information services
gwasanaethau gwybodaeth

The construction of conflict talk across workplace contexts: (towards a) theory of conflictual compact

Abstract

Studies of conflictual workplace discourse are rare, both in language-awareness research and discourse analysis more generally, owing partly to the difficulty in gaining access to such interactions, and arguably to the relative rarity of conflictual discourse occurring at work. The topic is therefore both under-analysed and under-theorised. Drawing on data in the form of meeting transcripts and spoken and written interview data from three separate corpora of workplace communication, this study analyses how conflict is linguistically and discursively constructed across a range of different professional contexts. Our contribution to language awareness, and to discourse analysis, is threefold. Firstly, the close analysis of meeting data pinpoints a range of linguistic features that can constitute conflict at work, which then form the basis for a novel categorisation. Secondly, the combination of interactional data with interview data demonstrates the awareness professionals may bring when considering the issue of communication and conflict, and its ramifications for successful collaborations. Finally, the proposed theory of conflict can provide explanatory depth to awareness of conflictual discourse, explicating why workplace discourse may be more likely to turn conflictual in certain contexts, and not in others.

Introduction and literature review

We start this paper with three premises concerning communication in workplaces:
1. Workplaces are saturated with problems, and dealing with problems is one of the defining features of all workplaces
2. Most of these problems do not lead to conflict
3. Conscious understanding of conflict can benefit the development of appropriate communicative and professional practices

On the first point, while workplace problems may be ignored or discussion of them postponed (Boden, 1994), there is considerable management and linguistic research which highlights the plenitude of, and engagement with, problems at work (Pounds, 1969; Firth, 1995; Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004; Vine, 2004; Koester, 2006, 2010; Handford, 2010; Handford and Matous, 2011; Ayoko 2016; Holmes and Stubbe, 2016). On the second premise, workplaces seem to function best when conflict is not allowed to escalate (Angouri, 2012; Handford, 2010; Holmes and Stubbe, 2016), and while there is evidence to suggest that some workplaces may feature higher levels of impoliteness than others, such as Culpeper's seminal work on the military (Culpeper, 1996), it is demonstrated below that impoliteness itself does not entail conflict. Similarly, while disagreement may be a pre-requisite for conflict to occur, disagreement is not synonymous with conflict (Angouri, 2012). The third point concerns the potential impact of professional discourse analysis in actual workplaces: by making explicit tacit discursive practices (Nonaka, 1994), in this case concerning conflict, a greater degree of conscious communicative awareness can benefit

both novice and expert practitioners in achieving their transactional and interpersonal goals at work.

While there have been several studies that have explored impoliteness (Mullany, 2008; Schnurr et al., 2007 and 2008), mock impoliteness (Schnurr et al. 2008), disagreements (Angouri, 2012; Marra 2012) at work, there is relative neglect of the study of 'conflictual workplace talk', i.e. unfolding work-related spoken interactions where at least two interlocutors take an adversarial stance towards each other, involving the use of what we call 'adversarial features,' and signalling a divergent framing of the interaction (see below). Our definition draws on Vuchinich (1990): "In verbal conflict, participants oppose the utterances, actions, or selves of one another in successive turns of talk" (p. 118). However, our focus is specifically on workplace talk, hence the "selves" are some type of professional or institutional identity, and the "actions" concern transactional work-related issues.

Key discursive and sequential characteristics of such verbal conflict are identified in some early seminal studies (Coulter, 1990; Kotthoff, 1993; Muntigl and Turnbull, 1998) and are described and illustrated in the methodology section below. Turning to institutional settings, conflict talk has received attention within some specialised contexts, including media discourse (Greatbatch, 1992; Gruber, 1996), legal discourse (Conley and O'Barr 1990) and police work (Bousfield, 2008). Fewer studies deal with conflictual workplace discourse within business settings. These include O'Donnell's (1990) study of conflict in talk between labour and management, Handford and Koester's (2010) comparison of conflictual discourse in different businesses and Svennevig's (2012) analysis of a case of "spiralling hostility" in emergency phone calls. While conflictual workplace discourse, as defined here, involves disagreements about workplace tasks, Handford and Koester's and Svennevig's studies show that the conflict can spill over onto and affect the relationship. When this happens, it seems to contribute substantially towards the perception by the interlocutors that the interaction has become conflictual.

Disagreements are very common in the workplace and not necessarily conflictual (Angouri, 2012; Marra, 2012), frequently occurring in the context of problem-solving and decision-making, where they may indeed play a positive role in reaching solutions. Angouri (ibid.) shows that disagreement in external meetings from two businesses is not negatively marked, but perceived as 'normal', and that arguments which are task rather than person oriented tend not to be seen as conflictual. In our paper, we will also argue that the relationship between the participants plays a key role in the development and trajectory of conflicts. Impoliteness, on the other hand, involves an attack on the interlocutor's face and, therefore, does impact rapport (Culpeper, 2008; Locher and Watts, 2008), but it does not necessarily result in conflictual discourse[1]. Conflict is interactive, involving at least two participants, and the interlocutors need to agree to 'do' conflict, that is to enter into a 'conflictual compact', as explained in the Methodology below.

This paper has two main aims: to demonstrate a methodology for analysing potentially conflictual discourse that draws on and extends earlier studies, and to propose a theory that accounts for the range of contextual features that may be relevant when discourse turns

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[1] See Koester 2017 for a detailed discussion of conflict vs. disagreement and politeness.

conflictual at work – that is, it aims to explain why workplace discourse may be more likely to turn conflictual in certain contexts. The paper thus aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Are there any further linguistic and discursive features that index conflict which have not been identified in previous research?
2. How is conflict linguistically and discursively constructed across a range of different professional contexts?
3. How can the differences in conflict between contexts be accounted for?

