

A Conflict Talk Analysis of Sherlock Based on Face Theory

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the response strategies in conflict talk and their role in interpersonal communication, particularly the application of face theory in the analysis of conflict talk. The research material consists of the first and second seasons of the BBC miniseries "Sherlock," focusing on the conflict talk between the main characters Sherlock and John Watson. From the perspective of face theory, the study examines the strategies employed by communicators to maintain face during conflicts and how these strategies influence the resolution of conflicts. The findings indicate that Sherlock and Watson employ a variety of response strategies in conflicts, including negative face threatening acts, positive face threatening acts, face raising acts, and medium acts. The selection of these strategies is influenced by factors such as pragmatic distance and turn-taking. The study highlights the importance of face maintenance in specific social contexts and provides valuable insights for understanding and improving interpersonal communication in real life.

Keywords

Conflict Talk; Face Theory; Pragmatic Distance; Turn-Taking

1. Introduction

In the multicultural modern society, conflict talk has become an unavoidable phenomenon in interpersonal communication. This type of verbal behavior not only reveals individual disagreements but also reflects deeper social and cultural dynamics. Face theory, as a significant branch of social psychology, provides a theoretical framework for analyzing this phenomenon. It emphasizes individuals' efforts to maintain dignity and image in social interactions, as well as their reaction strategies when face is threatened. Conflict talk in dialogue is a unique phenomenon, serving not merely as simple conversation but as a socially significant construct. In many film and television works, screenwriters skillfully employ conflict to drive the plot. This study selects dialogues between Sherlock and John Watson from the BBC miniseries *Sherlock* as the subject of analysis, exploring the application of face theory in

conflict talk. By examining the interactions between these characters, the study aims to reveal strategies for maintaining face during conflicts and the factors influencing these strategies, offering theoretical guidance for practical communication.

2. Theoretical Framework

Face theory is a social psychological theory that explores how individuals maintain and protect their face in social interactions, as well as the actions they may take when face is threatened. Face is essentially a set of desires and expectations that can only be fulfilled by others. Goffman (1959) noted that in interpersonal communication, participants engage in impression management while striving to maintain the face desired by others. Building on this theory, Brown & Levinson (1987) proposed the role of face in conversation. They categorized face into two types: negative face and positive face. Negative face refers to the desire for unimpeded personal autonomy, independence, and freedom of action—the need for one's actions to be respected by others. Positive face refers to the desire for one's attributes to be recognized and appreciated by others, reflecting the need to maintain a positive self-image and gain approval from others (Shi Xu, 2017).

3. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative analysis approach within the framework of face theory to systematically examine the conflict dialogues between Sherlock and Watson in the British series *Sherlock*. The research design section elaborates on the research questions, corpus selection criteria, and analytical methods, aiming to scientifically uncover the mechanisms of face-maintenance strategies in conflict discourse and their influencing factors, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent analysis.

3.1. Research Questions

This study, in accordance of face theory and using the first and second seasons of the BBC miniseries *Sherlock* as research material, analyzes the conflict talk between the protagonists Sherlock and John Watson from the perspective of face theory. It aims to answer the following questions:

1. What types of response strategies do communicators employ to maintain their own face?
2. How do communicators use response strategies to maintain or restore face in conflict talk?
3. What factors influence the choice of response strategies in conflict talk?

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The study selects *Sherlock* as research material for two main reasons: First, obtaining real-life data is challenging and involves privacy concerns, making fictional tele-

vision series an ideal alternative. Second, while conflict talk in film and television has been widely studied—e.g., Sun Yunwen (2008) on friendships in *Friends*, Zhao Yu (2011) on gender dynamics in *Love Defense*, Yang Xiaoli and Chen Yu (2012) on parent-child relationships in *Modern Family*, and Li Jian (2012) on doctor-patient relationships in *Grey's Anatomy*—few studies have examined colleague relationships. In *Sherlock*, Watson serves as Sherlock's assistant, making their relationship both collegial and friendly. This complexity adds uniqueness to their dialogues, providing valuable insights into conflict in multifaceted relationships. Additionally, the relational dynamics between Sherlock and Watson evolve significantly from the first to the second season, offering comparative material for analysis.

