



An Analysis of Doctor-Patient Conflict Talks in Grey’s Anatomy

LIU Wenting^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, Shanxi Datong University, Datong, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by Shanxi Datong University Science Foundation for Youth” (2015Q30).

Received 12 October 2015; accepted 9 December 2015

Published online 26 January 2016

Abstract

Conflict talk is one of the research objects of discourse analysis. This paper takes Grey’s Anatomy as corpus sources, a TV series in ABC, selecting some fragments of discourse that have high frequency of appearance in the series, analyzes the conflict talk between doctors and patients from the perspective of pragmatics, gives a further explanation about conflict talk and its duality, aiming to survey the conflict talks from a unique way, affirming that it plays a positive role in interpersonal relationship.

Key words: Conflict talk; Pragmatic analysis; Grey’s anatomy; Effects

Liu, W. T. (2016). An Analysis of Doctor-Patient Conflict Talks in Grey’s Anatomy. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 12(1), 42-45. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8128> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8128>

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

1.1 Definition of Conflict Talk

According to some interviews, conversations or social small talks, we can find that when speakers and listeners hold different views about the same thing, argument, contradiction, and opposition will appear. Those words including argument, contradiction, fight, opposition and so on are all called Conflict Talk. In a narrow sense, it’s a

verbal behavior, for example, Pomerantz (1984) thought that it was “disagreement”; in a broad sense, it’s a speech event. Grimshaw (1990) named it as “conflict talk”. Eisenberg and Garve (1981) came up with “adversative episode”. Schiffrin (1985) called it as “oppositional argument”. Above all definitions have similarity—there are conflicts among people during communication, like A disagrees with B’s words and behavior, or A concerns things differently compared with B. So we can also consider conflict talk or conflict speech as a way to deliver diverse ideas when people compare notes. In short, conflict talk is an opposing idea or a dispute state which is caused by speakers and listeners’ wording about different opinions.

1.2 Duality of Conflict Talk

Conflict talk is widespread in the interpersonal communication, but the studies linguistics and anthropological linguistics research on is quite lacking (Kakava, 2001). It’s commonly believed that, conflict talk heads from the lack of social skills, or communication breakdown. As to interpersonal communication, the effect of conflict talk is mostly negative, showing as talk’s conflict, speaker’s wording and the effect of speaker’s identity. These perlocutionary acts all reflect that verbal interaction is under the restriction of interpersonal relationships.

Conflict talk has a negative impact on communication, which causes the divergence of communication; it will achieve convergence by mitigating and terminating conflict talk, which has positive effect on communication. The speaker criticizes, asks the listener will reinforce the opposite of each other, and cause listener’s emotion of indignation, complaint and dissatisfaction. Then, listener directly uses some opposed, abusive and threatening words to respond, this is the negative effect of conflict talk. In this kind of conflict talk, the interactor often insists that the other one is wrong and he himself is right; the listener doesn’t have talk’s conflict with the speaker,

with the attitude of compromise, approval, acquiescence avoiding speaker's conflict, thus, he or she can ease the conflict talk to a certain degree, and weaken both sides' war of words. And this is the positive effect of conflict talk.

1.3 Literature Review

Because in the reality conflict talk exists widely and it's quite complex, it has drawn lots of scholars' attention. Debates among people have led foreign scholars to start studying conflict talk. They believe that according to verbal behavior, debating is simply a particular deed, which aims to persuade. However, conflicts and arguments among ideas probably happen. In 1990s, some scholars made a further study to find strategies about what causes and how to avoid conflicts, including some issues about how self-image and ideology make difference in conflict talk. Until 21st century, this study has got more and more attention at home. Ran (2010) has studied the features, causes and solutions of conflict discourse regarding of how conflict discourse happens, develops and come to an end among Chinese couples, using the perspective of pragmatic. Zhao (2004) has analyzed Chinese conflict talks specifically in initiation, conflict and end by using structural analysis and given an explanation to its social foundation. According to the observation, description and interpretation of conflict talk, she revealed its structure and expanded the study range of language analysis. In a word, whether viewed from the breadth or depth, domestic and international scholars have achieved fruitful results in conflict discourse.

Doctor-patient relationship has captured more and more people's attention in recent years. Doctor-patient conflict talk plays an extremely important part of this relationship. Anything wrong in communication could become a medical obstacle. Therefore, this paper is trying to review the conflict talk by quoting a variety of conversations from a famous US TV series—Grey's Anatomy and find out that conflict talk does play an important role in interpersonal relationship between doctors and patients.

2. ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT TALKS FROM GREY'S ANATOMY

2.1 Doctor-Patient Conflict Talks and Face-Threatening Act

Grey's Anatomy is one of the most popular TV series in ABC. It tells us how a few interns working and growing up in Seattle Grace Hospital. This TV series is full of their stories about their daily issues, studying and working life. And the scenes about doctor-patient communication are essential. However, it can't be always peaceful between them. There must exist some conflicts and awkwardness and threaten each other's face. Based on Brown and

Levinson (1987), the face-saving and face-threatening views of politeness are to explain the interactional structure of conflict talk. Negative face is defined as "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" or "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction... i.e. the freedom of action and freedom from imposition. Positive face is "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some other executors", or in other words, "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that his self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants". With these universals, disagreement is considered as a face-threatening act because disagreeing with someone will cause threatening to that person's positive face. And it will influence listener's public identity (Goffman, 1967).