In terms of our contribution to studies of language awareness, this is one of a few studies in a language awareness publication to focus on authentic spoken business interactions (Fung, 2007; Singy and Guex, 1997; Koller, 2018; see Codó, 2018), encompassing both L1-L1 and BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca) interactions, the first, to our knowledge, that explores conflict at work. Our contribution to this field, and to discourse analysis more widely, is through 1) the close analysis of meeting data to both demonstrate and unearth a range of linguistic features that can constitute conflict at work, which then form the basis for a novel categorisation, 2) the combination of interactional data with interview data to demonstrate the awareness professionals may bring when considering the issue of communication and conflict, and its ramifications for successful collaborations, and 3) a proposed theory of conflict that can provide explanatory depth to awareness of conflictual discourse. A further aim of the research is to raise explicit awareness of the contextually nuanced nature of workplace interactions, an area that is under-researched in the language-awareness field (Koller, 2018). The theoretical and empirical contribution of this research can thus provide the foundation for a theoretical framework for the development of awareness-raising programmes in different types of organisations. In other words, the analysed data and proposed theory of conflict allows for greater awareness of conflictual discourse, explicating why workplace discourse may be more likely to turn conflictual in certain contexts, and not in others. Therefore, along with the other articles in the special issue, we intend to demonstrate how professional contexts are potentially rich sites of study for raising awareness of language in use, rather than primarily for language learning and teaching. As such it is a response to Donmall's (1992) call for more language-awareness research into "the world of work and issues in language-sensitive professions" (p. 2).

Methodology

Data
This paper draws on data in the form of meeting transcripts and spoken and written interview data from three separate corpora of workplace communication: CANBEC, ABOT and CONIC. CANBEC (The Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus, see Handford, 2010) contains one million words of spoken business interactions, with 90% from meetings. These are from a wide range of industries, company sizes, and departments. Approximately a quarter of the data is from inter-organisational (external) meetings, and the remainder from intra-organisational (internal) meetings. ABOT (The Corpus of American and British Office Talk, see Koester, 2006) is a small corpus (about 34,000 words) of American and British office talk representing a range of spoken genres, including informal

meetings. CONIC (The Construction Industry Corpus, see Handford 2014) contains around 300,000 words of spoken interactions, from both the design and construction phases of the industries. There are just over 180,000 words of meeting data, which is drawn on in this study. The corpus is also supplemented by over 200,000 words of written and visual documents (such as construction plans, agendas, and diagrams), and about 25 hours of interviews. Whereas the interactions from CANBEC and ABOT are largely from L1-L1 interactions, CONIC features a high number of ELF interactions. Furthermore, while CANBEC and ABOT feature audio recordings, CONIC contains both audio and video recordings of interactions. To our knowledge, the combined corpora are one of the largest and most varied collection of transcribed authentic spoken workplace interactional data in existence, and allow us to rigorously examine the discursive construction of conflict at work, and the relationship between conflict and context.

In our earlier study of metaphors and idioms in conflictual workplace interactions (Handford and Koester, 2010), we pinpointed two meetings from CANBEC and ABOT which featured, compared to the other meetings in the corpora, a high degree of conflictual metaphors and idioms. Besides metaphors and idioms, the two meetings also displayed a high frequency of other linguistic and discursive features indexing conflict. In this study, the two meetings are re-analysed to pinpoint all 'conflictual' features (see methods), and compared to extracts from two meetings from CONIC, which are particularly dense in 'conflictual' features compared to other meetings in CONIC. For this study, we carried out a complete and systematic analysis in all four meetings of features indexing conflict. A reason for examining construction industry interactions is that, despite construction communication being characterised as adversarial (Emmitt and Gorse, 2003), there is little research on actual construction discourse (Handford and Matous, 2011; Angouri, 2012; Handford, 2014; Tsuchiya and Handford, 2014). It therefore seems reasonable to hypothesize that conflict may be evidenced in the construction-industry meetings from CONIC. Table 1 shows some background features of the meetings. The roles of the relevant participants is outlined in the analysis section.

Table 1: Meeting background features

Meeting number	Industry	Number of participants	Inter- or intra-organisational	Topic
1	Drinks industry	2	Inter-organisational	Contracts
2	Printing	2	Intra-organisational	Client complaint
3	Construction	16	Inter-organisational	Bridge design
4	Construction	17	Inter-organisational	Tunnel construction

Methods
This paper investigates what is argued to be an important difference between potentially conflictual linguistic and discursive features (hereafter termed 'adversarial features') and

conflict talk. The use of adversarial features, both linguistic and discursive (for instance interruptions or face-threatening metaphors) does not in itself signal the presence of conflict talk: for the interaction to be deemed conflictual at least two parties need to be taking up an adversarial stance, as in the following exchange from meeting 1:

Extract 1:

1.   Peter   And the rent's (1 second) *stupid*. So.
2.   John   Not as stupid as I was *trying* to make it.

In other words, there is a difference between speakers' using adversarial features, and a situation or context being conflictual: for instance, if A verbally attacks B, but B then responds in a more conciliatory manner, then this is obviously a qualitatively different situation to where both/all interlocutors are using confrontational language towards each other. Extract 1 is an instance of an opposition format (Kotthoff, 1993), an adjacency pair where the second turn uses a salient item of language or concepts from the preceding turn to reject the force of the first turn. We argue that for a situation to be conflictual, both parties have to, paradoxically, enter what we term a 'conflictual compact' (as seen in extract 1), following McCarthy's (1998: 32) definition of compacts as 'co-operative sets of behaviour'. It is paradoxical because mutual engagement is required for the discourse to be conflictual – hence the use of the term 'compact'.

The present study will examine what linguistic and discursive features are indicative of conflictual compacts through a comparison of four meetings in different contexts. By 'professional context', we mean industry type, meeting type (external or internal), relationship between the speakers, relationship between the organisations, L1 or ELF status of the interlocutors, the professional social distance between them, and their individual roles and status in the organisation.

Drawing on previous research, several linguistic and discursive features that can index conflict in interactions are pinpointed.

