

Conflict in corpora: Investigating family conflict sequences using a corpus pragmatic approach

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Abstract

The analysis of conflict in family discourse has often been characterised by ethnographic approaches and/or fine-grained analysis of unique conflict episodes. This article, by contrast, uses a c.175,000-word spoken corpus of Irish family discourse, in conjunction with a corpus pragmatic approach to explore specific linguistic aspects of conflict discourse. Conflict episodes are identified and analysed in the corpus using a range of linguistic “hooks” (Rühlemann 2010) that have been previously associated with prefacing disagreement such as the marker *well*, mitigators (*I think, I mean, I guess*) or the counterargument strategy *yes but*. The analysis reveals that the family members most frequently use the *yeah but* strategy in conflict episodes which facilitates immediate disagreement. This strategy is often accompanied by a range of mitigators, predominantly in turn final position, some of which have not been previously identified as indexing conflict sequences.

1. Introduction

The relationship between linguistic form and function is characterised by ambiguity and unpredictability (Mey 2001). This problematic relationship restricts the automatic identification and retrieval of pragmatic phenomena such as conflict sequences from large corpora (Rühlemann and Clancy forthcoming). There are, for example, innumerable, constantly evolving ways in which one conversational participant might threaten or an insult

another, which, in turn, might trigger a conflict sequence. One solution to this is the use of small corpora (usually in the 20,000-50,000-word range) which allow for the manual tagging of pragmatic phenomena thereby mitigating the difficulties associated with the form/function mismatch (see Vaughan and Clancy 2013). The emergence of corpus pragmatic research (see Romero-Trillo 2008; O’Keeffe et al. 2011; Aijmer and Rühlemann 2015) has, however, provided a range of alternative routes by which pragmatic phenomena may be accessed even in larger corpora such as Lutzky and Kehoe’s (2017) use of collocational profiles to study the speech act of apology, the still-developing approaches to the (automatic or not) annotation of such speech acts (see, for example, Weisser 2003; Kohnen 2008; Garcia McAllister 2015; Musi 2018) or the use of ontologies, systems which facilitate the examination and integration of different annotation systems across different corpora, to develop corpus search strategies (Musgrave et al. 2014).

This article employs a corpus pragmatic methodology in order to illustrate the application of corpus software tools for locating and analysing, both quantitatively and qualitatively, conflict sequences in a corpus of Irish family discourse. In order to do this, *WordSmith Tools Version 7.0* (Scott 2017) is used to search for a number of markers or ‘hooks’ such as *well, yes but* or *I think*, that have been shown in the previous literature to frequently preface disagreement sequences. The first step is to generate frequency lists in order that the number of instances of these items in the corpus can be determined. Secondly, concordance lines are examined to ascertain how many times these items occur in conjunction with conflict episodes. This highly iterative approach, characteristic of corpus pragmatic research, allows a connection to be made between what are initially *potential* markers of disagreement and those markers that *actually* occur in conflict sequences. This facilitates the assessment of a form-function relationship as the markers frequently associated with conflict in family discourse emerge. In addition, a more nuanced examination of a

number of individual conflict episodes challenges the traditional view of prefaced disagreement by arguing that mitigation in family discourse, accomplished by a range of markers not previously identified in previous conflict studies, appears to frequently occur in turn final position.

2. Previous literature on markers that characterise conflict sequences

Argument or conflict is characterised in the language-based literature as sustained disagreement over a number of conversational turns (see, for example, Schiffrin 1984; Muntigl and Turnbull 1998; Rips 1998; Norrick and Spitz 2008). The definition of a conflict sequence that will initially be adopted here, and illustrated in the analysis and discussion to follow, is that it is constituted when at least three turns or moves occur in which participants mutually challenge one another (see, for example, Schiffrin 1984; Maynard 1985; Hutchby 1996; Norrick and Spitz 2008). Furthermore, disagreement is itself characterised by a turn construction that differs substantively from a turn that agrees with a previous turn due to disagreement being a dispreferred response (Pomerantz 1984). The preferred response to, for example, a question is an answer, to an offer, acceptance, and so on. Conversely, said question or offer can be met with a dispreferred response such as another question or refusal respectively. Holtgraves (1997) points out that when dispreferred moves such as disagreement occur, they are often prefaced in some way. This involves, to some degree, the placement of linguistic, paralinguistic or kinesic resources at the beginning of the turn with the actual disagreement pushed back towards to turn's end (Vuchinich 1990; Muntigl and Turnbull 1998). The focus of this article is on the linguistic resources at conversational participants' disposal to index disagreement. This range of linguistic markers that frequently appear to preface disagreement sequences has proven to be remarkably consistent across

different studies set in a number of different discourse contexts and cultures and employing a number of different data collection techniques.

