

Playful Nips and Hostile Bites: Sociable and/or Serious Argument

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Introduction

Gregory Bateson (1972/ 2000), in observing monkeys playing at a San Francisco Zoo, wondered how the monkeys recognized their actions as play and not combat. He posited that they were capable of sending metamessages that signal “this is play” (p.179) and that “these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote” (emphasis in original, p.180). These observations developed into the powerful notion of frames, which may consciously or unconsciously serve as context or premises for understanding what is happening in an interaction. Frames can include concrete notions such as “interviews,” “jobs,” or “language”, but they may also be diffuse and difficult to identify. They are not unlike Gumperz’s speech activities: we rely on contextualization cues to understand the nature of the interaction and thus understand which frame(s) we are in (Gumperz, 1982, p.166-167). Frames are hardly static: they can overlap, shift, break, and build upon one another. They may conflict with one another and as such may be a source of misunderstanding.

Just as “this is play” can become “is this play?” (Bateson, 1972/ 2000, p.182), the speech activity of argument is not always a hostile, serious activity. Schiffrin (1984), drawing on Bateson (1972), Tannen (1981), and others, introduced and explored the concept of argument as sociability within Jewish culture. She notes that “Simmel included as inherently sociable those activities in which serious domains of social life were reframed and consciously indexed as nonserious replications of themselves, for example, play, games, and flirtation” (1984, p.315). More important, an activity becomes sociable when there is “no ulterior end, no content and no result outside itself” (Simmel, 1961, p.158, cited in Schiffrin, 1984, p.315). Thus, an argument, according to Schiffrin, may be sociable so long as the content does not become more important than the activity of arguing. In other words, arguing for the sake of arguing may be a sociable

activity rather than a hostile one, at least within certain groups. The title of this paper references Straehle's (1993) observation that teasing or playful arguing may be misconstrued as a form of aggression.

The problem thus becomes treading that fine line between fight and play and identifying when, if ever, an argument is purely sociable, or if there is always some underlying hostility in argument. The purpose of this paper is to explore these notions by looking both at argument and actions that can lead to argument (such as disagreements and complaints). The first section briefly summarizes definitions of argument in the literature and the assumption of the role of argument in Western culture: that it is undesirable and to be avoided. The second section, the heart of the paper, reviews Schiffrin's (1984) paper as well as other studies that demonstrate the notion of argument as sociability in other cultures (such as German, Greek, and Italian); some of these studies demonstrate the overlaps of serious and playful conflict exchanges as well, including within children's disputes. The third section returns to the notion of argument as fight, looking at Lee and Peck's (1995) critique of Schiffrin (1984), and cultural relativity in argument (Lein & Brenneis, 1978). The paper concludes with a discussion on cultural relativity, intercultural misunderstanding, and suggestions for future research.

Argument: Definitions and Assumptions

Before examining the significance of argument, it is useful to briefly look at some of the definitions provided by in the literature. Kakava (2002) defines argument as "the exchange of more than two oppositional turns...to challenge and/or offer support for a position" (p.1539). Schiffrin (1985), in examining the organization of everyday argument, notes that argument contains both competition and cooperation between interactants, as they simultaneously build support for their own position and attempt to undermine that of their opponent. Schiffrin (1985)

also distinguishes between two basic forms of argument: rhetorical, which is monological, and oppositional, which may have one or more speakers creating “an extended polarization that is negotiated through conversation” (p.41). Both types of argument are present in the studies examined here, though oppositional argument is much more common. Vucinich (1990) notes that there is rarely any metatalk explicitly identifying argument as such in interaction; rather, we rely on contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982) to signal the activity. As Gumperz (1982) has shown, these cues are context-dependent and their interpretation relies on experience within a culture or society; thus what signals serious argument for one person may not signal serious argument for another.