The data collection process involved the following steps: 1) Watching *Sherlock* Seasons 1 and 2 on Tencent Video. 2) Transcribing conflict talks between Sherlock and Watson based on conflict discourse features, labeling each instance with season, episode, start time, and a brief description of the conflict's theme. Sherlock is denoted as "S," and Watson as "W." 3) Classifying the conflict talk based on critical talk and response strategies, determining the resolution type for each conflict. 4) Calculating the frequency and proportion of each response type.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This study extracted eight conflict talk segments between Sherlock and Watson. Following Gao Ping's (2006) classification of response strategies in conflict talk—negative face-threatening acts (NFTA), positive face-threatening acts (PFTA), face-raising acts (FRA), and medium acts (M)—the distribution of response strategies in the series was statistically analyzed (see **Table 1**). Each strategy type is illustrated with one or more examples.

Table 1. Frequency and Proportion of Response Strategies in Conflict Talk.

Response Type	NFTA	PFTA	FRA	M	Total
Frequency	2	3	2	2	9
Proportion	22.2%	33.4%	22.2%	22.2%	100%

The table shows that PFTA occurs most frequently, indicating that threats to positive face are predominant in *Sherlock* Seasons 1 and 2. Notably, only three conflicts arise in Season 1, with neutral responses (e.g., topic shifts or vague answers) used in the first two episodes and a PFTA (e.g., rebuttal) in the third. In Season 2, six conflicts occur, employing all four response strategies. This shift reflects the evolving relationship between Sherlock and Watson, which is explored further below.

4.1. Analysis of Response Strategies in Conflict Talk

This section systematically categorizes the response strategies employed in conflict talk based on Brown and Levinson's face theory framework. Through detailed analysis of dialogue excerpts from *Sherlock*, we identify four distinct strategy types -

NFTA, PFTA, FRA, and M. Each strategy type is examined through representative examples to demonstrate its linguistic realization and pragmatic effects in conflict situations. The classification reveals how characters strategically navigate face threats while pursuing their communicative goals, providing insights into the complex interplay between face management and conflict dynamics.

4.1.1. Negative Face-Threatening Acts (NFTA)

NFTA involves threats to both the speaker's and hearer's negative face. For the hearer, commands, suggestions, or requests impose pressure, compelling compliance and restricting freedom of action, thereby threatening negative face. For the speaker, such acts also risk their own negative face by interfering with the hearer's autonomy. Let's look at **Example 1** and **Example 2**.

Example 1:

[**Context** (1-2 1:01:20): Watson is on a date with a female colleague at the theater, but Sherlock arrives to investigate a case and demands Watson's assistance.]

W: You couldn't let me have just one night off.

S: Yellow Dragon Circus, in London for one day. It fits. The Tong sent an assassin to England...

W: Dressed as a tightrope walker. Come on, Sherlock, behave!

S: We're looking for a killer who can climb, who can shin up a rope. Where else would you find that level of dexterity? Exit visas are scarce in China. They need a good reason to get out of that country. Now all I need to do is have a quick look round the place.

W: Fine. You do that. I'll take Sarah for a pint.

S: I need your help.

W: I do have a couple of other things on my mind this evening.

S: Like what?

W: You are kidding?

S: What's so important?

W: Sherlock, I'm in the middle of a date. You're going to chase some killer while I'm trying to...

S: What?

W: While I'm trying to get off with Sarah.

Sarah: Hey... Ready?

In this dialogue, Sherlock's disregard for Watson's desire to enjoy his date threatens Watson's negative face, sparking conflict. Watson's frustration escalates as Sherlock persists, exacerbating the tension.

Example 2:

[**Context** (2-2 12:54): A client seeks Sherlock's help with a case. Initially uninterested, Sherlock changes his mind upon hearing a peculiar detail and assigns the case to Watson.]

S: I'll take the case.

W: Sorry, what?

S: Thank you for bringing this to my attention, it's very promising.

W: No no no, sorry, what? A minute ago, footprints were boring, now they're very promising?

S: It's got nothing to do with footprints, John. You weren't listening. Baskerville, ever heard of it?

