

Linguistic feature variation within disagreements: An empirical investigation

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Abstract

This article discusses a quantitative and qualitative investigation into oral disagreements, providing notable contributions to the field of disagreement research. First, it identifies multiple co-occurring linguistic features which index disagreement, and provides descriptive statistics of these features. Second, it identifies different types of disagreements, as well as patterns within these types, noting their varying linguistic configurations. The study thus affords a starting point for research aiming to identify the linguistic makeup of conflict talk or attempting to distinguish between types of disagreements.

Two primary types of disagreement are located: backgrounded and foregrounded, which appear to exist on a continuum of increasing explicitness and escalating hostility. Within foregrounded disagreements, three patterns emerge (collegial disagreements, personal challenge disagreements, personal attack disagreements), comprised of different linguistic constellations; these three patterns also appear linked to a continuum of escalating hostility. Descriptive statistics as well as qualitative analysis reflect variation in the frequency of use of linguistic features across the patterns, as well as in the functions for which these features are used. The evidence suggests that disagreements are not a uniform phenomenon.

Keywords: disagreement; conflict; conversation analysis; oral discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

In 1990, Grimshaw urged us to discover ‘the features which identify and define conflict talk and determine its course and outcome’ (1990: 319). Grimshaw also advocated learning ‘how different types and genres of conflict talk vary’, and creating methods which would allow the

exploration of 'different dimensions of variation' within disagreements (1990: 11). Yet disagreement research has not focused on these complex issues. Nor has disagreement research tended to examine extended segments of multiparty talk. Rather, studies have tended to examine aspects such as specific moves or speech acts, often within short dyadic exchanges (e.g., Mitchell-Kernan 1972; Brenneis and Lein 1977; Boggs 1978; Eisenberg and Garvey 1981; Maynard 1985; Hutchby 1996; Al-Khatib 1997). Other research has investigated sections of disagreements (e.g., Watson-Gegeo and Boggs 1977; Goodwin 1980, 1982, 1983; Kochman 1983; Benoit 1984; Pomerantz 1984a; Mulkay 1985; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987, 1990; Corsaro and Rizzo 1990) or the structure of disagreements (e.g., Eisenberg and Garvey 1981; Benoit 1984; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984; Schiffrin 1987; Preston 1994; Muntigl and Turnbull 1998; Kleiner and Preston 1997). Some studies have speculated about differences in disagreement types (e.g., O'Keefe 1977; Schiffrin 1984, 1985, 1987; Connor-Linton 1989; Sprott 1992, 1993; Drake and Donohue 1996; Smithson and Diaz 1996). Other studies, often with foci other than disagreements, have commented on linguistic features which might occur within disagreements (e.g., Tannen 1987, 1993; Biber and Finegan 1988, 1989; Ainsworth-Vaughn 1992; Drew and Heritage 1992; Willing 1992; Clayman 1993; Wilce 1995). Yet previous disagreement research has not systematically set out to define the linguistic constitution of disagreements, nor done empirical investigations of different disagreement types.

2. Addressing gaps in the field

The study which this article summarizes (Scott 1998) helps remedy these gaps in the field, offering three notable contributions to disagreement research: (1) the identification of multiple linguistic features which work together to index disagreement (specifically within the broadly defined speech community of adult American professionals), (2) the identification of different types of disagreements, aligned along a continuum of increasing explicitness and escalating hostility, and (3) the presentation of an innovative, exploratory methodology which allows disagreements, and variations within disagreements, to quantitatively emerge from the surrounding discourse. This article will focus on the first and second of these points.

The research questions are:

1. Do certain linguistic features co-occur in adult multiparty face-to-face disagreement discourse, and thus function to index disagreement? What linguistic features are these?

2. Do differing patterns of linguistic features occur within disagreements, indexing different types or patterns of disagreements? If so, what are these types and how is each of them characterized linguistically?

2.1. *The corpus*

The corpus consisted of four transcribed editions of the unscripted half-hour long American Cable News Network (CNN) television news show *Crossfire*. *Crossfire*, along with other American issue-oriented television shows (*Firing Line*, *The McLaughlin Group*, *Capital Gang*), appears to be a new genre, one not much studied in scholarly literature; these shows mix elements of conversation with the media genres of debates, news interviews, public affairs shows, and talk shows. In *Crossfire*, two hosts and one to three knowledgeable guests discuss a single controversial topic of current interest.¹

Crossfire's format typically follows the following sequence. One of the two hosts introduces the topic with background information, finishing a one-to-two minute introduction with a rhetorical question which highlights the controversial nature of the topic. The hosts and guests are then introduced, and questions, answers, and free-for-all discussions ensue for approximately nine minutes. After a commercial break, this structure is repeated. After the second and final commercial break, the program closes with a one-to-two minute segment in which the two hosts sum up and briefly discuss the topic, without the guests present. During the show, a strict turn-taking or question-answer format does not apply. Although some attention is paid to allowing all participants air time, the hosts do not rigidly control the floor, in terms of number of turns taken, words spoken, or order of speakers.

The fact that this talk is broadcast on television does, of course, impact upon the discourse. The time constraints and the very public nature of the talk influence what is said, and how.² *Crossfire*, for example, as a televised news show, works to entertain as well as to provide information. Yet *Crossfire* places a strong emphasis on the latter, working to accurately portray information. *Crossfire* extols its newsy nature in calling its programs *editions*, in its choice of serious topics, in its selection of scholarly hosts and of guests who are experts in their fields, and in its conservative black-backgrounded studio setting. Despite the televised nature of this talk, this author argues, as do others (e.g., Ilie 1999), that such unscripted talk bears many similarities to conversation and to the professional talk, for example, found in meetings. As one goal of this research is to allow future comparisons with other sources of professional

adult face-to-face discourse, the only editions selected for inclusion in this study were of topics likely to be discussed by the average educated American professional. The titles of the four episodes and their air dates are:

1. 'Drinking and Driving Legally', 27 May 1996;
2. 'Muzzling Clarence Thomas', 2 June 1996;
3. 'The FAA in the Hot Seat', 25 June 1996; and
4. 'The Immigration Debate', 7 July 1996.

