

Who Wins?

Non-Aligned Family Conflict: A Linguistic Approach

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I. Introduction: Stating the problem

I would like to start by presenting the following scenario: A son in his mid-thirties meets his father at the son's request. The latter is experiencing a personality crisis of some form – he does not actually know how to continue living and has been searching for meaning in his life. As such, he is going to change his familiar and routine surroundings and leave the town he lives in for an indefinite period of time. He would like to discuss this with his father, but starting the conversation is not easy for him.

Both men are sitting next to each other on a park bench and are silent for some time. The father is the first to start talking: he mentions that he is neither in a hurry nor does he have things to do, but he has no intention of sitting there in the silent context...

FATHER: I won't say that I'm in a hurry or that I have things to do... I have nothing to do, but I don't intend to sit here like this and keep silent either.

SON: Dad, don't pressure me, please. Listen, I don't like it that lately we can't manage to talk to each other. I mean, to get to any meaningful discussion.

FATHER: If there were something to talk about...

The father's opening remark suggests that the son should explain the reason for their meeting. Though the father is trying to motivate his partner to start talking, the stimulus he provides is addressed rather to the circumstances and does not display any personal concern on his part. The father thus states his intentions in an impersonal manner.

The son's response, however, is posed in a confronting personal mode: He seems frustrated and immediately asks his partner not to pressure him. Moreover, he admits that he does not like the fact that they had not been able to communicate effectively with one another in the recent past.

The beginning of a family conversation in this way does not seem very encouraging. Nevertheless, this is a very common scenario, more common than one would like to think. What is taking place in the opening exchange, though not extreme, is quite problematic: Both partners communicate in a way that prevents people from reaching a mutual understanding. This holds true for the rest of the conversation – the dialogue develops further into a disagreement between two individuals who have different views, feelings and wishes, and these culminate in conflict and a feeling of discontent.

With the aim of uncovering what went wrong, I have primarily addressed the concept of the conflict by attempting to consider the original pragmatic implications embodied in this notion. Considering the meaning of the word "conflict", we essentially presuppose a clash of interests, opinions or values. Whatever the conflict appears to be – the cause of anything or the result, the state itself or the methodology of treating something – it is traditionally associated with mismatch, confrontation, and even explicit fighting.

In terms of the essential nature of the conflict, however, the encounter between the father and the son (and the communication that follows) is not manifested in an articulate quarrel. Still, some kind of indirect and less straightforward incongruity is present in the dialogue that clearly allows one gauge it as conflict-ridden.

I claim that the dialogue reveals another mode of conflict – one that does not feature a direct clash, but rather its parallel expression. This type prevents the parties involved in the conflict from being oriented to each other directly; rather, they move towards one another on different plains. I refer to this as *non-aligned conflict*. In this type of the conflict, each speaker maintains his own identity and governs his individual mode of communication in his own dimension, and this continues for the duration of the particular challenging dynamics of the entire conversation.

The evidence to support this claim comes from an analysis of a family discourse. Recognizing that the verbal intentions of participants basically underlie the framework of a conversation, I looked for patterns that would best explicate this inner sub-textual dialogue mechanism. To depict the non-aligned mode of family disagreement, I consequently turned to the level of verbal behavior and focused on its following constituents: meta-controlling, face-threatening and past-projecting.

II. Meta-controlling

The following is a passage of discourse taken from the play “*The Town*” by the Russian playwright Evgeny Grishkovets .

(1) SON: You, you... once again... Something that I wanted to tell you, indeed, something that I don't want... But need to tell is not really... Oh damn! Easy to formulate. In short, I have told you that I planned to go, so I am going away now and apparently, for a long time.

FATHER: We-l-l!

(2) SON: Dad, please, don't say this “we-l-l” like that. Ever since my childhood, when I hear this, I really don't know what to say in response. And now, I don't know what to start with. I can't explain anything to the point. I don't hide anything, but if one asks definitely, why I am going or what for – that is! I would say nothing. I don't know what to say.

FATHER: What don't you know? You don't know what to say, or you don't know why you are going?

