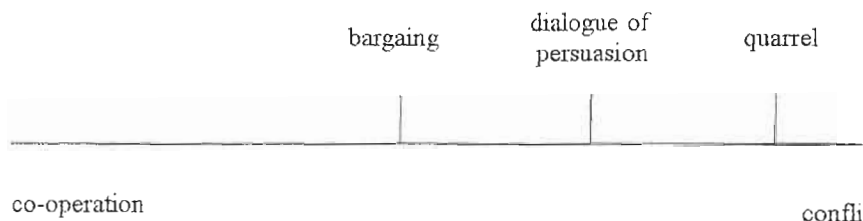
2.2 Definitions and Taxonomy of Conflicts

Before analysing the conversations of the corpus, we would like to define the term conflict. With the noun '*conflict*' we refer to a broad category of *conversational Gestalten* characterized by a *disagreement* between speakers concerning opinions, interests, visions of the world etc. This disagreement a) is revealed linguistically (but also from intonational, paralinguistic signals etc.) by means of fairly explicit actions (see hidden conflict) and b) it sets out to obtain one or more aims, the principal one being to damage the other, to get the better of him/her and establish one-up and one-down positions.

If we borrow part of the classification advanced by Douglas N. Walton & Eric C.W. Krabbe (1995) in the dialogical field and apply it to our context, we can consider the verbal conflicts which we have examined as three different types of discourse:

1. negotiation, which arises from a conflict of interests and the aim of which is to obtain the greatest personal advantage;
2. the dialogue of persuasion, which arises from a conflict of opinions and the aim of which is to persuade the conversational partner;
3. the quarrel, which usually arises from latent animosity towards a given interlocutor and the main aim of which is the defeat of the conversant-opponent.

We could represent graphically the points made regarding a) the continuum co-operation-conflict and b) the different discourse types (clearly conflictual by nature) in the following way:



We should not forget to bear in mind that in real situations things are often much more complex so that it is possible to go from one format to another or even from an apparently co-operative situation to one that is conflictual, as it occurs in our corpus where the quarrels always follow the dialogue of persuasion and the negotiation.

3. The Microstructure of Conflict: The Indices

Our research is based on the hypothesis that conflict is something which can be perceived.

In other words, each conflict is a complex event (a structured totality) which the parties recognize from the presence of specific linguistic and non linguistic indices (the parts). We have, therefore, attempted to single out these indices (both within our corpus and through an empirical research that will be discussed in section 4) and classify them according to the following three macro-categories: meta-communicative indices, linguistic indices, rhetorical indices.

3.1 *Meta-Communicative Indices*

Drawing on the definition of communication given by Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (1967), who openly reworked the formulation by Jürgen Ruesch & Gregory Bateson (1951, 179-181) concerning the aspects of “report” and “command”, every communicative act is made up of content and relational elements. The speakers negotiate and recognize the meta-communicative aspects of their interaction in order to establishing the type of communication they are making. In other words, based on the meta-communicative signals, the speakers construct the *frame* (Erving Goffman 1981) of their interaction and by recognizing these indices, an external observer is able to place the interaction in a category, for example that of conflict.

If we apply the theoretical insights of the Palo Alto school referred to above, then meta-communication can be concerned with the content and relational elements of the conflictual conversation. Obviously, in practice these elements are inseparable: if we limit ourselves to the analysis of verbal communication, then the words reveal both content and relational aspects. The distinction is therefore maintained purely for explanatory and application purposes. The examples of meta-communication found in the corpus can refer to **communicative content** in two ways:

a) with reference to the current communication. The following examples are uttered by a wife who is arguing with her husband about an event in the past:

(1)

1. **Wife:** I'm going to tell you once and for all
2. **Wife:** Are you going to cut me off half way through what I'm saying
3. **Wife:** Instead of talking to yourself there, come here and talk so I can reply

b) with reference to the content of a past communication, i.e. an interaction between the speakers that dates to a time before the current utterance. The first example is taken from the same conversation as the one above, the second is from a conversation between a mother and daughter, who is asking permission to have piercing done:

(2)

1. **Daughter:** First you say ok and then in the end you don't let me do things, because we talked about it, didn't we?
2. **Mother:** Yes, ok, it's just when we talk about things, it's that way, but later when it's time to them, it irritates me a bit, honestly

Moreover, some elements of the discourse are clearly meta-communicative indices of the **relational aspects** of the communication. The contrast in the roles and the abuse of the other person in a real quarrel, are particularly meta-communicated. This dichotomy between the "I" and the "You" of the interlocutors is shown in our corpus through various meta-communicative indices: discourse markers such as "yes but", "ok ok but", "but", "all right but", "no don't be like that" which clearly underline the divergence on the relational level; loud tone of voice, often used to keep his/her speech turn, and an ironical tone of voice to transmit sarcasm and provocation; overlapping, used to get the conversational upper hand over the other speaker; foul language, to insult and offend the interlocutor; explicit definitions of roles, as in the following case, taken from the conversation between man and wife quoted above:

