

**Quarrel:  
On some characteristics  
of the speech genre**

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**Abstract**

The present article focuses on the sphere of conflict in human communication. The aim of the research is to identify a number of tactics of conflict communication and the means of their verbal expression applied by interactants within the speech genre of the quarrel on the basis of conflicts or quarrels identified in contemporary British drama. Plays written by representatives of in-yer-face theatre have been chosen as the materials for the present research. Both the secondary speech genre of drama and the primary speech genre of the quarrel it absorbs tend to render the peculiarities of human interaction precisely. The foundation upon which the discussion develops is provided by G. Leech's (1983, 2014) ideas concerning the Politeness Principle and the maxims it embraces, as well as P. Brown and S. Levinson's (1987) notion of positive and negative face. The research data revealed that the interactants tend to violate the maxim of Approbation, Opinion-reticence, Modesty and Generosity as tactics of conflict communication; both the negative and positive faces of the interactants become threatened in the course of conflict communication.

**Keywords**

maxim of the Politeness Principle, negative face, positive face, speech genre, tactic of conflict communication

## **Une dispute: sur quelques caractéristiques de ce genre du discours**

### **Résumé**

Le présent article se concentre sur la sphère du conflit dans la communication humaine. L'objectif de cette étude est d'identifier quelques tactiques de communication en cas de conflit et les moyens de son expression verbale employés par les intervenants dans le genre de la dispute, en s'appuyant sur des conflits et des disputes identifiés dans le théâtre britannique contemporain. Les pièces écrites par les représentants du théâtre « in-yer-face » ont été choisies pour constituer le corpus de la présente étude. Le genre second du théâtre, ainsi que le genre premier de la dispute qu'il comprend, tendent à rendre les particularités de l'interaction humaine de manière très précise. La discussion est fondée sur les idées de G. Leech concernant le principe de la politesse et les maximes qu'il comprend (1983, 2014) et sur la notion de la face positive et négative de P. Brown et S. Levinson (1987). Le corpus analysé a montré que les intervenants tendent à violer les maximes d'approbation, de réticence d'opinion, de modestie et de générosité comme des tactiques de communication en cas de conflit. Les faces positives, ainsi que les faces négatives des intervenants sont menacées au cours de la communication conflictuelle.

### **Mots-clés**

face négative, face positive, genre du discours, maximes de politesse, principe de politesse, tactiques de communication en cas de conflit

## **Kłótnia: O niektórych cechach charakterystycznych tego gatunku mowy**

Niniejszy artykuł omawia sferę konfliktu w ludzkiej komunikacji. Badanie miało na celu identyfikację taktyk komunikacyjnych stosowanych w sytuacji konfliktu oraz charakterystycznych dla nich środków językowych używanych przez uczestników interakcji w ramach kłótni jako gatunku mowy. Jako materiał badania wybrano konflikty

i kłótnie przedstawione we współczesnych brytyjskich dramatach przedstawicieli nowego brutalizmu. Zarówno dramat jako wtórny gatunek mowy, jak i zawarta w nim kłótnia jako pierwotny gatunek mowy, dokładnie oddają specyfikę ludzkiej komunikacji. Podstawę teoretyczną wywodu stanowią koncepcje zasady uprzejmości i wynikające z niej maksymy zaproponowane przez G. Leecha (1983, 2014), jak również pojęcie pozytywnej i negatywnej twarzy P. Brown i S. Levinsona (1987). Badanie wykazało, że uczestnicy interakcji naruszają maksymy aprobaty, powstrzymywania się od wydawania opinii, skromności oraz szczodrości; podczas sporu zagrożona była zarówno pozytywna jak i negatywna twarz jego uczestników.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

gatunek mowy, maksymy zasady uprzejmości, negatywna twarz, pozytywna twarz, taktyka komunikacji w sytuacji konfliktu

## **1. Introduction**

In the works of such scholars as Paul Grice (Grice 1991), Geoffrey Leech (Leech 1983, 2014), Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson (Brown and Levinson 1987), human communication has been extensively studied from the perspective of a person's desire to cooperate and the inclination towards harmonious interaction. However, it would seem that further investigation is needed in the sphere of so-called disharmonious or conflict communication. Conflicts defined as situations "in which actors use conflict behaviour against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility" (Bartos and Wehr 2002:13) are an indispensable feature of human existence; they are ubiquitous, unavoidable and multi-faceted; whether grounded biologically or socially, they permeate every sphere of our life and are inevitably explicated verbally. That is why in the present study human interaction is viewed through the prism of its immanent conflictual nature.

The present article aims at defining certain characteristics of the speech genre of the quarrel in terms of the conflicting tactics applied by interactants and the verbal means of their

expression within the realms of conflicts, or quarrels, realized in contemporary British drama. The novelty of the research lies in the fact that the speech genre of the quarrel has never been studied from the perspective of the tactics that comprise it and through the prism of the characteristics pertaining to Anglo-Saxon speech practices.