2.2. *Steps in the study*

Table 1 illustrates the steps involved in the study. Linguistic features which might index disagreement were culled from various literatures (as discussed in the next section), and selected for investigation within the data. Having decided which linguistic features to examine, the next task was to delimit a unit of analysis within the four editions of *Crossfire*; section 2.3 illustrates this process, which ultimately located 56 disagreement sequences. A qualitative analysis of the 56 sequences uncovered a continuum of disagreement types, varying along an axis of felt differences in explicitness and hostility: these disagreement types were labeled *backgrounded*, *mixed*, and *foregrounded* disagreements. The 56 sequences were examined to discover patterns of similarity in the use of linguistic features. Similar patterns, as defined by this study, were only discovered within the foregrounded type of disagreement. Three patterns were located, and named *collegial disagreements*, *personal challenge disagreements*, and *personal attack disagreements*.

Table 1. *Overview of methodology*

Linguistic features likely to index disagreements were selected for study.
From four <i>Crossfire</i> editions, 56 disagreement sequences (the ultimate unit of analysis) were located
The 56 sequences were studied, locating a possible continuum of disagreement types:
<i>backgrounded</i>
<i>mixed</i>
<i>foregrounded</i>
The 56 sequences were examined for similar patterns of linguistic feature use; three patterns were located:
<i>collegial disagreements</i>
<i>personal challenge disagreements</i>
<i>personal attack disagreements</i>

2.3. Locating linguistic features which index disagreement

In the first stage of the study, linguistic features which might index disagreement were located and considered for inclusion in the study. This process involved a reading of the literature on disagreement (e.g., Grimshaw 1990), as well as the literature on stance (e.g., Biber and Finegan 1988, 1989), voice (e.g., Bakhtin 1981, 1984, 1994), genre (e.g., Briggs and Bauman 1992), and orders of discourse (e.g., Foucault 1980, 1985), as these latter scholars examine a number of issues related to power in discourse which are relevant to oral disagreements. The *Crossfire* data themselves were also examined, and a pilot study conducted which compared the frequency of certain linguistic features in *Crossfire* against frequency counts in Biber's 1988 corpus. In the end, over 600 lexical items and phrases were selected and examined for possible inclusion.³

Normalized frequency counts were calculated for all of these possible features. The features were then examined individually in the data. Linguistic features with high frequency counts (i.e., a standardized score of 1.0 or higher in comparison with Biber 1988) were retained for further analysis.⁴ Table 2 presents an alphabetical list of the twelve linguistic features which were retained. These features encompass linguistic strategies (such as repetition), grammatical categories (such as modals), and lexical items (such as discourse markers).

These features will be briefly discussed. An examination of the data suggested that absolutes (e.g., *all*, *every*) were frequent within *Crossfire* disagreements, and so this feature was included for study. The second feature, negation, while conspicuously absent in most of the disagreement literature, is an obvious category for inclusion as an index of disagreement. When disagreeing, people reject and deny ideas and statements, often using negation in the process. The negators counted under the category of affixal negation are: *anti-* (e.g., *anti-immigrant*); *de-* (e.g., *deregulation*); *dis-* (e.g., *disagree*); *il-* (e.g., *illegal*); *in-* (e.g., *inaccurate*); *ir-* (e.g., *irresponsible*); *-less* (no instances); *mis-* (e.g., *misunderstand*); *non-* (e.g., *non-alphabetizers*); and *un-* (e.g., *uncomfortable*). Nonaffixal negation included: *no*, *not*, and the contraction of not, *n't*.⁵

A third feature were the discourse markers *but*, *now*, and *well*. Individual instances of each word were examined to ensure that other uses of these words were not being counted as discourse markers, such as the adverbs *well* or *now*. Occurrences which were ambiguous, of which there were very few, were counted as discourse markers.

Emphatics (e.g., *a lot*) were suggested as possible indices of disagreement not only by the literature (e.g., Biber and Finegan 1989), but also by their

Table 2. *Linguistic features studied*

Absolutes	Negation affixal nonaffixal	Discourse markers	Emphatics	Floor bids	Flow	Indexical 2nd-person pronouns	Modals	Repetition	Questions	Turn length	Uptake avoidance
<i>all</i>	<i>anti-</i>	<i>but</i>	<i>a lot</i>	<i>let me/</i>	overlapping	<i>you</i>	possibility:	lexical	interrogatives	in	avoidance
<i>anybody</i>	<i>de-</i>	<i>now</i>	<i>at all</i>	<i>him/her/us +</i>	and	<i>your</i>	<i>can</i>	phrasal	with S-V	number	of
<i>anyone</i>	<i>dis-</i>	<i>well</i>	<i>for sure</i>	verb (e.g.,	latching	<i>yourselves</i>	<i>could</i>	clausal	inversion	of	previous
<i>anything</i>	<i>il-</i>		<i>just</i>	<i>talk, say)</i>	combined		<i>may</i>	sentential	and/or wh-	words	topic
<i>anywhere</i>	<i>in-</i>		<i>more</i>	<i>just a minute/</i>			<i>might</i>		markers	per	
<i>ever</i>	<i>ir-</i>		<i>most</i>	<i>second</i>			necessity:			turn	
<i>every</i>	<i>-less</i>		<i>real +</i>	<i>wait a minute/</i>			<i>must</i>				
<i>everybody</i>	<i>mis-</i>		adjective	<i>second</i>			<i>ought</i>				
<i>everyone</i>	<i>non-</i>		<i>really</i>				<i>should</i>				
<i>everything</i>	<i>un-</i>		<i>so +</i>				prediction:				
<i>everywhere</i>			adjective				<i>shall</i>				
<i>never</i>			<i>so + adverb</i>				<i>will</i>				
<i>nobody</i>			<i>such a</i>				<i>would</i>				
<i>no one</i>							<i>'ll</i>				
<i>none</i>							<i>'d</i>				
<i>nothing</i>							semi-modals:				
<i>nowhere</i>							<i>going to</i>				
							<i>has to</i>				
							<i>have to</i>				
							<i>has got to</i>				
							<i>have got to</i>				
							and contractions				

frequency in *Crossfire* relative to their frequency in Biber's 1988 corpus. Individual occurrences were examined to make sure that they were functioning as emphatics in context before they were counted. When the word *just* occurred in the phrase *just a minute/second*, it was not considered an emphatic, but was counted as an instance of a floor bid.