Kakava (2002), notes that in Western culture, it is generally assumed that agreement should be maximized and disagreement minimized. This preference for agreement can serve as a bias in interpreting argument, just as a preference for disagreement may serve as a bias; essentially, it is source of potential misunderstanding. The study below illustrates this preference for agreement, and how, when it is shared, appears relatively successful in preventing communication breakdown, at least within the particular group studied. This will serve as a contrast to those groups that have a preference for disagreement (discussed in the next section).

Laforest (2002) examined complaints among intimate peers—couples and siblings—in Montreal, Canada. Four French-speaking families across different social classes were recorded in their homes for 50 hours without the researcher present. Types of complaints and types of responses to complaints were analyzed. Laforest found that argument does not arise from a complaint itself, but from a rejection of a complaint, when the complainer questions the value of the complaineé’s response. More important, argument is quite rare: interactants would often quickly agree that a possible conflict was approaching and work together to avoid it, either

through negotiation or through a subtle change in activity. Thus, this group fits into the assumption that disagreement is undesirable as the informants generally agreed not to argue. It is important to note, however, that Laforest explicitly excluded Schiffrin's (1984) notion of "sociable argument," which she characterizes as in a "light-hearted key" and not a "dysphoric key", without discussing which cues she used to identify light-heartedness or dysphoria (Laforest, 2002, p.1611). Therefore, while this study does provide insight into serious argument between adults (or the avoidance of it, rather), it does not provide any data on nonserious argument. Rather, it provides a nice illustration of how argument in this speech community is dispreferred and to be avoided.

Argument As Sociability

Unlike Laforest's (2002) recordings with the researcher absent, Schiffrin (1984) obtained her data through sociolinguistic interviews. Her informants were lower-middle class Jews in Philadelphia. While she did interview non-Jewish people in Philadelphia, she focused on the Jewish informants for this study as she found a preponderance of disagreement--over a wide range of topics from intercultural marriage to movies to chewing gum--among the Jewish group that was simply not present among her other interviewees. This preponderance signaled to her a preference for disagreement, just as the lack of conflict in Laforest (2002) signaled the opposite. Following the theory that sociability emphasizes form over content, and that the substance of the argument is much less important than the form of the activity itself, she hypothesized that the disagreements and arguments she witnessed were nonserious, sociable arguments.

Signals of this sociability included frame breaks and cooperative disagreement. In terms of frames, she found arguments were initiated and terminated quickly and unpredictably (she thus calls the frames "vulnerable"). Regarding frame breaks, she cites an argument between two

informants, Henry and Zelda, on an apparently serious topic of family relationships. Zelda suddenly breaks in, saying “Boy you need a shave so bad!” and Henry immediately latches onto this sentiment and agrees. Schiffrin (1984) interprets this sudden shift to bodily matters as a signal that neither interactant was serious in the previous argument and as a signal of their intimacy and the strength of their relationship (but see Lee & Peck’s [1995] alternate interpretation, discussed later in this paper). The fact that Henry latches on to her frame break is significant; Schiffrin shows other instances where attempts to rekey the interaction as nonserious do not work because one of the participants has not “taken [it] up” (1985, p.322). In terms of cooperative disagreement, Schiffrin (1984) demonstrates how her informants work collaboratively, while in the competitive mode of the argument, to maintain the others’ face (again note Lee & Peck’s [1995] comment that only “outright abuse” [p.36] would lack this maintenance of face).

An important aspect of Schiffrin’s (1984) study is the informants’ valuation of fight. While serious argument was valued negatively for its potential to damage relationships, the sustained disagreement on a wide range of topics (both serious and trivial) in the presence of the researcher, indicated that none of the disagreement displayed was a threat to their relationships and thus serious. Also, the fact that these disagreements occurred in the researcher’s presence also signaled the nonserious, positive nature of the interaction. Furthermore, fights were valued positively for their *outcome* (the substance), whereas disagreement in general was valued positively as a *process* (the form). Finally, one must not neglect the cultural differences, perhaps key to Lee & Peck’s [1995] different interpretation. Schiffrin (1984) explains the cultural significance of disagreement and argument in Jewish culture in particular (focusing on those of Eastern European descent), while noting, of course, the need for more comparative data. Thus if

a culture has a certain orientation to argument, it is also important to note that as a speech community, it may have different contextualization conventions that signal what is serious and what is sociable.