W: Vaguely. It's very hush-hush.

S: Sounds like a good place to start.

C: Um... you'll come down then?

S: No, I can't leave London at the moment, far too busy. But don't worry, I'm putting my best man onto it. I can always rely on John to send me the relevant data, as he never understands a word of it himself.

W: What are you talking about you are busy? You don't have a case. A minute ago, you were complaining...

S: Bluebell, John! I've got bluebell! The case of the vanishing glow-in-the-dark rabbit. NATO's in uproar.

C: Sorry, you're not coming, then?

Here, Sherlock's flippant attitude toward the case bewilders Watson, especially when Sherlock falsely claims to be busy and delegates the task to him. Watson's repeated "sorry, what?" signals his anger, but Sherlock's praise and avoidance of further threats to Watson's negative face eventually defuse the conflict. These examples suggest that NFTA does not always escalate conflict and can sometimes aid resolution.

4.1.2. Positive Face-Threatening Acts (PFTA)

PFTA involves acts that criticize, contradict, or belittle the hearer, damaging their positive self-image. Such acts signal that the speaker no longer values the hearer's positive face. Let's look at **Example 3** and **Example 4**.

Example 3:

[**Context** (2-2 42:28): Watson dismisses the existence of a "giant hound" in the case, while Sherlock insists it is real and fears it. Watson urges Sherlock to regain his composure.]

W: Sherlock... Sherl...

S: There is nothing wrong with me! Do you understand? (shouting) You want me to prove it, yes? We're looking for a dog, yes? A great big dog. That's your brilliant theory. Cherchez le chien! Good! Excellent! Yes. Where shall we start? How about them? The sentimental widow and her son, the unemployed fisherman. The answer is yes.

W: Yes?

S: She's got a West Highland Terrier called Whisky. Not exactly what we're looking for!

W: Sherlock! For God's sake!

S: Look at his jumper, hardly worn... (analyzing the mother and son) That's not cheating, that's listening. I use my senses, unlike some people, so you see, I am fine. In fact, I've never been better, so just leave me alone!

W: Yeah, ok. Ok. Why would you listen to me? I'm just your friend.

S: I don't have friends.

W: No. I wonder why.

In this dialogue, Sherlock perceives Watson's concern as a challenge to his competence, threatening his positive face. His aggressive response further escalates the conflict, leading Watson to leave in anger.

Example 4:

[**Context** (2-3 50:43): Sherlock, framed by Moriarty, is suspected by the police. After the police leave, Watson watches from the window.]

S: They'll be deciding.

W: Deciding?

S: Whether to come back with a warrant and arrest me.

W: You think?

S: Standard procedure.

W: You should have gone with him. People will think...

S: I don't care what people think. You'd care if they thought you were stupid or wrong. No, that would just make them stupid.

W: Sherlock, I don't want the world believing you're...

S: That I am what?

W: A fraud.

S: You're worried they're right.

W: What?

S: That they're right about me.

W: No.

S: That's why you're upset. You can't entertain the possibility they may be right. You're afraid you've been taken in.

W: No, I'm not.

S: Moriarty is playing with your mind, too. Can't you see what's going on?

W: No, I know you.

S: A hundred percent?

W: Well, nobody could fake being such an annoying dick all the time.

Here, Sherlock's suspicion that Watson doubts him initiates the conflict. Watson's final retort, a PFTA, halts further escalation, demonstrating that such acts can sometimes curb conflict.

4.1.3. Face-Raising Acts (FRA)

FRA involves strategies that enhance the hearer's face, such as compliments or expressions of gratitude. Let's look at **Example 5**.

Example 5:

[**Context** (2-2 52:05): Sherlock apologizes to Watson after a heated conflict the previous night.]

W: Funny doesn't suit you. Let's stick to ice.

S: John...

W: It's fine.

S: Wait, what happened last night... something happened to me. Something I've not experienced before.

W: Yes, you said. Fear, Sherlock Holmes got scared, you said.

S: It was more than that, John. It was doubt. I felt doubt. I've always been able to trust my senses, the evidence of my own eyes, until last night.