Following scenes are what happen in Grey's Anatomy and they are explaining conflict talks in relation to face-threatening act:

Example 1

One of a patient's arms is broken and must be attached to the body, but the broken arm needs blood supply before the operation. So doctors have to transplant it to another part of body. Then the patient wakes up and questions the doctor excitedly.

Patient: Is that my arm? What did you do? Why did you do this to me? What did you do to me?

Little Grey: It's only temporary. It is just for a few days. Frankie, this is what you wanted, you wanted your arm.

Patient: In the right place! I said I didn't want to be a freak. You should have left me like I was.

1. Patient: This isn't your life! This isn't your body! How can you put my arm to my thigh! You had no right! You had no right to turn me into a monster! I'm normal! You shouldn't do this!"

2. Little Grey: Only transplant your arm to your thigh can save your life, and this situation is temporary. You are rescued. And you'll be a normal person after a few days.

Due to the need of blood supply, the patient's arm had to pick up on the thigh, the patient couldn't accept the fact, felt that he was a monster, so he questioned doctor and initiated the conflict in underlined sentence 1 regardless of threatening the doctor's face. All above the words said by patient is a kind of objection and complaint, these speech acts can cause conflict talk. If one communicator's speech act threatens the other one's identity, status and value, other similar acts are negative. Conflict talk is often associated with impoliteness. Culpeper (1998) thinks that impoliteness is a communicative strategy which influences listener's face, and caused conflict. Because the patient used this kind of strategy intentionally, even with malice. So the effect of interaction is obviously negative, his words threaten little Grey's face.

Example 2

A dancer gets bone cancer, in order to save her life, doctor suggests persuading her to agree on amputation and receive artificial limb installation. However, it's hard to accept for her.

Patient: What are you saying? Are they saying the chemo didn't work?

Karev: We should wait for your parents.

Patient: Oh my god. You want to cut off my leg? Oh my god.

Karev: Uh, look ... There's a printer with prosthetics that runs faster than guys with real legs.

Patient: There's gotta be another way. More ... more ... chemo or ...

Karev: Yeah, but with prosthetics today, it's ... it's amazing.

Patient: You don't get it! I need my leg!

Karev: I get it.

Patient: No, you don't. It's ... I ... I ... I can't explain.

1. Patient: You! You want to cut off my leg? Why don't you let me do more chemo? Maybe it will work! You don't understand me! I can't live without my leg! I am in confusion; I dare not imagine my future life. How can you do this?

2. Doctor: I told you that new prosthetics will save your life and I understand you very much. The only way to save you is that you have to change an artificial limb and we should wait for your parents' opinions.

We can imagine what the legs mean for a dancer. A dancer without a leg means losing her whole life. The patient can't accept the fact that she had to cut off her leg. She's hard to suppress her emotion and argues with Karev that it's her own leg and own decision in underlined sentence 1 which definitely threatens Karev's face.

The conflict talks in those conversations above are all initiated by patients, for they have dissenting opinions and threaten each other to defend themselves. Therefore, by analyzing the examples of conflict talks between patients and doctors, one reason is found that, the patients misunderstand the doctors' suggestions for treatment and they refuse the convincement in conflict talks initiated by themselves. So, this is the negative effects of conflict talk.

2.2 Doctor-Patient Conflict Talks and Its Positive Effects

Conflict is a resistance or debate status when a group or an individual holds different options in opinions, interests, principle, purpose and so forth. Discrepancy and opposition are not only universalities in conflict, but also a kind of typical feature of conflict talks.

Generally speaking, after one raises the conflict talk, there can be followed by two situations: First one is the other individual in interaction responds by using conflict words, which makes conflict worse then ever. Second one is the individual in interaction manages to respond for easing the situation and makes conflict turn to mitigating

orientation. The former will have negative effects in interpersonal relationship, while the latter will have a positive effect.

Tannen (1990) was considering the differences of conversational style between men and women, he found that female speakers in verbal opposition usually adopt some means of language to avoid conflict influence on interpersonal harmony, but male speakers treat the conflicting words as a way of "involvement" which they think can promote the interpersonal relationship between each other. This is the positive effects of conflict talk. Moreover, when talk's conflict is remitted or eliminated, speakers and listeners' interpersonal relationship can be strengthened, but not conflicting or form a new confrontation. This can be called the positive effect of conflict talk.

We can find out many talks in Grey's Anatomy which seem to threaten patients' face, but actually they do have a good effect.

Example 3

A senior high boy is highly discriminated against by others for he has breasts and it has brought him tremendous pressure. He wants to remove them but his mother doesn't approve it.

Karev: Mrs. Gruberman, every surgery has its risk, but this one is pretty simple. Look, it'll make your son feel a whole lot better about himself.

Patient's mom: Well, if the surgery is really a good idea, I would like to hear it from Dr. Robbins and Dr. Sloan.