Several articles draw on Schiffrin (1984) in an attempt to examine the preference for disagreement or sociable argument in other cultures; this is not to say a preference for disagreement or sociable argument are necessarily the same thing, but the former seems to be a good indication of the latter.

Byrnes (1986), drawing on Tannen's (1981, 1984) notion of conversational style, posits that German conversational style is (very broadly and generally) different from American conversational style. While Byrnes's paper is based solely on anecdotal evidence and is not empirical in nature, she provides some insights that warrant further study. She bases her discussion on her experience as a German teacher, her American students' experiences in Germany, and German writings on German and American communication. In essence, she finds Germans have a desire for "brilliant argumentation" in conversation, whereas Americans have a desire for "civility" or deference (p.195). She thus finds similarities between German conversational style and what Tannen (1981, 1984) has identified as "New York Jewish" conversational style in terms of involvement and permissible topics of conversation. Involvement includes showing enthusiasm for a topic including "overlapping, loudness, shorter or no pauses in turn-taking, finishing others' sentences, and highly emotional participation" (Byrnes, 1986, p.201). The permissible topics, in light of the preference for "brilliant argumentation", are more ideological, and more individual, unlike "a system which must continuously defer to the sensitivities of others" (p.201). Obviously these are general claims that could use more data for support.

In a more comprehensive study, Kakava (2002) examined disagreement in Modern Greek discourse, looking at three contexts: discussion among family, discussion among friends, and discussion in a university seminar. The family and friend data was in Greek with Kakava as a participant. The classroom data was in English, in an American seminar that had both Greek and non-Greek students: this served as a useful source for comparative data. As in Schiffrin's (1984) data, there was a preponderance of disagreement among the Greek interactants and Kakava interpreted this as a preference for disagreement. While the friend and family data contained disagreement strategies inappropriate in a classroom setting (negative affect, terms of endearment), all the contexts included an initial disagreement followed by accounts, rather than a hedge to mitigate the disagreement. Personal analogies were also a strategy used in all contexts in an attempt to win arguments, thus functioning similarly to Schiffrin's (1990) discussion of stories in arguments; both add a cooperative function to the argument, and can change alignments, by helping the hearer see the speaker's point of view. Kakava concludes that disagreement is preferred in Greek discourse because it is always foregrounded, unprefaced, and sustained. She even notes an instance in the classroom setting in which what would be considered a hedge or mitigator without any other cues—"I think"—becomes an intensifier, by virtue of the prosody of the utterance. Kakava does not explicitly state that argument displays solidarity as in the case of Schiffrin (1984), but she demonstrates how the Greek informants agree to disagree, and how argument is cooperative, expected, and not a threat to solidarity.

Similarly, Corsaro and Rizzo (1990) found argument to be a central feature among young Italian children. They compared Italian and American nursery school children, with the important caveat that what may be a dispute for children may not be a dispute for adults. Nevertheless, their study lends some important insights to the topic. Both groups had similar

types of disputes over the nature of play, over objects, over access to play space, and over claims (beliefs). In addition to these four types of disputes in both groups, the Italians had a fifth dispute type, “routine”, which was found to be purely performance and an indication of the Italian children’s enjoyment of argumentation and a main feature of their peer culture. As such, the Italian children had more disputes, and many more claim disputes than the American children, which were lengthier and highly stylized, with “cantinelas,” sing-song chants that emphasize form over substance and “mark agreement and communal sharing of an aesthetic production” (p.61). Thus the Italian children seemed to argue for argument’s sake, to enjoy the activity. This sense of enjoyment in argumentation seems to parallel the Greek, German, and “New York Jewish” styles of conversation and preference for disagreement.