(3)

- Wife:** Doing this you are making yourself a victim so that no one can say anything to you, right? Making yourself a victim, so I'm the one who makes a fuss, I'm the mad one

The function of *frame* given by the meta-communicative indices can be analysed at a macro-analytical level since these indices demonstrate the global quality of the dialogical Gestalt under examination. However, an analysis at the micro-analytical level can also be made when dealing with the details of the elements which compose the indices: regarding the subject that is meta-communicated, they can relate more to either the relationship or the content; with respect to the types of meta-communicative indices, they are revealed in the markers, overlaps, tone of voice, lexical choices and the explicit side-taking of opposing roles.

3.2 Linguistic Indices: Acts of the Conflict

According to the Speech Acts Theory and its evolution, the DA², when people speak they perform actions through which they attempt to influence each other.

² Cf. John L. Austin (1962).

In the interactions we studied the most frequent conflictual moves follow:

Accusations (and counter accusations) regarding:

-*doing* as in the case of the following fragment taken from a conversation between a mother and her daughter. The mother prohibits her to go to Spain, so the daughter says:

(4)

Daughter: You treat me like a child!

-*thinking*³:

(5)

Mother: You go to school, you only want to go to work to earn some money to spend, that's all, nothing else. It's not at all good, the way your mind works!

In the accusations related both to *doing* and *thinking*, the speakers implicate their judgements. The daughter in fragment (4) considers being treated as a child in a negative light; the mother in fragment (5) states that her daughter's way of thinking is wrong.

-*being*: The accusations concerning *being* are actually similar to personal insults and judgements that the conversant expresses towards his/her interlocutor. In the case of fragment (6) the conversant is a father and the interlocutor is his son who is late.

(6)

Father: You're just an idiot, really!

It is extremely difficult, therefore, to keep the accusations distinct from the judgements as they often appear together. We accuse someone of something either their actions, thoughts or being and we pass a negative judgement.

Defences constructed by means of:

-*negations*:

(7)

1. **Daughter:** All right Mum, but you can't put an end to my career just for the question of earning money.

2. **Mother:** Oh yes, yes, but who's putting an end to your career?

-*justifications*:

(8)

1. **Father:** So you're punctual, are you?

2. **Son:** Well, I've been here for three hours!

-*reasoning ad populum*:

³ We use the term *thinking* to refer to opinions, beliefs, convictions etc. attributed to the interlocutor by the speaker.

(9)

Son: Only little kids come back at eleven.

In fragment (7) a mother denies doing what her daughter is accusing her of; in fragments (8) and (9) a son attempts to defend himself from the accusation of not being punctual by using justifications and reasoning.

Accusations and defences appear in adjacent pairs⁴ as well as recursively in the course of the same conversation but they can also be found with the more complex structure of accusation-defence-counter accusation, often breaking the turn-taking rules.

Expressions of different opinions as in the case of the discussion between the two friends Marco and Federico:

(10)

1. **Federico:** I mean, if you ask me, Korea, I mean, the matter [is simple, the matter is simple].

2. **Marco:**

[No, so, no, wait, no], s-so I tell you, I mean, the two theories are not compatible, in the se[nse that],

3. **Federico:**

[No they are] compatible.

Feigned self-blame as in the following fragment:

(11)

1. **Wife:** But you're a pig Oli', sorry if I have to say this!

2. **Husband:** I'm a pig, I know, I know I'm a pig

Insults and personal affronts such as:

(12)

Daughter: Ooh! I can't go to bed a ten! I'm not an old man like you!

uttered by a daughter to her father during a quarrel about life-styles.

Threats as in the following example taken from the same quarrel as fragment (12):

(13)

Father: Always the same insolence, the same arrogance. But who the hell do you think you are?, who can put up with you, I'll send you away before long, always a pain in the neck, no!

Provocation such as:

(14)

Mother: If not I'll give up work and you can go to work instead!

⁴ For the concept of adjacent couplet see George Psathas (1979).

by a mother to her daughter who is persisting in asking permission to go to work.

Orders, prohibitions and reactions resulting from these:

(15)

1. **Mother:** I said no and that's the end of it and I'm not going to
[say it again!]
2. **Daughter:** [go
to hell]

3.3 Rhetorical Indices

In the conversations we have analysed we have found a frequent use of rhetorical choices: they appear as strategies used in the construction of the conflict in the dialogue and they are interpreted by the analyst as indices of the conflict itself. We will limit ourselves here to quoting and illustrating those, which in our opinion, are the most meaningful.

The conversational partners often make use of *reported speech* both in the form of *direct speech*, as in the following example (16), and as *indirect speech* (cf. example 18). These usages seem to be mainly aimed at the strategies attack-defence-counter-attack.