Figure 1: Conflictual features identified in earlier research:

Interactive (turn-taking) features
- Claim – Counterclaim (Muntigl and Turnbull, 1998)
- Preference for disagreement, i.e. disagreements are direct and unhedged (Kotthoff, 1993)[2]
- Opposition formats (Kotthoff, 1993)
- Speaker change at disagreement relevance place (DRP), rather than transition relevance place (TRP) (Gruber, 1996)
- Pauses in and between turns (Boden, 1994)

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[2] This involves a reversal of the usual preference structure, in which disagreements are dispreferred, displaying features such as delays, hesitations and accounts.

Prosodic features (Gumperz, 1982)
- Exhale, e.g. sighing
- Intake of breath (inhaling)
- Emphatic stress

Lexico-grammatical features (Koester, 2006; Handford, 2010; Handford and Koester 2010**)**
- Metaphors and idioms
- Lack of vagueness
- Performatives and metalanguage
- Strong deontic modals ('must', 'have to', 'should')
- Intensifiers, exclamation, expletives (swearing)
- Evaluative lexis

While the above features have been identified as "conflictual", we will use the term 'adversarial features', as we will be arguing that the presence of such features does not necessarily mean that the interaction is conflictual. Within the context of workplace interactions, we hypothesize that the presence of the first three interactive features does in fact signal a conflictual compact has begun. On the other hand, the other features, while frequently signalling conflict talk, may also occur without a conflictual compact being in place; in other words, they are types of adversarial features. All four meetings in question are coded for these features, allowing for comparison across the different professional contexts. Previous research on conflict talk has focused on a more restricted range of features, for example only interactive features. This is the first study to take an holistic approach in that it examines all linguistic, interactive and discursive features in the spoken workplace interactions, and evaluates whether or not they are types of adversarial features. Through this process, several original types of adversarial features are unearthed, thus extending our understanding of conflict talk.

Furthermore, the analysis of whole meetings allows for the degree of conflict to be compared, and thus to ascertain whether one interaction is more conflictual than another. One indication of a high degree of conflict is a clustering of adversarial features across a series of turns; another is the use of 'extreme' language involving face-threatening acts, such as bald insults which clearly have no ironic or humorous intent. Also, what we term the 'flow of conflict' can be examined: the degree of conflict itself can ebb and flow during the course of the meeting. The analysis demonstrates that conflict can spiral up or down, during the unfolding discourse, in other words, the degree rises or falls. In meetings 1 and 2, we show that conflict does indeed 'spiral up' over the course of the meetings, and in one of the meetings this climaxes with the use of mutual insults. This does not happen in a linear manner, as there are accounts and other linguistic features which seem like (unsuccessful) attempts to de-escalate the conflict. In meetings 3-5, we can also observe a variable use of adversarial features, but no clear 'conflictual compact' emerges.

Compared to the other meetings in CANBEC and ABOT such 'spiralling up' of conflict is very much the marked form; this is because the norm in meetings is for disagreements (a pre-requisite step for conflict) to be de-escalated (Boden, 1994: 155). Therefore, while disagreements may be commonplace in workplace interactions (see Introduction), conflict is not.

Analysis

The analysis is in two parts, with the first part examining the conflictual language and conflictual compacts in meetings 1 and 2. The second part of the analysis then examines meetings 3, 4 and 5 to determine the extent to which these might be termed 'conflictual'.

Meetings 1 and 2
Meeting 1 is an external meeting, between the Operations Director (Peter) of a UK-based pub-chain, and the Estates Manager of a multinational drinks company (John)[3]. This is the first time the two men have met, and the meeting starts with Peter welcoming John, and then signalling that he is unsure as to why the meeting is happening.

Extract 2

1.   Peter   Dive in. Grab a chair.
2.   John   Thank you.
3.   Peter   Er right now erm (1 second) John I (1.5 seconds) I er I have to say I'm er a little bit erm in the dark as to→ (1 second)
4.   John   ⌊ (laughs)
5.   Peter   → as as to what we're doing exactly. We have extremely limited (inhales) dealings with erm our tied pubs generally.

The beginning of the meeting is of note here because it is so mundane, and thus contrasts with the remainder of the meeting: it exhibits linguistic features typical of most meetings in CANBEC (Handford, 2010) and indeed other related research (Koester, 2006; Holmes and Stubbe, 2016): a mixture of positive politeness serving to demonstrate a convergent stance, such as the direct encouragement to sit down ('Dive in. Grab a chair') and indirectness when inquiring to the purpose of the visit, such as the hedges in Peter's second turn ('Er'/'right'/'now'/'erm'/'er'/'erm'/'a little bit') and the indirect metaphor 'in the dark'. The noticeable inhale (turn 5) also suggests some confusion over the visit, but as with the other features this is framed in a politic manner. By the end of the meeting, a mere 15 minutes later, both men employ explicit insults as their final exchange. The exchange also involves sarcasm and a conflictual metaphor ('You must be welcomed up and down the country'), serving to heighten the degree of divergence.

Extract 3

1.   Peter   John. (1 second) I don't envy you. You must be welcomed up and down the country.
2.   John   Well yeah. Most people are most people are kinder than you are but there you go.

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[3] The main role of an Operations Director is to increase efficiency and reduce costs working as part of an upper-management team, whereas an Estates Manager oversees the management of a selection of pubs.

Over the course of this meeting, although there are some exchanges that seem to temporarily de-escalate the conflictual compact, overall the degree of conflict continues to rise. In other words, the 'flow of conflict' spirals upwards, despite the occasional meander. The linguistic features that enable this are categorised in Figures 1 and 2, and exemplified in the extracts discussed.