In the exchange we see that the son (1) is muddled when preparing the way for presenting the topic, and eventually he introduces his agenda (“*I am going away now and apparently for a long time*”). The father, however, is not enthusiastic about that idea, and his comment (“we-l-l”) doesn't sound supportive at all. This is reflected in the next verbal expression by the son (2) – in his immediate deviation from the further development of the subject that he initiated. Instead, he extends his move to the explication of how his counterpart should *not* proceed with the talk (“*please don't say this we-l-l like that*”).

Such a response, though topically tied to the son's previous move (1) in a way that it also considers his general difficulties with formulating the topic (“*I don't know what to start with*”), goes beyond the bounds of a subject proposed for discussion. More specifically, it represents the speech act, that *meta-controls the conversation*.

(3) SON: Dad, I am asking you, don't pressure me! This talk won't succeed again, you know. You are pressuring me, not letting think and confusing me.

FATHER: But you have already said, that you don't know what to say. How can I confuse you more, if you yourself don't know anything?

(4) SON: (jumping up from the bench) Why are you grasping at my words?!

The next son's request (3) ("*don't pressure me!*") and the following, even stronger in its illocutionary force indirect command (4), that attacks the father's verbal tactics ("*don't grasp at my words!*"), also embody the son's personal feeling regarding the way their conversation should proceed. These meta-dialogue statements (Burton, 1980) are the linguistic indicators of non-acceptability of the prior moves of the father; their goal is to signal that the son consistently resists his style of talking.

(1) SON: You, you... once again...

(2) SON: Dad, please, don't say this "we-I-I" like that.

(3) SON: Dad, I am asking you, don't pressure me! You are pressuring me, not letting think and confusing me.

(4) SON: Why are you grasping at my words?!

The meta-statements as discourse indicators are employed in the talk to direct and orient the discourse itself (Blum-Kulka, 1983). In other words, the utterances refer back to the flow of discourse and not to the topic discussed. In effect, in this dialogue session we are not exposed to the development of the discernible content – the subject is veiled and does not progress any further. The amount of meta-control acts throughout the set of exchanges switches the focus to the verbal behavior and suppresses the topic. They undeniably indicate the conflictual nature of the talk.

III. Face-threatening

Addressing the father's verbal behavior, I would like to emphasize another linguistic element of the conflict, namely the employment of the negative conversational *implication* (the meaning that is not explicitly conveyed in what is said, but that can nonetheless be inferred), that communicates a *face threat* – some properties ascribed to the person that are aimed at devaluing his self image (Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, 1978).

Let's reconsider the subjunctive phrase ("if there were something to talk about...") used by the father in the introduction to the talk. This comment virtually questions the presence of the conversation's subject, and indirectly suggests the son's incapacity to manage an effective conversation at all. Though throughout his following verbal moves (2) and (3) the father strives, in different versions, to elicit adequate information from the son ("what don't you know?"), they are based on the same implication (nothing to talk about).

The father uses the son's vocabulary ("I don't know what to say"), but leads to a different effect – he projects all that was said by the son about the difficulties of introducing the subject against the latter. He paraphrases the statement and extends its structure on both the semantic and lexical levels ("you don't know anything"). In doing this, he simultaneously instigates an exacerbation of the miscommunication.

(1) FATHER: If there were something to talk about...

(2) FATHER: What don't you know? You don't know what to say, or you don't know why you are going?

(3) FATHER: But you have already said, that you don't know what to say. How can I confuse you more, if you yourself don't know anything?

The recognition of implied face-threatening tactics of the father is revealed in the direct meta-controlling of the conversation on the part of the son.

IV. Past Projecting

In the following portion of the dialogue, I would like to examine an additional discursive pattern that reflects the non-alignment of the conflict – this is the *mechanism of controlling the past rituals and projecting them to the future events*.

(5) SON: You see, Dad, you are afraid, as usual, that I have forgotten who really matters here. But I admit that you are the head. Why do you constantly remind me of this again and again? Can't you manage without that? Can't you, don't you really want to listen to me? You keep interrupting and pulling me up! Listen, Dad, I am not in third grade any more. My own son is in the third grade.