W: You can't actually believe that you saw some kind of monster?

S: No, I can't believe that. But I did see it. So, the question is, how? How?

W: Yes. Yeah, right, good. So, you've got something to go on, then. Good luck with that.

S: Listen, what I said before, John, I meant it. I don't have friends. I've just got one.

W: Right.

S: John. John! You are amazing! You are fantastic!

W: Yes, all right, you don't have to overdo it.

S: You may not be the most luminous of people but as a conductor of light, you are unbeatable.

W: Cheers, What?

In this scene, Sherlock's praise and acknowledgment of Watson's value effectively mitigate the conflict, showcasing the power of FRA in conflict resolution.

4.1.4. Medium Acts (M)

M involves neutral strategies that neither threaten nor enhance face, such as topic shifts or ambiguous responses. Let's look at **Example 6**.

Example 6:

[**Context** (1-2 28:22): After being mistakenly arrested for graffiti, Watson returns home to find Sherlock indifferent.]

S: You've been a while.

W: Yeah, well, you know how it is. Custody sergeants don't really like to be hurried, do they? Just formalities. Fingerprints, charge sheet, and I've got to be in magistrates' court on Tuesday.

S: What?

W: Me, Sherlock! In court, on Tuesday! They're giving me an ASBO.

S: Good, fine.

W: You want to tell your little pal: he's welcome to go and own up any time.

S: This symbol, I still can't place it.

(Sherlock puts Watson's coat back on him)

S: No, I need you to go to the police station and ask about the journalist. The personal effects will have been impounded. Get hold of his diary or something that will tell us his movements. Go and see Van Coon's PA. If you retrace their steps, somewhere they'll coincide.

Here, Sherlock's neutral response and subsequent task assignment prevent the conflict from escalating, illustrating the utility of M in conflict management. Medium act, to some extent, is a good way to resolve conflict.

4.2. Factors Influencing Response Strategy Selection

The selection of strategies in conflict discourse is not arbitrary but constrained by specific contextual factors. This section focuses on two key factors—pragmatic distance and turn-taking—and analyzes how interpersonal intimacy and power dynamics shape communicators' strategic preferences through dialogue examples from the series, thereby deepening the understanding of the socio-cognitive logic underlying conflict discourse.

4.2.1. Pragmatic Distance

Pragmatic distance refers to the perceived closeness between communicators in a specific context, describable as the intimacy degree of pragmatic distance. It can be categorized into initial pragmatic distance and ongoing pragmatic distance (Wang Jianhua, 2001). This study focuses on initial pragmatic distance. Gao Ping (2006) posits that intimacy follows the hierarchy: family > friends > colleagues > strangers. Analysis reveals that Sherlock and Watson's response strategies differ between Seasons 1 and 2, reflecting their evolving relationship. For instance, in **Example 6** (Season 1), their initial pragmatic distance is closer to colleagues than friends, leading Sherlock to use neutral strategies. In **Example 2** (Season 2), their bond as friends allows for more direct face-threatening acts. Thus, pragmatic distance significantly influences strategy selection.

4.2.2. Turn-Taking

Turn-taking rules ensure discourse coherence, with turns exchanged at transition-relevant places (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Interruptions, occurring at non-transition-relevant places, violate these rules and threaten face, often signaling power dynamics. Monologues, where a speaker dominates without regard for the interlocutor, also threaten face (Li Huadong & Yu Dongming, 2001). In **Example 3**, Sherlock's monologue about his deductive prowess escalates the conflict, prompting Watson to leave.

5. Conclusion

This study's analysis of conflict talk between Sherlock and Watson in *Sherlock* demonstrates the application of face theory in real-world dialogue and its impact on conflict resolution. These findings underscore the importance of face maintenance in interpersonal communication, particularly in complex relationships like that of colleagues and friends. Sherlock and Watson's interactions reveal that appropriate response strategies can mitigate tension and even strengthen bonds. Additionally, the study highlights the role of pragmatic distance and turn-taking in strategy selection, offering new perspectives for sociolinguistic research. Ultimately, this study enriches the application of face theory in conflict talk analysis and provides valuable insights for improving real-life communication.

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