

You're so not talking to me like that: analysing conflict talk in a corpus of sitcom discourse

Bárbara Malveira ORFANÒ (UFSJ)

According to Grimshaw (1990), arguing is a common practice among humans, and any adequate account of the nature of spoken interaction needs to be able to describe how arguments are produced and managed. However, Koester (2006) explains that it is difficult to analyse arguments due to the fact that usually participants do not feel comfortable in allowing their arguments to be recorded and that may be the reason for the sparse amount of research on the subject. Arguments have been addressed by many scholars in a variety of contexts within different approaches including: sociolinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and conversation analysis. It is fair to say that conversation analysis has provided a good framework for the study of arguments. Pomerantz' (1984:64) work on agreement and disagreement in assessment sequences gave interesting insights to the study of arguments. She distinguishes a preferred-action turn shape from a dispreferred-action turn shape and concluded that disagreements were a dispreferred activity and their occurrences were often minimized through delays in the production of a disagreement and prefaces that mitigated the disagreement (see also Levinson 1983 and Sacks 1987). However, Goodwin (1990), analysing children's disputes in a multiparty setting, observes that participants organise their talk highlighting opposition. Rather than being preceded by delays or hedges, turns containing oppositions are produced immediately. In addition, such turns frequently contains a preface which announces right at the beginning that an opposition is being produced (see Goodwin, 1990: 145). Coulter (1990) examines the structure of arguments and states that arguments have a minimal adjacency pair structure consisting of an assertion and a counter-claim. In another study, Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) propose a minimal three-part structure consisting of a claim, a disagreement and a counter-claim. They discuss how arguing gets accomplished, and particularly important for the present paper, how concerns for face influence arguing. Another interesting study on arguments is the work of Schiffrin (1990). Schiffrin (ibid: 256) analyses the role of opinions and stories in arguments within a Jewish community. She claims that personal stories, when used in the context of an argument, can negotiate the truth of a position and the sincerity of a speaker. An analysis on lexical bundles showed that dialogues containing an argument were an important characteristic of the sitcom Friends. In the present study dialogues containing an argument will be analysed from two different perspectives: (i) Muntigl and Turnbull's (1998) model for the study of arguments and, of particular importance, (ii) politeness (hedges). By combining Muntigl and Turnbull's (1998) framework for the analysis of arguments in casual conversation with Brown and Levinson's (1987) study on politeness, we can determine how speakers in the sitcom orient themselves in the dialogues containing arguments in the narrative of the show. The Friends corpus was searched manually for dialogues that contained a dispute. These dialogues were isolated for analysis and classified under Muntigl and Turnbull's (1998) framework for the analysis of arguments in casual conversation. In order to do so, a corpus containing the episodes from the seventh season of the sitcom is under investigation. From the 27 dialogues containing an argument, 22 contain only one type of argument utterance and 5 dialogues contain more than one type of argument and were classified as act-combination argument utterances following Muntigl and Turnbull's (ibid.) framework. We concluded that in Friends speakers use more contradiction and counterclaim utterances which results in a high frequency of arguments that contain a low cost of face to participants. Moreover, the utterances are often preceded by mitigation devices, in particular hedges, softening the impact of face threatening acts. Even when act combinations are used, attention is paid to the issue of politeness and the least face aggravating type of arguments are preferred by speakers. The results together with a close examination of the examples present in the data contribute to the ongoing discussion on the representation of real language in media discourse.