Floor bid is a label for a phrase which indicates an attempt to stop other speakers from talking, in order for a speaker to gain or keep the floor (e.g., *Let him speak*). This feature was included for consideration in the study as an examination of the *Crossfire* data revealed that these phrases seemed quite common during disagreements. No instances occurred in which floor bids were phrased as interrogatives, although floor bids often introduced questions (e.g., *Let me ask X+a question*).

The term *flow* was used to index a combination of overlapping and latching. Overlapping talk was included as a possible index not only because the literature cites it as a means of being confrontational or struggling for the floor (e.g., O'Donnell 1990; Hutchby 1992; Kuo 1994), but also because an examination of the *Crossfire* data reveals heavy use of overlapping during disagreements. All overlaps were examined to discover if they reflected a sense of interruption or cooperative talk; only a very small percentage of overlaps in the four editions were cooperative. In addition, in this setting, cooperation with one host or guest almost invariably meant disagreement with the opposing host and/or guest. As a result, even those overlaps which were cooperative still resulted in an increased sense of disorder. For this study, then, overlapping was defined as simultaneous talk of any sort. Latching was defined as talk by a new speaker which immediately follows the prior speaker's talk, with no noticeable pause separating the two turns. Latching appears frequently in the *Crossfire* data, and was thus included as a potential disagreement index. The coding of latching, as with overlapping, had increased scores if more than two speakers latched or overlapped simultaneously, allowing the score to reflect an increasing sense of verbal cacophony in a given section of talk if many overlapping speakers were involved.

While overlapping and latching were initially recorded separately, it was decided that collapsing the categories provided a more useful index of the quick, chaotic pace evident in different sections of the data. Both features reflect similar functions—engaged dialogue and a general competition for the floor. The categories of overlapping and latching were thus combined into a single category labeled *flow*. A high flow score indicates a fast, furious pace with many speakers vying for the floor, and little, if any, hesitation between speakers.

All instances of indexical second-person pronouns (*you, your, yourself, and yourselves*) were included in the next feature. Only indexical uses were

included in the counts in an effort to tap into involvement with an interlocutor, as well as to capture the accusational sense of second-person use (Connor-Linton 1989). Instances of *you* which occurred in the discourse marker *you know* were not counted. Neither were generic uses of the second-person pronoun. In cases in which the referent was unclear, and could have been either generic or indexical, the pronoun was counted.

Possibility, necessity, and prediction modals, as well as semi-modals, were included not only because the literature suggests them as possible disagreement indices (Biber 1988), but also because frequency counts show that they occur often enough in *Crossfire* to allow a study of their roles in disagreements.

Repetition, which may signal a challenge or a struggle for the floor (Boggs 1978, Goodwin and Goodwin 1987), was initially counted at the lexical, phrasal, clausal, and sentential level. In the final analysis, these categories were collapsed. In this study, repetition did not need to be exact to be counted. False starts, when produced by a speaker not overlapped by another, were not counted as repetition. Repeated linguistic features, such as modals, second-person pronouns, and questions, were counted both as modals, for example, and as instances of repetition, reflecting the multifunctionality of the features.

Questions can work to constrain an addressee's response and thus index potential conflict (Harris 1984, Drew and Heritage 1992). All interrogative sentences (with subject-verb inversion and/or *wh*-question markers) were counted as questions. Sentences which might, from context, appear to be questions but were ambiguous were not considered questions.

Turn length, measured in number of words per turn, is a potential index of disagreement. For the purposes of this study, a new turn was considered to occur with each change in speaker. The feature of turn length was selected because, in heated exchanges in the data, turn lengths appear to be shorter than they are in nondisagreement talk (such as introductions) or in less intense disagreement sections of the data. Some turn lengths were shorter because of overlapping; other short turns simply reflected briefer talk. In calmer disagreements, longer turns seem to occur. The differences in turn length were felt to be a possible indicator of disagreement, and perhaps even an indicator of different types of disagreement.

A close examination of *Crossfire* yielded a number of places in which participants side-stepped their previous interlocutor's questions or topics. These instances were labeled *uptake avoidances*,⁶ the final feature to be discussed. The following question and non-answer, about illegal immigration, provides an example.

- (1) BB: Where did they get the five million from?
 DS: Well, first of all, the lady in the harbor has a book in her left hand. The rule of law is what matters here. (*Crossfire*, ‘The Immigration Debate’)

While the overall frequency of uptake avoidances was not great, they were counted in order to see if they revealed any patterns in relation to other linguistic features, or in relation to types of different disagreements. Ambiguous instances, where it was unclear if the addressee were deliberately avoiding his/her interlocutor’s topic, were not counted as instances.

2.4. *Selecting the unit of analysis*

The next step in the study was to locate a reliable unit of analysis. One of the primary difficulties with a study of disagreements is how to locate boundaries of disagreements with any measure of reliability. While we may all recognize intuitively when we are involved in a disagreement, or when we hear one, objectively stating that a given disagreement begins and ends with specific sentences is problematic. Furthermore, selecting disagreements as the unit of analysis in a study defining disagreements creates a process of circular definition. To select and bound the fuzzy unit of ‘disagreement’, the analyst would need to decide—intuitively or otherwise—a priori what constitutes a disagreement in order to study what constitutes a disagreement, which leaves the researcher having worked circularly. The analyst must, then, either consider other possible units of analysis or find a second means, preferably empirical, of locating disagreements which can complement her intuitive sense of where a disagreement begins and ends.

Episodes, topics, turns, and disagreements themselves were all considered as possibilities for units of analysis.⁷ In the end, turns—defined as change of speaker—were selected as the *initial* unit of analysis because this minimized analyst bias in bounding the unit of study, and was inclusive of all data. Turns can only be an initial unit of analysis, however, because disagreements typically occur across turns.