## **2. Theoretical background**

The theoretical foundation upon which the discussion develops is provided by Grice's Cooperative Principle with its constitutive maxims (quantity, quality, relation and manner), which, if observed, ensures the achievement of the primary purpose a spoken exchange is adopted to serve, i.e., a maximally effective exchange of information; by the Politeness Principle, which postulates that "interactants, on the whole, prefer to express or imply polite beliefs rather than impolite beliefs" (Leech 2014:34), polite beliefs being favourable to the other person and impolite beliefs being unfavourable to the other person; the maxims of Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, Sympathy it embraces, as well as second-order Irony and Banter Principles alongside with the maxims of Obligation, Opinion-reticence and Feeling-reticence later added by Leech, and Brown and Levinson's ideas concerning a person's "negative" and "positive" face being the two aspects of the person's "face", the so-called public self-image every adult member of a society wants to claim for himself. According to these scholars, "people cooperate in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 63) and the desire to minimize the threat exerted by certain face-threatening acts, such as, e.g., expression of strong negative emotions, insults, accusations, criticism, etc., since, according to Brown and Levinson, "any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat" (1987: 68).

### 3. Some notes on previous research into speech genres

The problem of speech genres was first articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1987) and since then has been a perennial source of inspiration for such linguists as Vadim Dementiev (Деметьев 2010), Konstantin Sedov (Седов 1997, 2003, 2009), Jana Rytņnikova (Рытņникова 1997) and Anna Wierzbicka (1997).

According to Bakhtin, relatively stable types of utterances whose use is determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication should be referred to as speech genres (Bakhtin 1986:61). Another Russian linguist Konstantin Sedov compares communication within a speech genre to the scenario of a *commedia dell'arte*, “which implies a certain degree of improvisation despite the fact that the parts of the actors are defined quite precisely” (here and further all translations from Russian in the paper are mine, JK) (Седов 1997).<sup>1</sup>

The genre of drama should be included among secondary speech genres which in the process of their formation “absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion” (Bakhtin 1986: 62). Within the context of the present study, the speech genre of the quarrel defined by Sedov as “a speech genre which reflects and shapes typical situations of domestic socio-psychological conflicts in terms of verbal and non-verbal signs” (Седов 2007)<sup>2</sup> appears to be the primary speech genre absorbed in drama, which in its turn tends to render the peculiarities of human interaction accurately. According to Dementiev, the speech genre of the quarrel should be regarded as a phatic speech genre directly contributing to the deterioration of hu-

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<sup>1</sup> Жанры общения в этой связи уместно сравнить со сценарием комедии дель арте, в которой роли актеров заданы дотаточно четко, однако развитие действия предполагает различную меру импровизации.

<sup>2</sup> Ссора – это речевой жанр, который отражает и оформляет в знаковых (вербальных и невербальных) формах типические ситуации бытовых социально-психологических конфликтов.

man relations and aiming at the expression of certain nuances of interpersonal relationships rather than at exchanging information (Дементьев 2010: 215). The study of a particular speech genre can contribute to the understanding of the peculiarities of a particular speech practice within a particular culture, since “all speech-genres are culture-specific and provide an important source of insight into communicative routines most characteristic of a given society” (Wierzbicka 1985: 2). Sedov expresses a similar idea by saying that “the system of speech genres formed in a particular language situation reflects the system of socio-psychological norms and principles of behaviour within the realms of a particular culture (ethnos) (Седов 1997)<sup>3</sup>.

#### **4. The definition of terms used in the paper**

By a *conflict*, or a *quarrel*, we mean an episode of confrontational or disharmonious interaction among personages, which is initiated by the addresser demonstrating his/her hostile or aggressive intention towards the addressee, or when the addresser sends a signal to the addressee concerning the incompatibility of certain his/her and the addressee’s cognitive structures. In her attempt to define a quarrel in terms of a universal set of semantic primitives, Wierzbicka suggests the following set of formulas: “I know that you think of Z something different from what I think// I say: you think in the wrong way// I am saying that because I want you to tell me that you were saying the wrong things” (Вежбицка 1997),<sup>4</sup> which clearly demonstrate that a quarrel originates from a sit-

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<sup>3</sup> Система речевых жанров, сложившихся в той или иной языковой ситуации, в полной мере отражает систему социально-психологических норм и принципов поведения в рамках той или иной культуры (этноса).

<sup>4</sup> Знаю, что ты думаешь о Z нечто другое, чем я говорю: ты думаешь плохо говорю это, потому что хочу, чтобы ты сказал, что ты говорил плохо.

uation where the mental representations of the interactants do not coincide.