Meeting 2 follows a similar 'flow of conflict' trajectory, despite contrasting with meeting 1 in terms of meeting type (internal rather than external), relationship (co-workers as opposed to strangers), and company size (small versus large). It is a meeting between the owner and managing director of a small printing company (Sid) and his office manager (Val). Val has been with the company for two years and shares an office with Sid. The company has only four employees and the general atmosphere and style of interaction is quite informal. This meeting stood out from the other interactions recorded in the same workplace in that it dealt with a particularly vexing problem and was the only one to display such a high level of adversarial features. The meeting begins with Sid soliciting advice from Val on how to solve a problem with a client who is refusing to pay for a printing job.

Extract 4

1. Sid   Can I just discuss with you about this *da:mn* label, where do you
            think we ought to go.
2. Val   ↑Uhm... ((Oh my god)) I don't- I don't- ... See the difficulty is,
            we quoted a: size, didn't we, which is what you *said you* quoted it, an' that's
            what you were *wor*king to. An' if it had been any different, they should've
            told us.

Although Sid's frustration is apparent through his use of the mild expletive *'damn',* his request is neutrally worded and polite ('where do you think we ought to go'). Val's response, though reflecting the problematic nature of the situation (e.g. the *sotto voce* exclamation 'oh my god'), is considered and hedged, displaying hesitation ('uhm'), pauses and a tag question ('didn't we') which seems to solicit agreement.

However, in the course of the meeting, as Sid repeatedly rejects all the suggestions made by Val, the discussion becomes heated, as extract 5, which occurred towards the end of the encounter, illustrates:

Extract 5

1. Val   She's- *she's* actually *say*ing, (inhales) that all of them.
            as far as she was concerned, all of the artwork sizes *changed* slightly, an' I
            said well it *can't* be that way, because... we had cutters made to the *si*zes.
2. Sid   No I'm sorry, I don't accept all this. If you give somebody an
            order, you give a- you give them an order with the sizes on it.
3. Val   ⌊↑ Well Sid, it's no good talking to me about then.
4. Sid   What?
5. Val   'Cause she's gonna stand her ground. So...

6. Sid   ⌊ And I'm standing mine, too.
(1.5 seconds)
7. Val   Well y- you probably won't get *paid* then. So *then* what.

In this exchange, there is a clustering of adversarial features used by both speakers, which evidence a conflictual compact. These include preference for disagreement in turn 2 with Sid forcefully rejecting the customer's position that Val is explaining, speaker change at disagreement relevance place (DRP) with Val interrupting Sid in turn 3, and an opposition format in turns 5 and 6, where Sid reuses Val's movement metaphor 'stand one's ground' to put forward his own position and oppose the customer's. Other features, that in conjunction with those listed, also evidence conflict include, the long pause of 1.5 seconds between turns 6 and 7, prosodic features (e.g. audible inhaling in turn 1 and frequent emphatic stress) and certain lexico-grammatical features, such as conflictual metaphor ('stand her ground'), lack of vagueness, a performative ('I don't accept all this') and metalanguage ('it's no good talking to me'). Furthermore, some turns later, a meta-discursive reference by Sid to the discussion as 'a conflict' provides evidence that the participants have awareness of the conflictual nature of the interaction.

 As in meeting 1, some off-topic exchanges (in this case informal banter) seem to allow the conflictual parties to let off steam, but overall the conflict escalates. Interestingly, unlike meeting 1, the meeting does not end in a stand-off. Although the problem remains unresolved, Val, after apparently giving up on reasoning with Sid, quips that she and her co-workers could offer to buy the company from Sid; thus the meeting ends on a lighter note. This difference in how the two meetings end is most likely due to the difference in the relationship: the participants in meeting 1 may never see each other again, whereas Val and Sid need to continue working together on a daily basis.

All the adversarial features listed above in Figure 1 occur in both meetings 1 and 2. In addition, the analysis revealed some further features indexing conflict not previously highlighted in studies of conflictual talk (see figure 2). We found not only preference for disagreement, but also a more general preference structure reversal, for example, a question followed by a dispreferred response:

Extract 6 (meeting 1)

1. Peter   Y- Have you got the agreement with you there? Or-
2. John   ⌊No.

As a positive reply to a question is normally preferred, a negative reply would be hedged and indirect within a normal preference structure. Here John's negative response is mono-syllabic and blunt. In both meetings, speakers also asked questions whose function seemed mainly to challenge rather than elicit an answer, for example:

Extract 7 (meeting 1)

1. John   Well the things cost *money*.

2.   Peter   Yeah but why are *we* paying for it?

We also identified some specific linguistic features contributing to lack of vagueness, including frequent unhedged negatives or a blunter rewording, for example in the case of a false start:

Extract 8 (meeting 1)

John   And that would be that would be correct. Er we're not really looking to (1 second) Well (1 second) we *aren't going to* vary the (1 second) proposal that we've given to you.

In consensual discourse, speakers tend to choose a softer, more indirect form when rewording after a false start, but here the opposite happens with 'er we're not really looking to' reworded more baldly as 'we *aren't going to*'. Exact repetition of self or other's words and phrases was also frequent in both meetings. Self-repetition often served to emphasize a point, whereas other-repetition was in some instances highly face-threatening, as it seemed to challenge the veracity of the interlocutor's words.

In addition to metalanguage and performatives, there were also instances of utterances that could be described as meta-discursive, for example John's comment 'not if I'm honest that I care that much', in turn 3 in extract 9 below. This involves a kind of stepping outside the discourse and providing an evaluative comment, which in this case is highly face-threatening.

Extract 9 (meeting 1)

1.   John   You know people erm *perceive* each other in different ways.
2.   Peter   Mm.
3.   John   Erm (1 second) and (1 second) I don't know how to how to break that down erm not if I'm honest that I care that much.