In the same general speech community, Saunders (1985) examined silence in Valbellan Italians. Like Byrnes (1986), no transcripts of data are provided (perhaps pointing to a difficulty in obtaining adult data). Through observation and interview, he found that the stereotypical displays of “effusive, vociferous emotionality” (Saunders, 1985, p.176) are actually on issues that pose little threat to the relationships of interactants and have a more cathartic function. The more serious threats to relationships were the lack of argument, where an “unrelenting silence” was often used when a resolution to a serious conflict did not seem likely (p.177). Saunders seems to draw on Bateson (1972) when he writes “where you see emotion, there *is* emotion, but the emotion you see is not always the emotion that is there” (p.174, emphasis in original). Similarly, Bateson (1972 / 2000) writes regarding playful fighting: “the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (p.180). Saunders (1985) also observed that children are socialized to dramatize emotion and find satisfaction in it, which is bolstered by the boisterous arguments in Corsaro and Rizzo’s (1990) Italian data.

Related to the socialization of children, Boggs (1978) identified a contradiction routine in the verbal disputes of part-Hawaiian children that signaled serious conflict among younger children but play among older children. This routine included the forceful use of “Not!” as a contradiction which is said to either “crack you up” or be taken seriously (p.325). While younger children took the routine seriously, many arguments among 10-12-year-olds ended with laughter and indicated a mock dispute and implicit reference to childish fights. Boggs found that the framing provided by the relationships of interactants determined whether the “Not!” routine signaled fight or play (again drawing on Bateson). He also notes that this routine fits into Hawaiian culture, “that assertiveness should be associated with humor” (p.338). Adult-child interactions contained a serious frame in a refusal to defer to a child, but the teasing, playful frame is clear. Importantly, Boggs notes that while older children and adults have a sense of when argument is play, younger children have not developed these notions of agreement with one another and thus do not have the frames or the signals to the frames to indicate teasing or play. Thus Boggs (1978) shows how children are socialized to orient to disagreement and dispute within that culture.

Another study related to argument and children focuses on white adolescent girls. Eder (1990) analyzed serious and playful conflict exchanges in white girls in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades across social classes. She found considerable overlap between the playful and serious exchanges. For example, eighth grade girls at one school frequently called each other “bitch” and “slut” and such insults were generally responded to in a nonserious manner. The exchange only became a serious conflict if the recipient of the insult took the insult seriously. Eder notes that when this occurred, communication would break down and thus being able to respond with more playful insults was preferred. This ritual insulting was more common among girls from working and lower class backgrounds where “toughness” was valued over

“politeness” (p.82), but Eder acknowledges that more research is needed to support this observation. Overall, both types of conflict exchanges communicated normative information, so here, perhaps, the playful exchanges are not purely “sociable” in Schiffrin’s (1984) sense, but the preference for playfulness may indicate the additional function in displaying the strength of a relationship despite verbal assaults. One must not discount, however, that the different stages in development affect how one responds to conflict; perhaps a teenager’s nonchalant, playful response to conflict does not signify the same as an adult’s response.

Before turning to a critique of Schiffrin (1984)—Lee and Peck (1995)—it is useful to look at one more study related to sociable argument and playful conflict. Straehle (1993) studied teasing and conversational rapport among three adults, again with Bateson’s (1972) notion of framing as the backdrop. She defines teasing as an enjoyable “language ‘nip’” that could “easily be mistaken for a hostile bite” (Straehle, 1993, p.211). Teasing can take the form of disagreement, challenges, and insults, among other “aggressive” forms (p.214). Thus one must rely on contextualization cues to mark the teasing frame, which Straehle identifies as exaggerated prosody, exaggerated and blatantly false claims, laughter, and play with pronouns (such as referring to a present party in the third person). Importantly, Straehle points out that line between teasing and real hostility can be a very fine one indeed, just as Eder (1990) and Boggs (1978) have shown how different age groups need to negotiate the meaning of argument. Most salient to this particular paper is the similar functions teasing and sociable argument have in displaying and developing intimacy and rapport. Straehle notes that “teasing is similar to sociable argument in that it reflects familiarity and intimacy despite antagonistic form” (p.227). Thus it is an important complement to the notion of argument as sociability.