In brief, each linguistic feature was coded for its occurrence in every turn in the data. This created a graphic representation of the usage of the linguistic features in the transcripts. The graphic representation enabled the empirical location of blocks of adjacent turns with activity in at least two of the features. These blocks of turns were then checked against the transcripts for an intuitive confirmation of whether, in fact, a disagreement existed in these blocks. In the end, 56 blocks of turns were located, becoming the 56 disagreement sequences taken as the final units of

analysis. This resulted in a database of 13,224 words, or 74 percent of the original database of 17,738 words.⁸

2.5. *Locating disagreement types*

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted on the 56 sequences. The qualitative analysis involved perusal of the data, highlighting different features to examine their use and co-occurrence. Two disagreement types emerged during this work, distinguished primarily by two characteristics: the implicit or explicit nature of the disagreement, and a corresponding degree of conversational turbulence, which seemed stronger in the explicit disagreements, arising, it seemed, from the occurrence of multiple speakers, short turns, and raised voices. These two types of disagreements were labeled *backgrounded* and *foregrounded* disagreements, to reflect the relative implicitness or explicitness of the disagreements within them. These disagreement types were considered to exist on the poles of a continuum; between the two poles were *mixed disagreements*, which combined characteristics of the two.

The quantitative analysis sought to uncover patterns of linguistic use within and across the sequences. Normalized frequency scores for the twelve linguistic features were calculated for each sequence, allowing a comparison of feature frequencies across the sequences. The length of each individual turn within the sequence was noted, and an average turn length of each sequence was derived as well, to allow comparison. To verify if, in fact, the types of qualitatively located disagreement did manifest empirical differences, two raters divided the 56 sequences into the three types (backgrounded, mixed, foregrounded), and descriptive statistics were calculated for the three types, as presented in Table 3. Descriptive statistics validated the intuitive sense of raters that different types of disagreements were appearing in the data.

At this point, investigation of the sequences required that a system be devised for analyzing the linguistic feature usage. Earlier, when examining the graphical representations of activity, the process of locating sequences began by noticing that a block of turns had an obvious use of features X, Y, and Z. But now that the sequences were located, the investigation into similarities and differences between sequences required more than just stating that one sequence uses more of feature X, and less of features Y and Z, than another sequence. How much *more* made a difference? A system needed to be devised which could make distinctions between different types of disagreements and yet still reflect the variation within disagreement types.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics by disagreement type^a*

Number of sequences Feature	Disagreement type					
	Backgrounded		Mixed		Foregrounded	
	8 mean	s.d.	15 mean	s.d.	33 mean	s.d.
Average turns/sequence	7.4	2.6	10.3	3.1	12.4	6.3
Average words/turn	53.5	19.8	27.7	15.2	17.3	8.5
Negation	2.8	1.2	2.6	1.0	3.8	2.0
Flow	1.0	0.6	2.2	1.4	4.4	2.1
Questions	0.8	0.3	1.1	0.7	1.6	0.9
Uptake	0.3	0.3	1.0	1.2	1.4	1.6
Repetition	1.5	0.5	1.6	1.6	3.4	2.3
Discourse particles	1.4	0.4	1.7	1.4	2.0	1.3
2nd-person pronouns	1.4	1.1	2.3	1.9	3.6	1.6
Emphatics	0.7	0.5	1.0	0.7	1.0	0.8
Modals	1.5	0.5	2.1	1.2	1.9	1.5
Floor bids	0.3	0.2	0.8	1.4	1.3	1.5
Absolutes	1.3	1.1	0.9	1.0	0.7	0.8

^aThese frequency counts are normed per hundred words.

2.6. *Selecting feature strengths*

To gain a sense of how frequently individual features were used in the 56 sequences, graphs were created for each linguistic feature. These graphs depicted the frequency of a feature, for example, negation, showing the placement of all 56 sequences. This graphing allowed the depiction of the range of usage for each feature, and the distribution of sequences at different points in the range. Negation, for instance, had a normed range of 0.5 to 8.2 instances per 100 words. The sorted data graph for this feature showed if there was a relatively fluid movement across that range, or if many sequences bunched together at some point or points on the normed score axis. Graphs were created for each feature in order to gain a sense of the distributions of sequences across the ranges of each feature. This was important in order to understand what scores seemed common for a linguistic feature among the 56 sequences and what scores appeared marked.

The bar graphs for individual linguistic features were used to help make decisions about cutoff points for what characterized a feature's use as *strong*, *moderate*, or *weak* in these data. To remain stringent about

assigning the label of *strong*, and thus to secure robust findings with this exploratory methodology, the cutoff point for each feature allowed less than a third of the 56 sequences to be labeled *strong*.⁹

Table 4 lists the ranges of those features included for study in this research. The table also indicates what frequency indexes a given feature as strong, moderate, or weak in these data.

The scoring of the strength of the features in Table 4 is not uniform, e.g., a coding of *strong* on one feature (e.g., *repetition*) indicates that it occurs four times or more per hundred words, while a *strong* on another feature (e.g., *floor bids*), indicates that it occurs three times or more per hundred words, and a *strong* on *questions* is indexed by a normed score of two or more. This variation in the scoring reflects the variations in range (*repetition* ranges from 0 to 11.2, while *floor bids* range from 0 to 6.1, and *questions* from 0 to 3.5), as well as the relative distributions of the sequences within a feature (e.g., the 56 sequences for a feature could have bunched together at the low end of the range, dispersed evenly, or grouped at several different points), and is intended to most accurately index the strength of the feature. This system of indexing the strength of a feature allows a depiction of the variation of use of that feature within the data.

2.7. *Locating patterns of disagreement*

Having derived a system for labeling a feature's strength *within* an individual sequence as strong, moderate, or weak, the next task was to

Table 4. *Ranges and strengths of the features^a*

Feature	Range	Strong	Moderate	Weak
Repetition	0.0–11.2	≥4.0	2.0–3.9	0–1.9
Flow	0.3–9.2	≥4.0	2.0–3.9	0–1.9
Negation	0.5–8.2	≥4.0	2.0–3.9	0–1.9
2nd-person pronouns	0.0–7.1	≥4.0	2.0–3.9	0–1.9
Floor bids	0.0–6.1	≥3.0	1.5–2.9	0–1.4
Modals	0.0–5.8	≥3.0	1.5–2.9	0–1.4
Discourse particles	0.0–5.5	≥3.0	1.5–2.9	0–1.4
Uptake avoidance	0.0–5.4	≥3.0	1.5–2.9	0–1.4
Questions	0.0–3.5	≥2.0	1.0–1.9	0–0.9
Absolutes	0.0–3.0	≥2.0	1.0–1.9	0–0.9
Emphatics	0.0–2.9	≥2.0	1.0–1.9	0–0.9

^aThe features are listed in descending order, based on their range. Scores are frequency counts normed per hundred words.

devise a means of comparing feature use *across* sequences. As a result, a table resembling Table 5 was created. The table developed for the actual study, of course, included data from all 56 sequences.