Since, according to Leech, “the Principle of Politeness (PP) – analogous to Grice’s CP – is a constraint observed in human communicative behavior, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain or enhance communicative concord or comity” (Leech 2014: 87), we regard conflict interaction as being deprived of the interactants’ polite intentions. Thus, by the *conflict tactic* applied within the genre of the quarrel we mean a move within an episode coinciding with the breach of one of the aforementioned maxims and usually accompanied by an attack on face.

## 5. The materials

A non-experimental method of data collection has been applied in the study. Plays by David Eldridge and Philip Ridley, representatives of In-Yer-Face theatre, have been chosen as the materials for the present study. In-Yer-Face theatre is characterized by blatant language, heightened emotions, the questioning of moral norms, the smashing of taboos, and mention of the forbidden. According to Sierz (2000: 6), “In-Yer-Face theatre always forces us to look at ideas and feelings we would normally avoid because they are too painful, too frightening, too unpleasant or too acute”. All domestic quarrels identified in the plays result from a pre-conflict stage; the relationships among the interactants, therefore, imply a certain degree of intimacy and freedom from ethical constraints.

## 6. The tactics applied by the interactants

On the basis of the quarrels identified in the plays of the aforementioned playwrights the following conflict tactics have been detected.

In the majority of cases under analysis the interactants tend to demonstrate their inclination toward a conflict mode of interaction by means of violating the Maxim of Approbation, whose essence is formulated as “(a) Minimize dispraise of *other* [(b) Maximize praise of *other*]” (Leech 1983: 132) accompanied by the breach of the Maxim of Opinion-reticence, which, when observed, implies avoiding the imposition of one’s opinion, since “there is a low tolerance of opinionated behavior, where people express themselves forcefully, as if their opinions matter more than others” (Leech 2014: 97). Consider the following examples:

- (1) NICK: *You’re the most important person to me in the world. But I don’t know if I love you. I don’t know if I can love you. If I’m capable of loving you.*  
 HELEN: *You arsehole. You fucking arsehole. Why are you torturing me like this? I can’t talk any more. I feel so exposed.*  
 (David Eldridge, *Under the Blue Sky*, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 201)
- (2) BETH: *That’s your bloody fault! I was trying to help you and you have to go and cause an argument!*  
 SHERRY: *Why can’t you just let me get on?*  
 BETH: *You bloody pig-headed cow!*  
 SHERRY: *You can’t just let me get on with my life!*  
 BETH: *I was just trying to help you.*  
 (David Eldridge, *Summer Begins*, Act 1, Scene 2, p. 104)

In examples (1) and (2) the addresser trades derogatory remarks, such as insults, accusations, and complaints, performs an expressive act aimed at the conveyance of negative emotions towards the addressee, his/her actions, abilities, thoughts, etc., thus threatening the addressee’s positive face,

whose essence can be accounted for as “the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). Such swear words as *arsehole*, or animal metaphors and obscene expletives, such as a *bloody pig-headed cow*, are used to express a range of negative emotions – anger, irritation, annoyance, and add an aggressive emotive charge. They contribute to the addresser’s attack on the addressee’s positive face and should be regarded as emotional aggravators.

The breach of the Maxim of Approbation alongside the violation of the maxim of Opinion-reticence can have a very strong conflict-escalating effect and might even lead to a physical encounter as a non-verbal equivalent of confrontational interaction, as in:

- (3) *JACKIE: Once in a blue moon you come and see us, and you don’t even take your coat off and sit down. You don’t never have anything to eat when I offer it. You don’t take no interest in anything me or Barry’s got to say. We have to watch what you want on the telly when you come round. Or you switch it off. Our telly. In our home. And do you think I don’t know what you said about me when Barry told yer we was getting married. And even when your Uncle Len was dying you never bothered to come and see him. Above Basildon I expect. Waltzing about the place like your shit don’t stink. You’re a stuck up cunt, that’s all you are and that’s all you’ll ever be.*

*Shelley goes for Jackie and the family struggles to pull them apart.*

(David Eldridge, *In Basildon*, Act 3, p. 80)

In example (3) the addresser performs illocutionary acts of reproach, an accusation and an insult, thus creating an atmosphere dangerous to positive face. By using taboo terms alluding to bodily excretion, e.g. *shit*, and physical sex, e.g. *cunt*, the addresser achieves a most aggravated effect and exacerbates the threat to face.

In the following example the addresser signals her confrontational intention by the violation of the maxim of Generosity, which in this particular quarrel takes the form of a threat:

(4) *HELEN: You're not leaving me. I'll kill you. I'll kill you right here and now.*

*NICK: No, you won't.*

*HELEN: I will. I'll put this right through your heart.*

*NICK: If you really loved me you wouldn't hurt me like this.*

(David Eldridge, *Under the Blue Sky*, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 209)

Not only does the addresser flout the maxim of Generosity, but she also attacks the addressee's negative face, referred to as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). It appears that the value of personal autonomy defined as a premium value in modern Anglo-Saxon culture (Wierzbicka 1985: 54) is no longer upheld within the realms of a quarrel and conflict communication in general.