(16)

1. **Wife:** Po::r- hhhh. I'll tell you one thing, but for God's sake, (.), you know that, even if you did only know at seven, how can you phone me at four minutes to eight to tell me, "Someone is coming to dinner"?!]
2. **Husband:** Apart from the fact that it was six seven minutes to eight. Ten! =

In this typical marital row, we find reported speech used by the wife in the construction of a *rhetorical question* through which the nub of the disagreement is expressed. The reply of the husband is also interesting as it is based on a *shift in accent* which is a characteristic way of boycotting the rules of conversational exchange. This strategy overloads a marginal element of the sentence with meaning thus discrediting the communicative intentions of the interlocutor.

Another strategy which is extremely frequent in our corpus is *repetition: self-repetition*, which usually works as a re-enforcement of the speaker's position (point of view, role etc.), and *hetero-repetition*, aimed at disagreeing, contesting and contradicting the interlocutor using his/her words as a weapon (Carla Bazzanella 1993, 1994, 1999). This repetition can relate to the whole verbal turn or parts of it. Two important examples follow:

(17)

1. **Mother:** So if you know it all: : that's settled!
2. **Daughter:** That's right!
3. **Mother:** That's settled.

4. **Daughter:** That's settled.

5. **Mother:** That's settled.

(18)

1. **Piero:** But you told me that I wasn't to come! You told me I wasn't to come!

2. **Lavinia:** What a liar!

3. **Piero:** Liar? But you told me you were going with Chiara and Silvia, only women and not to be a pain in the ass! You told me on Wednesday and you left on Friday, I'd swear to it bloody hell!

In both cases we can observe the self-repetition and hetero-repetition mechanisms which interweave in a continuous play of postponements, attacks, defences, and counter-attacks. The words of the other speaker are taken up and given polemical or sarcastic meanings, thus changing and overturning not only the sense but also the deictic centre in order to underline the distance and opposition to what the interlocutor has said. The adversary's discourse is present in his/her own at the moment when it is refused and disqualified (Marina Mizzau 2002).

Other rhetorical conflictual strategies found in the corpus can be classified in the category of communicative moves tending to debar the other person, which Carlos E. Sluzki et al. (1967) defined as *transactional disqualifications*. These are mainly *redundant questions* and *status disqualifiers* as we can observe in the following example:

(19)

1. **Mother:** I told you that as I'm the mother and as I'm 40 years old, if I'm happy that my children are all right, if they're set up, if that evening I feel like coming in a bit later, I'll come in a bit later, I told you this, do you understand?

2. **Daughter:** I will too then!

3. **Mother:** Then I'll start again. You are the daughter, I am the mother.=

4. **Daughter:** = I don't give a damn.

5. **Mother:** You don't give a damn?

6. **Daughter:** No.

It is interesting to see how following the mother's claims of one-up status the daughter's replies express open *insubordination* along with the questioning of hierarchical roles.

Also frequent is *feigned ironic-sarcastic assent*, as in the following example taken from a squabble between a girlfriend and boyfriend:

(20)

10. **Simone:** I have so many other things!

11. **Anna:** Oh yes, I can see that! Sport on Sunday, [The Best of Sport, (.) the =

12. **Simone:** [(laughs)] You damn it Sunday Variety Sh-]

13. **Anna:** = Motor racing, if it's not motor racing, it's motor bikes, if it's not motor bikes, there's the match: : some team.

This is a typical example of "double movement" on the accord/discord axis (Mizzau 1995), where assent is exploited in order to construct dissent. "Oh yes" which opens the turn, conventionally signals accord, but here is immediately followed by content which denies it. The feigned compliance combined with sarcasm is interposed by an attempt (in overlap) by the interlocutor to fight back (counter accusation).

Finally, we will draw attention to another strategy typical of conflict: *delocution*, which consists in talking of the interlocutor in the third person, even in the absence of other people (Mizzau 2002).

(21)

Wife: Oh what the hell! He puts the wood on the fire and then goes and touches the bread!

The discrepancy between the superficial linguistic level and the pragmatic level seems to maintain and signal the relational distance.

4. The Perception of Conflict: a First Analysis

In this section we present some preliminary results of an empirical research, which attempts to investigate the perception of conflict in dialogues.

On the basis of our data we state that it is possible to perceive the conflict, including *covert conflict* (see Roberta Lorenzetti & Mizzau 2000; Mizzau 2002), simply by observing the surface of the dialogues (Franca Orletti 1994) namely by the indicators that define the interactional and relational context.