Sequences were then compared to locate similar patterns of feature use. In Table 5, for example, Sequences 1, lines 215 to 230, and 2, lines 62 to 83, share strong scores for flow, questions, and second-person pronouns; moderate scores for negation, repetition, and modals; and weak scores for uptake avoidance and floor bids.

Rigor was achieved in identifying *patterns* across disagreements by requiring sequences to have strong scores on a minimum of two features in order to be considered for further analysis. This restriction, along with others to be described shortly, was made to ensure that the findings discussed in this exploratory study reflect only the most salient patterns of linguistic features within disagreements in these data.

Two further decisions were made about sequences selected as examples reflecting recurring patterns. To ensure robustness, at least four of the 56 sequences had to share at least two strong features to be considered a pattern. This choice was made to focus on the most pronounced patterns within the disagreement sequences, and to reject patterns which might appear solely by chance. In addition, sequences had to come from at least two different transcripts. This last criterion was included to eliminate the possibility that any located patterns reflected individual linguistic styles, or interactive styles among specific individuals on a single program.

The three criteria already mentioned define a disagreement pattern. Thus, sequences which shared similarities in features were considered to form a disagreement pattern when: (1) at least four disagreement

Table 5. *Comparing feature strengths^a*

Sequence	1: 215–230	2: 62–83
Negation	M	M
Flow	S	S
Questions	S	S
Uptake avoidance		
Repetition	M	M
Discourse particles	M	
Second-person pronouns	S	S
Emphatics	S	
Modals	M	M
Floor bids		
Absolutes		M

^aS = strong; M = moderate; blank = weak.

sequences shared a minimum of two strong features, and (2) at least two transcripts were represented in the four disagreement sequences.

To facilitate comparison, the disagreement patterns were also given strong, moderate, or weak scores on features. A strong score for a linguistic feature within a pattern meant that 100 percent of the sequences which comprise that pattern must have strong score on that feature. A moderate score for a feature within a pattern meant that all sequences within the pattern had moderate or higher (strong) scores. A pattern was scored as a *tendency* if 70 percent of the sequences within the pattern had a moderate or strong score on a feature. The creation of the category of ‘tendency’ allows for a description of features which tend to occur within a pattern, but are not uniformly utilized within the sequences within a pattern, thus allowing an exploration of variation in usage. The methodology outlined here located three different patterns of disagreement sequences, all of which occurred among the foregrounded disagreements. No backgrounded or mixed disagreement sequences met the criteria.

3. Findings

This article will now focus on foregrounded disagreements, and specifically on the three patterns located within the foregrounded sequences.

3.1. *Patterns within foregrounded disagreements*

The three patterns located within the 56 sequences were named *collegial disagreements*, *personal challenge disagreements*, and *personal attack disagreements*. Table 6 indicates which linguistic features characterize the three patterns.

Table 6. *Patterns within foregrounded disagreement*

Feature strength	Pattern A: Collegial disagreements	Pattern B: Personal challenge disagreements	Pattern C: Personal attack disagreements
Strong	flow, questions	questions, negation	negation, flow, repetition
Moderate	repetition	flow, repetition, emphatics	second-person pronouns
Tendency	negation, discourse particles, modals	second-person pronouns, modals	discourse particles
Number of sequences	10	5	4

Of the 56 original disagreement sequences, seventeen fit into patterns, as defined by the criteria described in Section 2.6. Two sequences met the criterion for more than one pattern: one sequence fit into Patterns A and B, and the other sequence fit into all three patterns, hence the total of nineteen sequences in Table 6. This overlap of sequences which occur in multiple patterns is possible because the categories, as constructed, are inclusive, not mutually exclusive, reflecting the complex, multifunctional nature of linguistic features.

Each individual pattern will be discussed, with an example provided. To help gain a sense of the linguistic configuration of the patterns, Table 7 provides the descriptive statistics for the three patterns.

The descriptive statistics illustrate some notable differences between the three patterns, for example, in negation, which increases from 3.4 occurrences per hundred words in Pattern A to 5.8 per hundred words in Patterns B and C. Yet the descriptive statistics can also fail to reveal differences. In some instances, numbers which are similar across the three patterns do not demonstrate that the features are often used in dramatically different ways, creating differences in the experience of the observer, and presumably of the interlocutors. Qualitative analysis revealed that three features (repetition, questions, and second-person pronouns) varied notably in functions across the three patterns, and needed further description and quantitative analysis of those functions in order to illustrate variation across the patterns, as will be discussed in the next section.

Table 7. *Descriptive statistics for Patterns A, B, C*

Feature	Pattern A: Collegial disagreements		Pattern B: Personal challenge disagreements		Pattern C: Personal attack disagreements	
	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.
Turns/sequence	15.0	5.4	11.8	8.0	12.0	3.4
Words/turn	12.6	3.4	23.1	12.1	13.4	1.6
Flow	5.9	1.9	4.0	2.3	5.9	0.5
Repetition	5.3	2.7	4.3	2.2	5.4	0.7
Negation	3.4	2.2	5.8	1.3	5.8	1.6
Questions	2.4	0.5	2.3	0.4	0.8	0.9
Second-person pronouns	(3.2)	(1.7)	4.3	2.1	4.5	0.9
Discourse particles	2.3	1.6	(1.6)	(1.3)	2.8	2.0
Modals	2.3	1.5	2.3	1.5	(2.7)	(2.5)

Note. Parentheses indicate that that feature did not receive a rating of *strong*, *moderate*, or *tendency* in that pattern. Frequency counts are normed per 100 words.

3.2. *Functional variation*

Repetition, questions, and second-person pronouns demonstrated varying functions in the transcripts, and were thus subdivided into categories to reflect these different uses. Repetition, for example, appears to have three primary functions in these data: (1) to emphasize or elaborate on a point, (2) to refocus the talk on something the speaker wants topicalized, and/or (3) to attempt to gain the floor or have one's voice heard because of overlapping speech.

Repetition is often used for emphasis, to stress an idea, as in the following sentence.