FATHER: Is that all? You think I don't know how you ask for advice? You come running with bulging eyes and describe any new idea you have. You tell me that it is a very important one and that you need my advice. But actually you have already decided how to act. And you need me only to listen to you and to agree with you. Because if only I don't take your fantasies seriously, you will immediately jump up, run away, and slam the door. I must listen to everything you have to say and support you. You don't really need any of my advice. You hear only what you want to listen.

(6) SON: Wonderful! This is the way we have talked!

FATHER: Yes, we have talked... Why don't you run away? Because here you don't have a door to bang?

(7) SON: Dad, haven't you heard? I mentioned that I am going to go away...for a long time.

FATHER: What advice do you want from me? You have decided that you will go. What would you like to hear? "Go, my little son"? So, please – "Go my little son!"

(8) SON: I will go, I will go!

FATHER: So, go.

The individual goals of the participants obviously dominate here, and this repeatedly leads to the problem of shaping the mutual subject of the discussion. While the son tries to adhere to the original format of meta-controlling the discursive behavior of his dialogue partner, the father's verbal tactics consistently aim at running a *pattern based on using the past to address the present* – in other words, referring throughout the talk to the actions, deeds and practices that occurred in the past, and that for now shape the family's common consciousness.

The conversational strategy of relating to the son's familiar practices touches on a number of the father's verbal moves. Using only the *you*-statements, he reveals his acquaintance with the habitual behavior of the son in (5); he projects the son's customary actions for the present situation and cynically provokes him to act as he usually does in (6); in (7) the father even goes further: He suggests his own alternative of what his partner might like to

get and responds by himself to his own proposition. This last verbal move reveals the absurd humor of the situation and additionally foregrounds the conflict as *non-aligned*, where even the immediate presence of the counterpart might not be necessary for conducting the talk.

Since these frequent provocative comments contain an obvious challenge, they virtually convey an additional stimulus for the face threat, for now based not on implication, but on providing real facts. The pragmatic meaning of this past-present interplay is, however, far more extensive. The son has not only to confirm his past pattern of behavior and by this admit the face-threatening act oriented to him – rather, the father's tactics make him know that his present performance is considered in light of the past framework and therefore is treated accordingly.

For family conflict, where people know each other for a long time, this verbal pattern of projecting past to present is particularly indicative. While such a conversation may occasionally give way to a new stimulus, it merely recycles the verbal strategies, by narrowing and even halting the flow of the discourse.

V. Conclusions

My focus in examining this dialogue lay in uncovering the conflict fashion that doesn't feature as an explicit confrontation or clash. The non-aligned conflict, as I pose it, is different from the obvious disagreement, in that it is based on the deep-rooted past and does not necessarily aim at resolution. In this type of family interaction, both sides are not directed to each other in terms of genuine commitment, and this is manifested in the protracted conflict that is lingering and even chronic.

On the level of verbal interaction we view the opposing discourse styles, and what is more important – the inability to adapt to the discourse mode of the dialogue partner. Meta-controlling, face-threatening and projecting the past experience onto the present are the verbal patterns that reflect the way the disagreement makes the ideas separate and the reason it does not involve any common ground throughout the conversation.

The non-aligned conflict features polarity of the both sides, either through the content representation or through the conversational dynamics. The structural discrepancy between the two conversational strategies suggests the presence of the two different planes, even

dimensions, where the sides of the conflict reside. Not only do we sense a lack of cooperation between the players, even more notable is the fact that we do not witness any meaningful confrontation. There is no argument, and consequently, no winner. Such conflicts explicate insufficient pragmatic behavior of both participants and leave us with the impression of vagueness and disappointment.

Thus, through the prism of this dialogue one may well experience the broader cultural format of non-aligned conflicts. In this type of conflicts the same patterns operate through the different stages of life, and this type of conflict, while expressing a level of disagreement on the discourse level, still do not embody confrontation and are not likely to be resolved. From this viewpoint, they do not really contribute to expected positive transformations in real life.

References

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