Karev: Look, I'm ...

The mother has become irritated when hearing the doctor's words, she wants to take her boy out of hospital. Schiffirin (1985) thinks that, to support one's views, speaker always belittles others' views. But the doctor continues his "conflict talk" in patience.

1. Karev: 13 is young enough to plastic surgery, but your kid's not gonna grow out of it. He's already gone through puberty, and his father's had the same condition his entire life. Look, if he had weight to lose, I would advise diet and exercise, but your kid doesn't have a weight problem. He has breasts. He needs excision of the glandular tissue. And yeah, it could wait till he's older, but he's a dude with breasts, and he's headed for high school, and there's no reason he should be subjected to the psychological damage that comes from years of taking schoolyard crap. Look, you want your kid to be a man? Let him make his own decisions.

The patient's mother is so stubborn that she doesn't accept doing the surgery which she thinks is not safe for her son. Doctor Karev tries to convince her to do the surgery, because if she doesn't let her son do so, his mood at school will be worse even threatens his entire puberty. Do let him make the decision! After listening to doctors' sincere persuasion, the mother agrees to accept

the operation. The operation succeeds and eventually everything is back to normal. Therefore, in underlined sentence 1, Karev doesn't care about the patient's face and directly utters his willingness to make the boy normal. These conflicting words are working its positive effects finally.

Example 4

It's not allowed for patients to drink water after operations, but someone breaks the rule. Finally, doctor has to threaten his face regarding of his health.

Robert: No! No! Leave me alone! Let me go back. I need the water! I need it!

Alex: Martin, we're trying to help.

Robert: I don't want your help. I don't want people to look at me. I'm pathetic. Stop looking at me! Stop looking at me!

Alex: Give him 3% hypertonic solution. 500ccs per hour over the next 4 hours. We need to stabilize him.

Robert: You think you're such hot shot doctor. You're not. You're nothing. I'm gonna fire you too!

Alex: Go ahead fire me.

Marcus (1985) thinks that, conflict is a constructive process of positive effects in communication. That is, both sides involved in conversation build his or the other one's identity and role by opposing, dissent, and debate which mutual confrontation is. During the interactive conversation, if speaker's words are conflict talks, the response from the other side generally has very strong pertinence, that is to say, they will select his responses according to the other's words. It illustrates that verbal interaction of each other acts with others.

In this conversation, the patient drank the water without getting approval from Alex. He felt very pathetic, and lost his temper. He was afraid of everyone to look at him. Alex decided to give him 3% tranquilizer. Then he had a scratching satire on Alex and wanted to fire the doctor. The response from Alex conformed to his words. The doctor directly made a diagnosis which actually wouldn't need patient's explanation but conveyed his madness at his unreasonable idea and caused threatening to his face.

The conflict talks in those conversations above are all initiated by doctors, for they have dissenting opinions and threaten each other to defend themselves. Therefore, by analyzing the examples of conflict talks between patients and doctors, the other reason is found that the doctors really care about the patients' condition and really worried about if the patients don't accept their suggestions. So, they initiate the conflict or dispute with the patients. And this is positive effects of conflict talk.

CONCLUSION

This paper has quoted several conflict conversations from Grey's Anatomy, and has briefly analyzed the negative

and positive effects conflict talks have on interpersonal relationship. And we can find out that conflict talk has two sides, even though it has some negative effects, but it is not always the killer of the interpersonal relationship. As what these examples in Grey's Anatomy have shown for us, when doctors say something fierce and threaten the patients' face, they probably think of patients' health instead of their own interests. So, the result of this kind of conflict is definitely a promotion of harmony between the doctors and patients, even to other relationships. In consequence, we should treat the conflicts during conversation by a correct attitude and analyze them concretely.

REFERENCES

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Culpeper, J. (1998). (Im) impoliteness in drama. In J. Culpeper, M. Short & P. Verdonk (Eds.), *Exploring the Language of Drama: From Text to Context*. London: Routledge.
- Eisenberg, A., & Garve, C. (1981). Children use of verbal strategies in resolving conflicts. *Discourse Processes*, (4), 149-170.
- Grimshaw, A. D. (1990). *Conflict talk. sociolinguistic investigations in conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual*. New York: Doubleday.
- Kakava, C. (2001). Discourse conflict. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Marcus, E. C. (1985). *Perceptions of conflict resolution* (Ph.D. dissertation). Columbia University.
- Pomerantz, A. (1984). Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structure of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ran Y. P. (2010). A survey of the pragmatic studies about conflict talk in interaction. *Foreign Language Education*, (1), 1-5.
- Schiffrin, D. (1985). Everyday argument: The organization of diversity in talk. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Handbook of discourse analysis* (Vol.3, pp.35-46). *Discourse and Dialogue*. London: Academic Press.
- Tannen, D. (1990). Silence as conflict management in fiction and drama. In A. D. Grimshaw (Ed.), *Conflict talk sociolinguistic investigations in conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watson-Gegeo, K. A., & White, G. M. (1990). *Disentangling conflict discourse in pacific societies*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Zhao Y. L. (2004). Conflict talk analysis. *Foreign Language Research*, (5), 37-42.