Performatives, metalanguage and meta-discursive comments all make 'what we are saying and doing' absolutely clear and unambiguous, in other words they make the listener aware of the speaker's conscious intention concerning the point and force of the message, and, thereby may contribute to a ramping up of conflict. As Handford and Koester (2010) note, metaphors, idioms and other formulaic expressions are used for evaluation and to express intensity in conflictual talk. At particularly adversarial moments in the two meetings, they are employed in overtly adversarial ways to challenge or attack the interlocutor, for example the question 'beg your pardon?' (meeting 1) when the speaker has clearly understood, or 'that's neither here nor there' (meeting 2), which Val uses in challenging Sid's argument.

From a functional/discursive perspective, a number of adversarial speech acts occur, including accusations, insults and sarcasm or mock politeness, hence the new 'Functions/speech acts' category (Figure 2). In the exchange which closes meeting 1 (extract

3 above), for instance, both speakers trade insults and Peter employs sarcasm: 'You must be welcomed up and down the country'.

Figure 2: Additional conflictual features identified in meetings 1 and 2

Interactive (turn-taking) features
- Other types of preference structure reversal
- Adversarial or challenging (rhetorical) questions

Lexico-grammatical features
- Lack of vagueness: high frequency of blunt negatives, blunter rewording, imperatives, direct questions
- Other and self-repetition
- Metaphors, idioms and formulaic expressions often used in adversarial ways: sarcastically, to highlight unacceptability, evaluate negatively, challenge
- (Adversarial) Metadiscursive comments (in addition to performatives, metalanguage)

Functions/Speech acts and other discursive features
- Insults
- Accusations
- Sarcasm and mock politeness
- Flippancy
- Inappropriate informality, e.g. ellipsis and tag questions

These additional adversarial features also occurred in both meetings, but the more face-threatening ones (e.g. challenging questions, sarcasm, insults) were more frequent in meeting 1. Again, the different relationship between the speakers is most likely a factor, as is the nature of the conflict, given that Sid's issue in meeting 2 is with the customer, not Val.

Meeting 3 – Bridge Design meeting

This is a multiparty BELF meeting (as is meeting 4) involving professional and academic engineers, designers, financiers and government officials from several Asian and European countries. It is the ninth such meeting, the first being held two years before. In this long meeting, which stretches over two days, one long turn of an academic engineer from the panel of experts stands out as containing a clustering of adversarial features, as shown in the extracts below.

Extract 10

Chatterjee   No thank you. I would like to respond to this comment made by the secretary.(1.0 second) Um I do not know whether a *blame game* is going on (1.0 second) but I hear *whispers* and I don't like it. (1.0 seconds) Um I will be very *straight* and *blunt*. (turn continues)

There are metaphors ('*blame game'*, 'I hear *whispers*'), lack of vagueness and negative evaluation ('I don't like it') and metalinguistic comments ('I will be very *straight* and *blunt'*) which are highly evaluative and adversarial and heightened with emphatic stress. The remainder of the turn (not shown here) is also punctuated by a number of long pauses. This extended turn ends with an overt threat:

Extract 11

Chatterjee   I have *contacts* and I *know* people I will hit back. Thank you.

Chatterjee's contribution is followed by a long pause of 3.5 seconds. The next speaker (Das, the Chair) who takes the floor responds to Chatterjee, but his language is hedged and indirect, with the exception of one metalinguistic comment ('understand my lips').

Extract 12

Das   So (clears throat) er I am happy that you would er er um I mean understand my lips and er I want that it should be settled as quick as possible.

In categorising the adversarial features found according to the four discursive types, interactive, prosodic, lexico-grammatical and functional, (see Figures 1 and 2), it is noticeable that most of these are lexico-grammatical; in fact, the only interactive adversarial features across turns are long pauses.

Meeting 4 – Tunnel Construction meeting

Meeting 4, is from a project in Singapore to build tunnels for a subway system. Alex is the Chair, and third most senior engineer on the project, whereas Kita is his senior. Arjun is a team-leader for one of the on-site labourer gangs. In interviews with the senior engineers following these meetings, there was considerable frustration expressed about the perceived tardiness and sloppiness of Arjun's team.
In this meeting, in addition to a high density of lexico-grammatical features, we find more interactive features indexing conflict, as illustrated in extract 13.

Extract 13 (Meeting 4)
1. Alex   So please our instruction.
2. Kita   *When* you start…mobilisation? /ʔ/ the way→
3. Arjun   ⌊ /ʔ/
4. Kita   →Two zero eight.
5. Arjun   Today we're moving the /ʔ/
6. Kita   When finish?
            (2.0 second)
7. Kita   *When finish*?
8. Arjun   Seventeenth.
9. Kita   Huh?
10. Arjun   Sixteenth er. June the sixteenth.

11. Kita: Six=Sixteenth /?/… Must be finished within this week. My instruction. (1.0
            second) I cannot believe your your deliberation now. Today you /?/ finish
            deliberating for one /?/ next week.

Kita's speech, in contrast to other interactions we recorded, is direct and unhedged: he uses direct questions, such as 'When finish?' (turn 6, which is repeated in turn 7), the very forceful modal verb 'must' and the highly face-threatening meta-statement 'I cannot believe your your deliberation now' (turn 11). There are also some interactive adversarial features: interruption at DRP (turn 6), the long two-second pause between turns 6 and 7, and also a claim-counterclaim pattern (turns 8-11), where Kita challenges the date for finishing ('seventeenth') first given by Arjun. However, what is striking is that the use of these adversarial features is completely one-sided. Only Kita, who is hierarchically dominant, uses them, whereas Arjun, at whom these turns are directed, does not respond in kind. Although his slowness to respond in turns 6-8 indicates some interactive trouble, when challenged, he self-repairs in turn 10, rather than reiterating his original response.

So in sum, while there is a notable clustering of adversarial features at certain moments in the construction meetings, and a range of features occur at all four 'levels of discourse' (interactive, prosodic, lexico-grammatical and functional/discursive), this does not result in conflict talk. The adversarial linguistic and interactive behavior is all one-sided (on the part of the senior speakers), and is not reciprocated by the less powerful interlocutors. In other words, the parties do not enter into a conflictual compact by opposing "the utterances, actions, or selves of one other in successive turns of talk" (Vuchinich, 1990, p. 118). In the discussion section, knowledge of the constraints of the interlocutors' professional context is evidenced through interviews, suggesting considerable conscious awareness of the difference between what we term adversarial and conflictual language.