- (2) [Flying] is *absolutely, absolutely* safe. (*Crossfire*, 'The FAA in the Hot Seat')

Repetition may also be used to focus the talk on a topic, as when LN repeats the negatively loaded word *scandal* as she attempts to get the participants to focus on her topic of choice, a topic which was ignored earlier:

- (3) But let's just talk about the INS *scandal*. Isn't this a *scandal* for the INS to fudge its figures? (*Crossfire*, The Immigration Debate)

The third function common in these data was repetition to be heard amongst overlapping voices. While this brief discussion might imply separation between these functions, it is recognized that linguistic features are multifunctional. For the purposes of this study, however, repetitions were coded for only one of the three primary functions just listed.

The capacity for multifunctionality is also true of questions and indexical second-person pronouns. Questions were subdivided along the lines of the four primary functions which occurred in these data: (1) floor bids, (2) rhetorical questions, (3) information solicits, and (4) challenges (both personal and impersonal). Floor bids function as a means of asking for the floor. Rhetorical questions, as defined in this study, are those questions for which an interlocutor does not appear to expect, or does not allow, an answer, and which have embedded in them a simple and obvious answer, as in the following example.

- (4) How many people do you want to die before you think it's [i.e., drinking and driving is] okay? (*Crossfire*, 'Drinking and Driving Legally')

Information solicits may be real questions, questions for which the interlocutor does not have the answer. They may also be questions soliciting opinions, often taking the structural form of negative interrogatives such as *Isn't it*, *Wouldn't he*, or *Don't you+verb*. Via their form, these questions imply consensus with the speaker's expressed viewpoint, which an interlocutor is then asked to confirm or deny.

As challenges, questions may be impersonally or personally oriented. An impersonal challenge is directed to the interlocutor's viewpoint or evidence (e.g., *How do they know that?*). In contrast, a personal challenge is defined as an attempt to discredit the integrity of the interlocutor and thereby his argument. For example, in 'Muzzling Clarence Thomas', LC challenges BP's consistency on an issue, asking, 'Where were you *then*, Bill Press?' As with repetition, questions were coded on the basis of their primary function, selected from one of out of these four categories.

The indexical second-person pronouns in these data demonstrated a continuum, moving from a neutral indexing (e.g., *Let me ask you a question*) to reflecting a more engaged and mildly hostile involvement (e.g., *Now you say what he's doing is right*), to strongly oppositional, accusational reactions towards interlocutors and their ideas. They, too, were coded based on their primary role.¹⁰ The use of strongly oppositional, accusational indexical second-person pronouns will be illustrated in section 3.5.

3.3. Pattern A: Collegial disagreements

Pattern A, named collegial disagreements, is marked by strong scores on flow and questions, the moderate use of repetition, and a tendency towards the use of discourse particles, modals, and negation (see Table 6). An example of a collegial disagreement follows, taken from 'The Immigration Debate', 7 July 1996. For ease of reading, a few of the important features (discourse particles, modals, and negation) have been italicized to illustrate their use in this example. See the Appendix for transcription conventions.

(5) Example of Pattern A

- 1 LC: = *But*— *but* Dan's point is the IMPORtant one. Why are we
 2 having this silly ARGUMENT about people who are in the
 3 country ILLEGALLY?
 4 [*Shouldn't* our goal —
 5 BB: [*But* they're here, Lynne.
 6 LC: —be to deport illegal aliens? =

- 7 FS: = *Well*, of course, it *should* be, *but*
 8 [let's go after the parents. Let's do it—
 9 LC: [*Well*, then, why have this argument? =
 10 DS: = *But* let's *not* do
 11 anything that [works. That's what you're —
 12 FS: [Let's do it—
 13 DS: —saying. It's all rhetoric. It's all
 14 rhetoric. The lady in the harbor has a book in her left hand.
 15 It stands for the rule of law. =
 16 FS: = Come on. [Let's do it at the border.
 17 DS: [The rule of law is what matters in [this.
 18 FS: [Let's do it at the workplace.
 19 [Let's do it with visas.
 20 DS: [If the rule of law is jeopardized—
 21 [

Frequent overlapping and latching (lines 1, 4–12, and 15–21 in this example), mixed with many short turns, give Pattern A disagreements a chaotic, fast-paced air, as multiple voices compete simultaneously for the floor. Longer turns, if they exist, tend to be near the beginning of the sequence and to provide the bulk of the context around which the disagreement erupts.

Questions, while frequent (lines 1–3, 4 and 6, and 9), tend to be aimed at gathering information, making a point rhetorically, or impersonally challenging an interlocutor's viewpoint or evidence. Impersonal challenging questions, in fact, are twice as likely as personal challenges in Pattern A (0.6 per hundred words versus 0.3). The general tendency for questions in Pattern A is to raise issues for debate (lines 1–3, and 4 and 6), not to attack an interlocutor personally. Questions (as well as statements) may be repeated as interactants work to drive home their points. Emphatic repetition is also common in Pattern A (2.6 occurrences per hundred words, versus a score of 1.4 for refocusing repetition, and 0.6 for repetition to have one's voice heard).

Discourse particles, modals, and negation tend to occur in Pattern A but are not uniformly strong characteristics. The discourse particles investigated in this study function to indicate opposition and contrast, and are often prominently placed at the beginnings of turns (lines 1, 5, 7, 9, and 10). Modals are often used to add weight or urgency to comments (e.g., *I've got to tell you ...* in a different excerpt) or to add a sense of implied consensus or coercion to statements (e.g., *We ought to ...*).¹¹ Possibility modals are slightly more frequent in Pattern A than necessity or prediction modals, and particularly occur in questions or

statements which raise or debate hypothetical scenarios (e.g., *Can you admit ...?* or *Well, of course it should be* in line 7 of the example of Pattern A).

Negation, when it occurs in Pattern A, tends to be in the form of negative interrogatives: *Shouldn't our goal ... ?* (line 4), or when interlocutors indicate what they *don't* want or *don't* do. In the former, negation demonstrates an expectation of implied consensus, and in the latter functions as a rejection of ideas. Because Pattern A disagreements tend not to contain fierce personal attacks, there is a concomitantly lesser need for rebuttal, and thus the negation which accomplishes denials and rejections.¹² This contributes to the diminished use of negation here, relative to the other patterns in these data.¹³

Disagreements in Pattern A are vigorous, and yet moderate. Interlocutors may be fervent about making their points, but they do not tend to attack their interlocutors. They may even interject humor in the midst of a disagreement, thus mitigating the sense of opposition.¹⁴ Because of the moderate nature of these disagreements, they were named collegial disagreements.

