"No, you listen!" A pilot experiment into escalation devices in confrontational conversation

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Abstract

In conversation, interlocutors are often friendly or polite and generally socially collaborative. However, it is not uncommon that interlocutors get upset, defensive, and antagonistic, engaging in confrontational conversation. Given that we are able to intuitively perceive the contrast between confrontational and non-confrontational conversation, our goal is to find out whether there is a linguistically manifested contrast between the two contexts. A corpus of confrontational conversation was analysed for potentially escalating linguistic devices. In this paper we propose an exploratory experiment where we test these devices to find out whether they, in fact, correspond to the perceived escalation of confrontation in a conversation.

1   Introduction

We define confrontational conversation (CC henceforth) generally as an antagonistic exchange characterised by blaming, insults, personal attacks, and so on, where interlocutors express themselves in a non-collaborative and even combative manner (see e.g. Walton 1998 on *eristic dialogue*). The contrast between CC and non-CC is often intuitively clear to speakers, therefore the overarching aim of this research is to explain the roots of this intuition. We tackle this question by attempting to find distinctive linguistic features of CC.

To study the linguistic properties of CC, a relevant contribution in the literature is that of impoliteness strategies (Lachenicht 1980, Austin 1990, Culpeper 1996, Bousfield 2008, a.o.) since these are concerned with attacking face (Culpeper, 1996), where face is loosely defined as "one's public self-image" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 61). We assume that face-attack (or face-threat) in interaction escalates confrontation in conversation provided certain conditions that enable it are met, including a balanced power dynamic between interlocutors, similar cultural background, etc.

Culpeper (1996) proposes impoliteness *superstrategies*, which are classified according to how they interact with face (whether they threaten face directly or indirectly, whether they threaten negative or positive face, etc.) in a symmetrically opposite fashion to the taxonomy of superstrategies in Politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Embedded hierarchically within superstrategies are *output strategies*, which are an open-ended list of ways to achieve the former. Examples of these include *seeking disagreement* or *using taboo words*. At a macro-level, Culpeper (2011, 136) proposes impoliteness formulae, which are concrete linguistic structures which have been attested to correlate with impoliteness, e.g. *shut* [*the fuck*] *up*.

Our research directly relates to impoliteness formulae in Culpeper (2011). We aim to determine whether explicit linguistic devices are perceived as impolite/aggressive/face-threatening. We present a bottom-up approach to testing corpus-sourced devices for their potential to escalate confrontation.

In order to do so, we must supply two things: context and interpretation (Culpeper, 2016). The importance of context has long been discussed with respect to impoliteness strategies. Tracy and Tracy (1998) propose that those which are perceived as impolite across most contexts are *context-spanning* strategies, whereas strategies which are perceived as impolite only in some contexts are *context-tied*. Essentially we are testing whether devices found in CC data are escalating when used in a new context (context-spanning) or not systematically perceived as offensive (context-tied). Secondly, impoliteness strategies also require that interlocutors actually perceive impoliteness (/aggression/face-threat), which we will assess by measuring interlocutors rapport "the experience of harmony, fluidity, synchrony, and flow felt during a conversation" (Gratch and Kang, 2015). Since CC is antagonistic, we assume that confrontation and rapport are negatively correlated.

2 Corpus analysis

The data used for the corpus analysis were selected transcribed dialogues from British reality television show *The Only Way is Essex* (TOWIE corpus[1]). Turns were annotated as potentially aggressive if they seemed to escalate confrontation, i.e. if reactions to those turns, as well as subsequent turns, provided indication that aggression/face-threat was perceived.

These turns were grouped as different generalised devices which included: repetition (full or partial) of the interlocutor's previous turn; returning the speech act, particularly directives; second person reports, i.e. a statement about the addressee for which the latter has epistemic authority; insults; rhetorical questions; patronising commands; vocatives, specifically turn-final addressee's name.

2.1 Selected devices and examples

Three devices were selected for testing: second person reports, patronising commands, and turn-final addressee's name. They are exemplified in (1), (2), and (3) respectively, with devices in boldface. The following are adapted from the TOWIE corpus.

(1) MEG: I react by screaming and shouting. Like, I can't help it. It's who I am.
CHL: Okay, well. **You can help it. You can.**
MEG: Well, I can't! It's the way I am when I've been hurt! ((indignant expression))

(2) YAZ: Now let's be honest.
LCK: Listen.
YAZ: You message me as well.
LCK: No, no no, **listen**.
YAZ: No, no no, you listen!

(3) MEG: You're boring.
CHL: Who are you talking to?
MEG: You're boring**, Chloe.**
CHL: Good, you don't have to be around me!

2.2 Research question

In the corpus, these devices do not occur on their own. Since we are asking whether they should be classified as context-spanning escalating devices, we must take into account that in the corpus they are concurrent with other potentially confounding phenomena. For example, the second person report in (1) and the patronising command in (2) are

coupled with disagreement, whereas the turn-final vocative in (3) is preceded by an insult. Therefore, our aim is to test these devices in different contexts. Our research question is whether these linguistic devices – second person reports, patronising commands, and turn-final addressee's name – escalate confrontation in interaction.

3 Method

3.1 DiET chat tool

The Dialogue Experimental Toolkit (DiET) chat tool (Healey et al., 2003) is a text-based chat interface into which interventions, such as adding fake turns, can be introduced into a dialogue in real time, thus causing a minimum of disruption to the 'flow' of the conversation. For this experiment we will use the version of DiET which runs through the messenger app Telegram.[2]

3.2 Participants and procedure

40 fluent English speakers will be recruited and grouped into 20 pairs, with 10 pairs in the intervention condition and 10 pairs as controls (with no interventions). Participants will be prompted to discuss the balloon task (see Section 3.3) via chat on Telegram for 20 minutes.

In this experiment, the three selected devices in Section 2.1 will be automatically inserted into the chat via DiET with a set number of turns between interventions. The devices inserted via DiET appear to be sent by the participants themselves. That is, when messages are sent or modified on behalf of p1, they appear to p2 as sent by p1, and are not visible at all to p1; likewise for when messages are sent on behalf of p2.

All participants will subsequently be asked to fill in a survey evaluating the rapport with their interlocutor based on the chat.

3.3 Task

The balloon task is an ethical dilemma, where participants must discuss which of four people in a hot air balloon should be sacrificed to save the other three. There are potential reasons for saving or sacrificing each person, and the task usually leads to lively discussions (see e.g. Howes et al., 2021). Since such ethical dilemmas give rise to questions and opinions concerning sensitive topics (where the notion of face is salient in the interaction), it provides a context that allows for CC to ensue.

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[1] https://www.sara-amido.com/research/resources

[2] https://dialoguetoolkit.github.io/chattool/

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