Discussion

In the first part of this study, we carried out a complete analysis of all adversarial features in two meetings which a previous study had found to be conflictual (Handford and Koester, 2010). This led to the identification of some further adversarial features not previously discussed in the literature on conflict talk (research question 1). These, together with the previously identified features, were grouped into four 'types': interactive, prosodic, lexico-grammatical and functional. There is overlap between these categories, in particular between the functional and the lexico-grammatical categories; for example, an insult might involve the use of an expletive, or a threat might be uttered by using a performative. Despite substantial differences in professional context, meeting type and speaker relationship, almost all the adversarial features identified occurred in both conflictual meetings (meetings 1 and 2). The category framework also proved robust in analysing the extracts from the construction meetings (meetings 3 and 4). Similar adversarial features were found, though not to the same extent as in the two conflictual meetings, and they fall mostly into the lexico-grammatical category.

The analysis of adversarial and conflictual discourse in meetings across a range of professional contexts and of meeting types enables us to put forward a proposal for how

conflict is constructed in workplace interaction (research question 2). In the first part of the article, we stipulated that for an interaction to be conflictual, both parties need to enter into a conflictual compact and essentially agree to 'do conflict'. We also suggested, therefore, that the mere occurrence of certain linguistic or discursive devices which, within the context, are impolite, face-threatening or adversarial is not enough for the interaction to be deemed conflictual. The addressee of such adversarial talk needs to respond in kind by using equally adversarial discourse. We therefore hypothesized that certain interactive features that have been found to be characteristic of conflict, such as opposition formats and preference for disagreement, may be inherently conflictual, as they occur across turns and thus show that a conflictual compact has been entered into. Our findings, however, do not confirm this hypothesis. Although the interactive adversarial features were indeed far less frequent in the construction meetings (which we found to be adversarial, but not conflictual) than in the conflictual pub-chain and printer meetings, there were nevertheless some instances (e.g. claim-counter-claim) in the construction meetings. However, there was an important difference. These interactive conflictual patterns were always initiated by the senior speakers and not those lower down in the hierarchy, who also did not reciprocate when at the receiving end of such 'attacks'. Therefore, such conflictual patterns were never extended beyond an adjacency pair or short sequence. This contrasts with meetings 1 and 2, where extended interactive sparring led to a spiralling up of conflict. Our findings show that in order to identify discourse as conflictual, we need to look beyond the individual utterance or even adjacency pair and pay attention to who is doing what in the discourse.

Our findings also show that meetings from the construction industry – famed for its adversarial nature (Emmitt and Gorse, 2003; Handford, 2014) – do not feature the same degree of conflict as meetings 1 and 2, which are from other industries. This begs the question, how can apparent differences in conflictual workplace interactions be accounted for (research question 3)? In this section we will first explore some possible explanations, which we argue can be largely discounted, and then propose an original theory which we argue does account for the unearthed patterns.

One potentially relevant contextual factor concerns the number of participants. Meetings 1 and 2 are dyadic, but the construction meetings are multiparty. Nevertheless, there are many dyadic meetings in CANBEC and ABOT (Handford 2010; Koester, 2006) which do not contain commensurate levels of conflict, and there are other multiparty meetings in CANBEC which do feature opposition formats and other adversarial features (see Handford, 2010 Chapter 8). So, while meeting size in itself does not seem to be a determining factor, there is one aspect of multi-party meetings that may inhibit conflict which we will return to below. Another possible factor is the ELF nature of the construction meetings: is there something about ELF interactions that lessens the chance of conflict? There is indeed literature suggesting that ELF workplace interactions may prioritise mutual accommodation and convergence (see Koester 2010, Chapter 6), but there is also research showing that ELF interactions, in the construction industry, can feature a high degree of face-threatening other-repair (Tsuchiya and Handford, 2014). Furthermore, the question itself might imply some deficit model of ELF speakers, which we would contest: the professionals using English in the construction meetings are capable of considerable linguistic versatility, as demonstrated in the extracts.

Other possible factors that can also be discounted include the impact of whether the meeting is external versus internal. Meeting 1 is an example of the former and meeting 2 of the latter, whereas the construction meetings are a mixture of both. Given that both speakers in meeting 1 are men, and meeting 2 involves a man and a woman, speaker-sex is not considered as a potential factor in this data. However, that the construction industry may have a masculine genderlect (Handford, 2014), featuring linguistic patterns that might be considered face-threatening (Tsuchiya and Handford, 2014), and that genderlect may be relevant to conflict (Mullany, 2008), deserve further study beyond the scope of this paper. As we are comparing conflict across different professional contexts, another possible explanation could be in the different norms and practices (i.e. cultures) of each workplace or industry. We will return to this point later in discussing communities of practice, but it is noteworthy that meetings 1 and 2 display similar conflictual language and discourse, although they take place in quite different industries.

The issue of power is intuitively a strong candidate for explaining why conflict may happen. Power is defined here as the status workers have in a professional context, and/or the enablements and constraints they negotiate through discourse. It is argued here that status per-se is not in itself a clearly contributing factor: in meeting 1, while Peter's company is in a subordinate position in that it has an unwanted contract imposed upon it, Peter is in a far more senior position in his company than John. Hence the status-relationship is complex. In meeting 2, in contrast, the status difference between the speakers is very clear: Sid is the owner and boss of the company, whereas Val is an employee. Given that the two meetings contrast to such an extent in terms of power-difference, and yet exhibit such density of conflictual forms, status alone does not seem to be a key factor. This does not, of course, discount the relevance of power as it is discursively negotiated in interactions, possibly including resistance of power in meetings 1 and 2. In fact, this research is centrally concerned with the way interlocutors may negotiate constraints. But status in itself does not seem to be an explanatory factor.