3.4. Pattern B: Personal challenge disagreements

This pattern has two strong features, questions and negation; a moderate scoring on flow, repetition, and emphatics; and a tendency towards the use of second-person pronouns and modals (see Table 6). Example (6) comes from the 'Muzzling Clarence Thomas' edition. Emphatics, second-person pronouns, modals, and negation are italicized.

(6) Example of Pattern B

- 1 AW: [Let me *just* make a point. We're *not* here today to talk about
 2 Justice Thomas's legal opinions. We're here— <laughter> and
 3 I concur with *you*. I want to concur with *you*. *You're* right.
 4 Justice Thomas *should* have been allowed to speak before those
 5 students. What do they have to fear? But let me ask *you*— Do
 6 you feel, in spite of all that *you've* said about this man, that he
 7 *can* be a role model for s- some young child out there who *so*
 8 desperately needs leadership in their lives?
 9 JM: A role model in *inconsistency*? A role model in tr- traitorism
 10 and betrayal? *NO*. I think that he's a civics lesson, but *not* a
 11 role [model].
 12 AW: [But you know, given how people are disgusted with *you*
 13 at times, you're a role model because I know *your* heart and
 14 *you* have a good one [and I think

- 15 JM: [Armstrong, *you're not* going to soften me
 16 up by being [nice to me.
 17 AW: [But I think *you're— No, no, no*. I'm *not* being
 18 nice. I *just* think *you're* bigger than this, and I'm shocked to
 19 hear *you* say to America that this man *can't* be a role model.
 20 This man has worked hard [to get where he is today.
 21 [

In Pattern B, interactants move between having moderately long turns in which they voice their opinions to very short overlapped turns in which they compete with each other for the floor and for control of the topic. There is a marked increase in number of words per turn in Pattern B (23.1 versus 12.6 in Pattern A, although the standard deviation also rises dramatically, to 12.1). Overlapping and latching concomitantly decrease (from 5.9 occurrences per hundred words to 4.0). In Pattern B, repetition and emphatics are utilized as speakers work to have their ideas and opinions heard and attended to. While the primary focus on emphatic forms of repetition in Pattern A decreases in Pattern B, the actual use of emphatics themselves increases in Pattern B. Modals tend to be used as well in Pattern B, displaying similar distributions among necessity, possibility, and prediction modals as found in Pattern A.

A key difference in Pattern B is a change in the type of questions asked, and in a rise in use of second-person pronouns, and particularly in accusational uses of pronouns. Questions to solicit information drop slightly (to 0.4 per hundred from 0.7 in Pattern A), but challenges increase (from 0.9 per hundred words in Pattern A to 1.5 in Pattern B). The types of challenges are also different, with 0.3 personal challenges per hundred words in Pattern A rising to 1.1 personal challenges in Pattern B.

Accusational uses of second-person pronouns accompany the rise in personal challenges (see Table 8). In Pattern A, strongly accusational uses of second-person occurred 1.2 times per hundred words; in Pattern B that increases to 3.2 per hundred.¹⁵ The large number of overtly confrontational questions in Pattern B, combined with a tendency towards accusatory second-person pronoun use, contributes to negation playing a prominent role in Pattern B, as interlocutors deny and rebut comments. The name *personal challenge disagreements* was given to Pattern B to reflect this emphasis on confrontational questions.

3.5. *Pattern C: Personal attack disagreements*

Pattern C is characterized by strong scores on negation, flow, and repetition, a moderate score on second person, and a tendency

Table 8. *Second-person pronouns across all patterns^a*

Type of second-person pronoun	Pattern A	Pattern B	Pattern C
Neutral	1.2	0.7	0.6
Mildly hostile	0.7	0.7	1.2
Strongly accusational	1.2	3.2	2.6

^aFrequency counts are normed per hundred words.

towards discourse particles. Negation and second-person pronouns are italicized.

(7) Example of Pattern C

- 1 JM: The fact here is that Clarence Thomas is a represent-
2 reprehensible HYPOCRITE who benefited from affirm-
3 ative action programs and then turned his back on them.
4 He, FURTHERMORE, when you READ the CONtext
5 of these decisions, is EXTREMELY *not* only mean spir
6 [ited—
7 LC: [*But- but* =
8 JM: =*but- No*. <hand up, as *Stop*> *But inaccurate*.
9 He SITS and talks about, *well*, uh, there's, a stigma to be
10 attached to affirmative action. What about the stigma to
11 UNemploy [ment? I mean, when you look at the glass ceiling—
12 LC: [*But- but* let's get back to the
13 subject [at hand.
14 JM: [*No*. Because he =
15 LC: = *You* want to talk about whether
16 *you disagree* with Justice Thomas, and I COMPLETELY
17 understand that *you* do.
18 [I don't think our—
19 JM: [*But- so you're* trying [to change the—
20 LC: [I don't think our viewers are [in
21 doubt.
22 JM: [So
23 *you're* trying to flip the question =
24 LC: = *No*, I -
25 JM: —to ask me about
26 intellectual diversity.
27 LC: I am try [ing —
28 JM: [*No* one—
29 LC: —to get to the subject of the program and,

- 30 Julianne, *you're* trying to pretend that **YOU** are the
 31 soul of moderation <Head back, eyes big, voice mocking>
 32 [and that *you* are =
 33 JM: <high pitch> = *No*, I'm *not*.
 34 LC: a defender of free speech. *You* once said that *you* wished
 35 Clarence Thomas would DIE an early death. Of ALL the
 36 venomous things that I have heard said about Justice Thomas,
 37 **THAT IS** [the worst.
 38 [

Short turns characterize Pattern C (13.4 words per turn, standard deviation of 1.6), with a correspondingly high occurrence of overlapping and latching (5.9 occurrences per hundred words). Competition for the floor is fierce, and not surprisingly, the use of repetition to have one's voice heard dominates in Pattern C (1.9 instances per hundred words, up from 0.6 in Patterns A and B). As in Pattern B, negation is frequent in Pattern C, often occurring to deny accusations (e.g., line 33: *No I'm not*). Discourse particles also appear in this pattern, often showing up sentence-initially (lines 7, 8, 12, and 19) as a means of rebuttal.