In sum, the studies discussed above illustrate how argument can have functions that are not purely about hostility or resolving real conflict, and thus argument as a form is not necessarily an activity avoided by all groups. Variables that can affect orientation to argument include age, gender, and culture, the latter being the focus of this paper. How to better distinguish between sociable and serious argument remains an issue.

Sociability, Fight, and Cultural Relativity

Lee and Peck (1995) do not deny the possibility that sociable argument exists. They do, however, take issue with the nature of Schiffrin's (1984) evidence. The main critique is that the features of sociability described by Schiffrin are also present in serious argument, making it difficult to identify when, exactly, is an argument sociable. They use the structure of Schiffrin's (1984) article to build a counterargument with their own data from the television show *Sylvania Waters*, about a family in Australia. While Lee and Peck (1995) essentially sidestep the notion of culture as context in their main evaluation of Schiffrin's (1984) article, thus overlooking a major thread, they also make some important observations that will help push analysis of argument further. First, they offer an alternate interpretation of an exchange between Schiffrin's informants, Henry and Zelda. They claim that the frame break in which Zelda exclaims "Boy you need a shave so bad!" does not signal the nonserious nature of the previous conflict exchange; rather, it serves to diffuse a potentially relationship-threatening conflict. While this seems like a plausible alternative (indeed, a single nonserious frame break does not necessarily mark an entire exchange as nonserious), it does not really explain the preponderance of disagreement in Schiffrin's data on both serious and trivial topics, nor does it address the (probably related) issue of culture.

When Lee and Peck (1995) do address the high frequency of disagreement in Schiffrin's data, they again miss the point of culture, observing that the high frequency of argument in their own data does not suggest sociable argument. First, their data only concerns one family, whereas Schiffrin's data, though also a small sample, includes more families. Second, the family in Lee and Peck's data are comprised of an Australian man, a New Zealander wife, and her son from another marriage. The husband is noted to have a positive attitude toward argument, and seems to enjoy the activity for its own sake, while the mother and son do not. It is not until their conclusion that Lee and Peck note the possibility that the husband, as an Australian, may be more prone to argument and may see it as "a (rather indirect) marker of affection" (p.46). Thus it is entirely possible that the preponderance of serious argument in their own data was a result of the different orientations to argument in the cultures of Australia and New Zealand: a case of intercultural misunderstanding. Though one does not want to run the risk of oversimplification or overgeneralization, especially today when culture can shift and change more rapidly than before, it seems like an obvious area for more comprehensive and nuanced research as it is an important part of contextualizing interaction.

In order to close on this notion of cultural relativity in argument, one more study may provide insight on this issue. Lein and Brenneis (1978) studied children's disputes in three speech communities: white American children in New England, black American children of migrant farm workers, and Hindi-speaking children living in rural Fiji. They aimed to identify what features of arguments were common to all and what features were specific to these individual communities. Unlike Corsaro and Rizzo (1990) and Eder (1990), who observed natural interaction in school settings, Lein and Brenneis (1978) elicited their data through role play by instructing children to have an argument over an object or over who is smarter, stronger,

etc. Despite this artificial prompt, the children soon forgot they were in a role play and became actively engaged in the activity.