Hourglass Theory:

The most intriguing pattern found in the present study concerns the contrast in degree of conflict between, on the one hand, the pub-chain and printer meetings and, on the other hand, the construction-industry meetings, and also more broadly between the other meetings in the CANBEC and ABOT corpora: what underlying pattern might explain why conflict can occur to such an extent in these two meetings, whereas it is more constrained in other 60+ meetings in the combined corpora? The most plausible explanation for the differences, it is argued here, is to do with the strength of the professional relationship between the interlocutors. Put simply, interactions are most likely to descend into a conflictual compact when there is either an intimate professional relationship or the lack of a professional relationship between the speakers. Professional relationships in between these extremes, which comprise the bulk of professional relationships and professional interactions, are argued to be less likely to descend into conflict. This may seem counter-intuitive, but it is argued here that there are plausible reasons to explain the underlying pattern.

This theory parallels Wolfson's (1986) 'Bulge Theory', but contrasts with it. Bulge Theory argues that social distance between speakers roughly falls into three categories, which comprise a continuum: intimates versus those in a clear power-difference relationship and strangers at two opposing ends, and in the middle acquaintances, co-workers, and status-equal friends. Wolfson argues that communication at the two extremes is very similar, in that it tends to be rather formulaic and short, whereas in the middle (the 'bulge') there is a much greater variety and number of speech behaviours used to perform the same speech acts. As she states, "we find again and again that the two extremes of social distance-- minimum and maximum, seem to call forth very similar behavior, while relationships which are more toward the center show marked differences"(Wolfson 1986, p. 75). Cook (1990), in discussing linguistic creativity and Bulge Theory, states that certain linguistic forms, such as imperatives or taboo words, are relatively more likely to occur between speakers at either end of the relationship spectrum.

The Hourglass Theory of Conflict proposed here to account for patterns in conflict inverts the visual image of a bulge, with conflicts more likely to occur at the extreme ends of 'social distance', which we argue is, in the context of business/organisations meetings, the relative intimacy of the professional relationship. Across all three corpora, the most conflictual meetings are those that are either between professional strangers meeting for the first time (meeting 1) or between professional intimates who have worked together in very close proximity for several years (meeting 2). On the other hand, the meetings from the construction industry (meetings 3 and 4), while containing adversarial features, such as aggressive metaphors or strong deontic modal verbs, and providing evidence for speakers taking an adversarial stance, did not descend into a conflictual compact. It should be reiterated that this is despite the construction industry being renowned for communication problems and the adversarial, non-cooperative nature of many relationships (Emmitt and Gorse, 2003; Handford, 2014). In other words, it is a professional context we could reasonably expect to feature conflictual compacts.

The notion of community of practice (CofP) (Wenger, 1998) may help further illuminate both the patterns discussed here, and the absence of CofPs in certain workplace interactions. With its emphasis on 'practice', the notion of CofP is useful in characterising norms of interaction within a workplace. The three dimensions of a CofP, according to Wenger (mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire), result in a set of norms and practices, including interactional ones, which may vary from one workplace to another. We might assume that the practices of a CofP constrain the way adversarial talk may or may not lead to conflictual discourse (see, for example, Angouri 2012). In interpreting why conflict does not spiral to the same extent as was evidenced in meetings 1 and 2, we argue that there are layers of constraints in the construction meetings that may prevent conflict becoming a compact. These include, but are not restricted to, an acceptance of adversarial communication within these communities of practice, as expressed in an interview carried out via email with a member of the Bangladesh Bridge project about professional identities,

"As for your question about the identity, I can almost confidently say that we were assuming our identities according to the *roles* assigned. For example, I am a POE member with

specialization in social safeguard. My counterpart, Dr Txxxx, for example, speaks as the safeguard group leader of the consultant team. Indeed we communicate with each other like friends (as we are) in private, but in the meeting we kind of play the roles (not necessarily saying he was the one to grill)."

In other words, the speakers may use adversarial talk ('grill'), as part of their communicative repertoire in this professional context, and an awareness of this mitigates against the descent into conflict. Related to this, another professional construction engineer, interviewed on the difference between conflict and disagreement in construction, stated that

"Interesting Q's and no easy answer as difficult to differentiate between conflict & everyday solving of problems / issues that may be judged to cause / create conflict... If for example you sat in my meetings with Client & Contractors you may view our differences as conflict whereas we just see it as problem solving."

This insight may shed light on the reputation of the construction industry as adversarial: it may well appear to be so, but the practitioners themselves perceive it as everyday problem-solving. The issue of the masculine genderlect evidenced in much construction communication (Handford, 2014) may also be a factor here. Furthermore, the subordinates in the construction meetings who do not use conflictual responses are constrained in other ways, such as less job-security than the full-time senior engineers. Such discursive and hiring practices, as with all practices, both enable and constrain communication.

The engineer interview data shows how expectations concerning identity and problem-solving help to constrain communication while ensuring it is interpreted appropriately, which we argue is typical of workplaces. It is the lack of similar CofP constraints in the top and bottom of the hourglass that allows for conflictual compacts to occur, and hence the proposed shape. At the one end of our hourglass there is a highly embedded CofP which may tolerate some conflictual talk, unlike relatively more fragile and therefore more constrained workplace contexts. Conflictual compacts may occur in an intimate professional relationship because the considerable investment of time and effort that is necessary for a professional relationship to be categorised as 'intimate' means that the interlocutors can, at interactional moments of professional import, communicate their thoughts in an unmitigated and even antagonistic manner. If the potential damage to the interpersonal relationship is considerably less than in more usual professional relationships, then such unmitigated utterances do not carry the same risks and are therefore not subject to the same constraints. For relationships at the other end of the hourglass, where there is no existing relationship between the speakers, and probably little chance of one developing in the future, then once again the risk of damaging the relationship is not relevant because there isn't one. In other words, at both ends of the hourglass we may find more conflict because the speakers are not constrained but are in fact enabled by the pre-existing relationship-status. Indeed, the lack of constraints among professional strangers is synonymous with a lack of a CofP, as it is practices that constrain.