Pattern C is characterized by confrontational uses of second-person pronouns (e.g., lines 30–31: *you're trying to pretend that YOU are the soul of moderation*). Mildly hostile uses increased from 0.7 occurrences per hundred words in Patterns A and B to 1.2 in Pattern C. Pattern C contains 2.6 uses per hundred words of strongly accusational pronouns; less than in Pattern B (3.2) but more than double the rate for Pattern A (1.2).

What particularly marks Pattern C as different from Pattern B is the relative absence of questions. Where interlocutors used questions to challenge each other in Pattern B, in Pattern C, interlocutors personally attack each other (and third parties) via statements (lines 1–5, 8, 30–32, and 34–37). It is as if the gloves are off—the social nicety of indirect criticism which may occur in questions has been replaced by bold statements and negative labels (e.g., *reprehensible* and *venomous*) (see also Rees-Miller 2000: 1094). Interlocutors engaged in Pattern C disagreements, named *personal attack disagreements*, display notable affective involvement, often accompanying their blunt language with looks of shock, narrowed eyes, and/or dramatic gestures.

4. Conclusion

This empirical investigation of disagreements suggests that disagreements vary in type, and locates two primary types of disagreement: backgrounded and foregrounded. These two types appear to

exist on a continuum. Within the realm of foregrounded disagreements, three patterns emerged (collegial disagreements, personal challenge disagreements, personal attack disagreements), comprised of different linguistic constellations, which appear linked to a continuum of escalating hostility.

The study offers the first descriptive statistics of multiple linguistic features co-occurring within, and thus indexing, disagreements. It also is the first to provide quantitative and qualitative investigations of different disagreement types. The study thus provides an important quantitative starting point for research aiming to identify the linguistic makeup of conflict talk.

The findings in this study, although empirically supported, are still best regarded as tentative at this stage. First, the database is limited in both scale and provenance. In addition, as there is no comparative database (other than Biber 1988) against which to compare the frequency of features, an innovative and exploratory methodology had to be created to analyze the data. Future research, particularly as we move more towards computer-based analyses of large corpora, may reveal different patterns than those discovered in this study. A logical focus for future research is to do empirical analyses with large databases, preferably large enough to allow inferential statistics. Future research may pose additional questions as well, such as whether and how language use in disagreements varies by gender or by participant role, and how such factors might interact. In doing such work, cultural and ethnic variability in conversational styles would need to be considered (Tannen 1984; Reisman 1974). Talk in public versus private settings could also be examined, as well as differences between dyadic and multiparty disagreements.

Despite its limitations, this study contributes a model for the analysis of disagreements, and can be placed within a growing body of discourse analyses which use substantive data and conduct empirical analyses in addition to qualitative ones. With the growth of this type of research, statements about language use should become more reliable as researchers produce empirical verifications of their intuitive and qualitative interpretations.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

[Overlapping speech
=	Latching
-	False starts, stutters
—	Speech broken off or interrupted

CAPS	Indicates increased stress or increased volume
<i>CAPS</i>	Highest level of stress or volume; extremely emphatic
<i>italics</i>	Indicates the linguistic feature under discussion
< >	Side comments indicating prosodic or visual information

Notes

1. This study only includes editions in which two hosts and two guests interact face-to-face. Similarly, the study controlled for other variables by only including editions which were produced in the television studio without a studio audience present.
2. Scott (1998: 99–104) more fully discusses the impact of televising on talk.
3. Scott (1998: 52–83) includes three multipage tables which list linguistic features which may index disagreement, cites the source who mentions the feature, and briefly notes its hypothesized role in disagreements.
4. Features which were discarded may well play roles in disagreements; however, their infrequent or idiosyncratic occurrences in these data makes it inappropriate to offer any representative comments about their functions. Interpretations would have been suspect.
5. While differences in strength are associated with affixal versus nonaffixal negation (with nonaffixal *not* negations being weaker than *no* negations, for example), and with contracted versus noncontracted negation, this study did not explore negation at that level of analysis, nor did it examine different functions of negation (Yaeger-Dror 1985, 1997).
6. The concept of uptake avoidance has been discussed under a variety of labels, including ‘lack of uptake’ (Ochs 1979), ‘nonresponse’ (Pomerantz 1984b), ‘agenda shifting’ (Greatbatch 1986), ‘unilateral topic transitions’ (Fairclough 1989), ‘side-stepping’ (Clayman 1993), and ‘evasion’ (Galasinski 1996).
7. Scott (1998) discusses difficulties with each of these concepts.
8. The remaining 26 percent of talk primarily consists of introductions of participants and topics as well as transitions between topics.
9. While it is possible that a lower score could appropriately depict a given feature as *strongly* represented in a disagreement sequence, it was felt that a stricter standard would be more fitting, as no comparative analyses with other databases, such as conversation, existed except for Biber’s corpus, which did not include all of the linguistic features included in this study.
10. It might prove interesting to use these finer-grained distinctions in types of repetition, questions, and second-person pronouns to locate initial patterns of disagreements, but this process is seen as beyond the scope of this project, in part due to the small database.
11. The use of first-person plural pronouns works similarly in lines 1 and 4 of the Pattern A exemplar.
12. The infrequent use of indexical second-person pronouns, especially accusatory ones, may also play a role in the low use of negation. In part, this low use of second-person pronouns seems a result of the topic of many of the disagreements being third parties or abstract issues.
13. Note, however, that while negation occurs only 3.4 times per hundred words in Pattern A, this is higher than Tottie’s (1991) finding of 2.7 occurrences per hundred words in spoken language. The increase in negation here is likely to be a result of the fact that this is disagreement talk.

14. Most of the humor in these data comes from the hosts, who probably use humor as one means of maintaining a stable ongoing working relationship when their job requires that they regularly and publicly disagree with each other. Humor, however, is not common.
15. This exemplar of Pattern B happens to include several second-person pronouns coded as neutral (line 2)—functioning, in this instance, to be supportive of the interlocutor.

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