Lein and Brenneis (1978) found that cultural variability was more significant than they had initially hypothesized: while volume, speed, and stress were important elements in all arguments, they were used quite differently in the three communities. The most striking difference was in rules of turn taking and the overall organization of argument. Even in situations that were “emotionally loaded” where one might expect chaos, children observed the cultural conventions of argument, maintaining cooperation by building arguments together, following turn taking rules (for the American children), or following rules for appropriate overlap (for the Hindi-speaking children). Thus not only are these findings significant for explaining misunderstanding in intercultural dispute, they show the significance of cultural orientation to the nature of dispute. Even if sociable argument is not addressed in this particular study, it demonstrates (like the above studies dealing with children and adolescents) that children are socialized to deal with and view argument according to the conventions of their own cultures. Of course, this does not mean they will always interact with others this way, but, as Johnstone (1989) notes, it does *predispose* them to certain types of argument.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed here have shown some important trends regarding cultural orientation to disagreement and argument. First, arguments cannot be sociable when at least one of the interactants takes the substance of the activity seriously: across cultures, there needs to be agreement on the activity. Second, research has indicated that sociable argument exists among a variety of groups. Schiffrin’s (1984) concept of Jewish argument as sociability seems to exist in other cultures in varying forms. Kakava’s (2002) study has shown a preference for disagreement

in Greek culture. Corsaro and Rizzo (1990) and Saunders (1985) demonstrate how argument in Italian culture is routinized and enjoyed by both children and adults and thus functions as sociability. Third, many of the studies illustrate the fine line between serious and playful conflict (especially Straehle, 1993; Eder, 1990), creating potential for both inter- and intra-cultural misunderstanding. Finally, several studies show how children are socialized to orient to argument according to the conventions of their cultures (Boggs, 1978; Corsaro & Rizzo, 1990; Eder, 1990; Lein & Brenneis, 1978). Thus they appear to acquire the contextualization conventions necessary for framing their interactions.

While many studies have examined disputes among children, there appears to be a dearth of empirical studies examining serious argument among adults. This shortage may be due adults' reluctance to allow their serious arguments observed and analyzed. Laforest (2002) was able to collect a small amount of such data, and perhaps her approach may be useful for further studies: rather than having the researcher present, the consenting participants are recorded at home. One could then mix this approach with Tannen's (1984) approach, interviewing participants after the recording to get their reactions and insights into the data, thus shedding light on how argument is evaluated in a culture or society.

Furthermore, Lee and Peck (1995) have demonstrated that it is important to make clearer distinctions (if possible) between serious and nonserious argument, and to determine whether it is possible to have a serious argument that is also sociable, or whether it is possible to have a purely sociable argument. According to the theoretical framework Schiffrin (1984) operated in, an argument cannot be both serious and sociable, but this may discount the multiple layers of frames within which people operate. While Lee and Peck seem to discount the notion of culture as an important variable, they do make the important point that if elements of sociable argument

also appear in serious argument, then identifying sociable argument requires more precise research questions (such as those in Kakava [2002] which examine whether context affects opposition strategies); Schiffrin's (1984) argument would also be strengthened by having more comparative data that demonstrate both the concept of argument as sociability in Jewish culture and in other cultures, and data that demonstrate serious argument in those cultures. This would allow for a much more systematic analysis.

It is essential to obtain more comparative data on serious and sociable argument among adults in order to better understand approaches to conflict across cultures. Of course culture is not a static entity, nor is it the only variable that affects an interaction, but it is significant and may be studied with those variables in mind. Just as Johnstone (1989) notes that certain cultures are predisposed to certain types of persuasion, and just as they have different conventions for structuring argument (Gumperz, 1982; Lein & Brenneis, 1978), cultures appear to have different orientations to argument. That is, as has been seen by the studies discussed here, some cultures and speech communities prefer disagreement and display intimacy and rapport via this disagreement and nonserious argument and this may occur to varying degrees. To summarize, future research should look comparatively not only at how adults approach argument but how they perceive, evaluate, and value argument as a speech activity.

By having this cross-cultural data and developing a better understanding of it at the everyday level, one may then take this understanding to larger, higher-stakes contexts. Kakava (2001) observes that "although as discourse analysts we have shed light on conflict management at home and in the workplace, we have not shifted our attention to international types of dispute, where the ramifications and consequences are even more dire, as we have recently experienced" (p.663). Thus by creating a more systematic framework for understanding conflict and argument

cross-culturally in private discourse, researchers may then elucidate intercultural misunderstanding and conflict in public discourse in a similar manner.

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