It has been observed that the breach of the maxim of Modesty can also be applied by interactants as a conflict tactic. According to the maxim of Modesty, we should give low value to our own qualities and tend to self-devaluate (Leech 2014: 91), whereas, in the following conflict episode, the addresser is boasting of the immense benefit her husband has gained in marrying her, thus lowering his self-esteem:

(5) *JACKIE: You're no fun anymore Barry. There's a lot of men would love it on a plate like you get it. I never turn you down. Even when I'm on the blob.*

*Barry shakes his head.*

*JACKIE: I'm always up for it. And at one time so were you. I don't know what's happened to you Barry.*

*Silence.*

*JACKIE: And don't think I don't get offers. Men always fancy me. I could go out and get sex like that –*

*She clicks her fingers.*

*BARRY: Well fucking go and get it then and see what happens.*  
(David Eldridge, *In Basildon*, Act 2, p. 29)

By giving high value to her qualities the addresser commits the social transgression of boasting, simultaneously attacking the positive face of the addressee.

In the quarrels analyzed above the addresser sends direct unambiguous signals concerning his/her confrontational intentions, whereas conflict episode (6) illustrates the application of an indirect conflict tactic, that is, the Irony principle, which “boosts the face of the ironist while attacking the face of the target *O*” [*O* = other person(s), mainly the addressee] (Leech 2014: 235):

(6) *COUGAR: You're only jealous – Oww! There you go again. What is this? The baldy's revenge?*

*CAPTAIN: Don't, Cougar. Please.*

*COUGAR: You must walk round with a pair of tweezers in your pocket. Then, when you see a man with a healthy head of hair, on a bus or something, or when you're walking through the park, or in your junk shop – sorry! antique shop! – you creep up behind them and pluck out a few hairs.*

*CAPTAIN: Stop it, Cougar. It's not funny. It's hurtful.*

*COUGAR: You should set up your own little society. You know, the Bald Phantom Hair Pluckers or something like that. You get together once a month – when the moon is full, or something – and compare how many hairs you've managed to pluck.*

*CAPTAIN: I'm not laughing.*

*COUGAR: Well, I am! It's fucking hilarious! I can imagine it now. When ... when you become a member you're given – not a comb, but a piece of cloth and some polish and ... and you all sit there having skin-polishing contests.*

(Philip Ridley, *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*, Act 1, p. 17)

Having in mind the close relationships the interactants are involved in, one might think that the case under analysis might be indicative of banter which could lead to a “polite” (or rather “camaraderic”) (Leech 2014: 238) interpretation of the overt impoliteness. But, as a matter of fact, the addressee’s reactions prove the fact that the addresser is intentionally expressing a mocking, scornful and contemptuous attitude, thus causing offence by applying the Irony principle, “which maintains courtesy on the surface level of *what is said*, but at a deeper level is calculated to imply a negative evaluation” (Leech 2014: 100). Thus, alongside the application of the principle of Irony, or mock politeness, the addresser also violates the maxim of Approbation, since he mocks the addressee’s baldness; flouts the maxim of Quality by giving insincere advice and at the same time damages the addressee’s positive face.

## 6. Conclusions

On the basis of the analysis of thirty quarrels identified in contemporary British drama, the following conclusions concerning the characteristics of the speech genre of the quarrel can be drawn:

- The breach of the maxim of Approbation and the maxim of Opinion-reticence applied as conflict tactics are prevalent. By flouting the aforementioned maxims the addresser does not tend to minimize the “dispraise” of the addressee; the expression of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, accusations and insults inevitably threaten the addressee’s positive face and initiate confrontation.
- The violation of the maxim of Modesty, when the addresser does not avoid being complacent and attacks the addressee’s positive face; and the breach of the maxim of Generosity in the cases when a threat to perform a harmful physical action towards the addressee is provided by the addresser as the last and strongest argument thus creating a dangerous-to-negative-

face atmosphere, have also been detected in the plays under analysis.

- The application of the Irony principle alongside the flouting of Grice's maxim of Quality accounts for the indirect strategies applied within the speech genre of the quarrel.

To sum up, the socio-psychological background against which quarrels unfold implies heightened emotions and the transgression of social codes. What is more, the speech genre of the quarrel can be characterized by the extreme vulnerability of the interactants' both positive and negative faces, and the fact that the value of personal autonomy, being the premium value of modern Anglo-Saxon culture, is rarely implemented.

It is undeniable that the present research cannot boast completeness or depth and should be regarded as a modest attempt to delve into the complexity and versatility of the issue under discussion.

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**Materials**

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