First we gave a sample of 30 students a fragment of audio-recorded conversation taken from the TV programme Big Brother 2004. Then we gave them a questionnaire made up of 4 questions, 1 closed and 3 open, in which we asked them:

1. to indicate on a scale of 1-7 the degree of conflict perceived
2. to specify the reason for their decision
3. to indicate which linguistic indices had led to their recognition of conflict
4. to indicate which paralinguistic indices had led to their recognition of conflict.

As regards the first question, it emerges that the totality of students (100%) perceive conflict: 56.7% recognize the conversation as conflictual, 26.7% as very conflictual, 10% as quite conflictual, 6.7% as on mildly conflictual.

The indices of discord that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the answers to the third and fourth questions are as follows:

- as regards the strictly linguistic elements, the students indicate as macro-categories: terminological choices (e.g. foul language) used to perform speech acts aimed at attacking the other person and self-defence (e.g. insults, threats, accusations, offence, defence etc.)
- other indices pointed out by the students are linked to paralinguistic factors (e.g. absence of pauses, frequent overlapping, and fragmentary speech), intonational

elements (excited tone, loud volume), meta-communicative factors (use of discourse markers), stylistic-rhetorical choices (e.g. repetitions, rhetorical questions, dialect register).

Although only at a preliminary level, this data seems to confirm the results of the analysis we carried out on the corpus of ordinary conversations.

Conclusions

At the macro-structural level the conversational quarrels has been defined as a Gestalt quality that is situated near conflict pole along an axis whose extremes are co-operation and conflict. The presence of meta-communicative indices, examined from the micro-analytical viewpoint, gives information on the quality of the communicative frame within which the conflictual conversation is situated.

The micro-analytical analysis has highlighted the strategies used by the interlocutors as regards the speech acts, rhetorical choices and the single meta-communicative indices in order to construct and fuel the conflictual conversation. Some of these indices have been confirmed by the empirical study, the results of which can be found in section 4.

With reference to our corpus, we have noticed that the reason for the conflict may depend on actions for which one of the interlocutors is held responsible or on events outside their control and sphere of direct action. In both cases the course of the conversation can undergo changes from one type of discourse to another, among those borrowed from Walton and Krabbe (1995). In our corpus, most of the conflictual conversations can be classified as quarrels which are characterized by open discord and aimed at getting the better of the other person. In these cases, the prevalent speech acts are accusation and defence employed in various ways (see section 3.2). Other examples are preceded by a) attempts by one or both interlocutors to persuade the other of the validity of his/her point of view mainly through the use of reasoning; b) negotiation, characterized by the interlocutors being positioned on opposing levels both in terms of the content and the dialogical roles. The aim of the negotiation is the pursuance of their own interests and in this case too, reasoning is mainly used.

Summary

First of all we begin with a clarification of the theoretical-methodological background and a definition of conflictual conversations. Following this, we will attempt to demonstrate how, leaving aside specific content and the particular interlocutors involved, these dialogical activities are organized in recursive Gestalten and are easily identifiable:

-both on the **macrostructural** level
-and on the **microstructural** level, that is, the level of *conversational sequences and turns* which are made up of *linguistic* and *rhetorical meta-communicative choices*. These are identifiable as strategies which together help to build and fuel the *conversational conflict*.

In order to analyse the conversational structure of conflicts, we have studied a corpus

of 50 natural, ordinary conversations⁵ which we can label broadly as "familiar" since the interlocutors are all bound by important ties of affection.

Keywords: Structure of dialogue, conflictual conversation, interactional strategies.

Zusammenfassung

Zunächst beginnen wir mit einer Klärung des theoretisch-methodologischen Hintergrunds und der Definition von Konfliktgesprächen. Anschließend versuchen wir zu zeigen, wie - bei außer Acht lassen der speziellen Inhalte und der Besonderheit der involvierten Gesprächspartner - diese dialogischen Aktivitäten organisiert und leicht als rekursive Gestalten erkennbar sind:

- sowohl auf der **makrostrukturellen** Ebene
 - als auch auf der **mikrostrukturellen** Ebene, der Ebene der *Konversationssequenzen und -wechsel*, die aus einem *linguistischen* und *rhetorisch meta-kommunikativen Sortiment* aufgebaut sind. Diese sind als Strategien erkennbar, die zusammenspielen, um den *Konversationskonflikt* aufzubauen und zu verstärken.

Um die Konversationsstruktur von Konflikten zu analysieren, haben wir eine Sammlung von 50 gewöhnlichen, normalen Gesprächen untersucht, die allgemein als „vertraut“ bezeichnet werden können, da die Gesprächspartner alle durch wichtige Gefühlsbeziehungen miteinander verbunden sind.

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⁵ The ordinary talk conflictual conversations to which we refer belong to a wider corpus collected by the Centre for Research in Communication Psychology at the University of Macerata (Italy) starting in 2000. These conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed using the conventional Jefferson system (Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A Schegloff & Gail Jefferson 1974); the speakers are all Italian from the centre-south region of Italy.

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