Furthermore, while conflict cannot be directly attributed to meeting size, given that there is more chance of a variety of social distances in larger meetings than in a dyadic relationship, we may find conflict occurs more frequently in dyadic interactions; in other words, conflict could be an epiphenomenon of two-person interactions, whereas in multiparty interactions uniform social distance shared by all members is less likely. For instance, in the CONIC meetings, some participants know each other very well, and could be considered intimate, whereas other individuals share greater social distance.

A final point to consider is the possibility of conflict becoming normative in certain communities of practice. While there is discussion of the potential benefits of workplace conflict (e.g. Choi and Schnurr, 2014), it seems probable that conflict-as-practice would be highly problematic (see Andersson and Pearson, 2016), hence its rarity in professional contexts. In one CANBEC meeting, for instance, the Sales Director Ed tells a trainee salesperson that inter-departmental conflict can destroy a company.

Extract 14
Ed   It's (0.5 second) it's not something that (0.5 second) > er it's not a problem but it it's I've been in environments where that's been (1 second) I've been in environments where that's been (1 second) Well it's a downfall of (0.5 second) the companies that the technical and sales people are just not getting on.

In other words, we are arguing that for many CofPs, conflict is wisely avoided.

For a theory to be valid, it needs to have relevance beyond the supporting data in the study itself, for instance there could be evidence to support it in other independent studies in that it accounts for what has been analysed previously. As noted above, there are few studies that have explored conflictual talk in business/organisational settings, but those that have align with the theory. In a study of conflictual negotiations between labour and management, O'Donnell (1990) found that two managers with a long-term relationship - thus at the 'intimate' end of the hourglass - disagreed "in a far less formal way and with greater reciprocity" (p. 218). Two studies of aggression or hostility in call centre interactions provide some support for the theory at the 'stranger' end of the hourglass. Svennevig (2012) shows how misalignments between the caller and the operator in emergency calls led to "spiraling hostility", and Archer and Jagodziński (2015) identified aggressive or conflictual exchanges in 32 airline call centre interactions. As this study shows, workplace-specific practices and expectations can also inhibit conflict: the normative constraints under which the agents worked meant that the verbal aggression was mostly on the part of the callers.

Conclusion

This study has provided a holistic interpretation of the way conflict is constituted in business and organisational interactions through a close analysis of several complete meetings, which in turn are compared to three corpora of spoken professional interactions. In so doing, we unearthed several linguistic and discursive features that have not previously been associated with conflict. And, perhaps more importantly, we have shown that the presence

of what we term 'adversarial features', whether lexical, prosodic, interactional or functional, do not in themselves constitute conflict. Instead, conflict-flow in interactions, and conflict as a compact between participants, are explanatory concepts for understanding what conflictual discourse is, as opposed to, say, impolite communication or strong disagreement. Furthermore, an original theory is proposed to account for the tendency, observed here and also abstracted from other studies, for conflict to occur among professionals who have no previous relationship, or have a very close professional relationship. We hope that other studies in language awareness and beyond can engage critically with the proposed 'hourglass' theory, and test its validity in a wider range of workplace contexts.

We argue that our contribution to language-awareness studies is achieved through a clearer conception of the linguistic and discursive features interlocutors use in the workplace to be conflictual (or not), a triangulation of different types of data, and the importance of the professional relationship when accounting for conflict. As such, this study contributes to different areas of language awareness, for instance through addressing the relative dearth of studies on professional communication (see Koller, 2018) and on conflict in particular. Furthermore, the study contributes to pragmatics, (im)politeness studies, and discourse analysis more generally. This contribution is based on the analysis of both interactional and interview data: whereas the interactional analysis has allowed for a thorough categorisation of the types of features that can create a conflictual compact, and could form the basis for the development of awareness-raising programmes in different types of organisations, the triangulation involving the interview data indicates an awareness among expert practitioners of the difference between being adversarial and being conflictual, and how their language choice affects this. The paper thus sheds light on two areas of language awareness: greater awareness of how conflict is linguistically constructed in workplaces, and evidence of awareness among practitioners themselves when doing their jobs. In terms of how such language-awareness insights could be fed back to practitioner sites, training activities that focus professionals' attention on the various linguistic features that can allow for or prevent a descent into conflict (e.g. opposition formats, conflictual metaphors or interruptions) would be appropriate, , as well as discussion of the norms of the particular industry and organisation. An example of such training material that raises awareness of these linguistic features and provides opportunities to navigate conflict at work is published in Lisboa and Handford (2012). We therefore suggest here that language awareness would benefit from further engagement with workplace interactions, at both the empirical and theoretical levels, in order to achieve greater relevance as a field of study beyond the well-trodden pedagogical paths.

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Transcription conventions:

...	noticeable pause or break of less than 1 second within a turn
-	sound abruptly cut off, e.g. false start
italics	emphatic stress
→	speaker's turn continues without interruption
/?/	indicates inaudible utterances
⌊	overlapping or simultaneous speech (the exact onset of overlap is not shown)
( )	words in these brackets indicate non-linguistic information, e.g. pauses of 1 second or longer (the number of seconds is indicated), speakers' gestures or actions

Additional conventions for meeting 2

,	slightly rising in intonation
?	high rising intonation
.	falling intonation
!	animated intonation
↑	A step up in pitch
=	latching: no perceptible inter-turn pause
:	colon following vowel indicates elongated vowel sound
(( ))	double brackets around tone units spoken 'sotto voce' (in a low voice)

Some deviations from standard spelling for shortened words, e.g. 'an' (and), 'cause' (because)