There have been a number of studies that have conducted detailed investigations of the occurrence of specific linguistic markers in disagreement or conflict episodes. In addition to being a dispreferred response, disagreement has been often associated with face threat (Brown and Levinson 1987). Therefore, conversational participants frequently take action to mitigate or soften any act that might threaten their relationship. Instead of baldly stating their disagreement, participants often preface it in some way. There are a number of linguistic items that are used to preface disagreement, thereby mitigating it by positioning it further back in the turn. Foremost amongst these items is turn initial *well*. Schiffrin (1987) highlights the importance of *well* to the maintenance of discourse coherence due to the fact that it often occurs at a point where “upcoming coherence is not guaranteed” (p. 126) such as non-compliance with a request or a disagreement sequence. Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) classify *well* as a reluctance marker that prefaces a challenge, frequently in the form of an interrogative, to a claim made in a prior turn. Typically, then, *well* functions to downgrade disagreement (see Kotthoff 1993; Holtgraves 1997). There have also been a range of other mitigating devices identified that also function to displace and, therefore, soften disagreement. These items, for example, *I think*, *I don't know*, *you know* or *I mean* have been shown to have both positive and negative politeness functions in relation to conflict sequences (see Schiffrin 1987; Tsui 1991; Kotthoff 1993; Holtgraves 1997; Rees-Miller 2000; Fox Tree and Schrock 2002). It should be pointed out that a characteristic of many of the items mentioned such as *well*, *I think* or *I mean* is their polysemous nature. All of these items have a literal, lexical meaning. In addition, for example, although *I mean* can be used to preface challenge and *you know* to soften disagreement, both items have important organisational functions such as their use in topic shift (see Fox Tree and Shrock, 2002).

There are also a number of other strategies employed by interlocutors which appear to cue or mitigate disagreement. One of these is the positive counterargument strategy *yes but* (and the more informal *yeah but*). Holtgraves (1997: 231) maintains that the use of the *yes but* strategy 'is to express brief agreement with the other speaker's immediately prior turn but then quickly disagree with some aspect of the person's argument.' This strategy allows the speaker to express token agreement with the previous turn while almost immediately disagreeing with its propositional content (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2000). In their study, Norrick and Spitz (2008) concentrate on the pragmatic device humour, mostly in the form of laughter, and demonstrate its mitigating effect on conflict sequences. Other markers associated, sometimes indirectly, with disagreement include modal particles (Kotthoff 1993; Rees-Miller 2000), the pronoun *we* (Schiffrin 1984; Rees-Miller 2000) and the items *look* and *listen* (Schiffrin 1984; Maynard 1985). What each of the linguistic devices listed here have in common that they are suitable for automatic retrieval using corpus software. There are, of course, other markers associated with disagreement or conflict such as questions (Rees-Miller 2000; Georgakopoulou 2001; Williams, 2005), repetition (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998) and the creation of hypothetical scenarios, where conversational participants embed their opinions in a story about others rather than providing them directly, (Georgakopoulou 2001), that, while crucial, and in the case of format tying ubiquitous to conflict, are less suited to automatic retrieval from a corpus.

There also exists a substantial body of literature in the area of conflict talk that does not specifically refer to individual linguistic items and their functions within disagreement sequences. The primary concern of this research has been, for example, the tying of argument to larger social processes or the details participants are attending to while arguing. Therefore, it is less concerned with isolating specific linguistic items and instead focused on a more

global view of conflict talk (for example, Schiffrin 1984; Maynard 1985; Goodwin and Goodwin 1990; Lee 1997). However, although this research does not usually make reference to linguistic items specifically, many of the items that have been shown to index conflict can be seen within the sequences analysed. It is important to note that these items as a whole preface or delay disagreement (Pomerantz 1984) which indicates a willingness on the part of the interlocutors to cooperate with one another in establishing and/or maintaining a relationship. However, Kotthoff (1993) has demonstrated how when a disagreement changes from a mitigated frame to a more aggravated one, a change occurs in the turn structure where participants orientate themselves to quick disagreement and, therefore correspondingly, the use of mitigators and positive counterargument strategies becomes minimised. However, it does appear that even aggravated disputes contain some of the items discussed here as associated with disagreement. Kotthoff (ibid: 202) notes the presence of *well* and *I mean* in aggravated sequences, although she does note that their softening function is downgraded due to speakers orientation towards outright disagreement rather than mitigated disagreement in these sequences.

3. Data and methodology

For the purposes of this study, based on the previous literature, the markers that co-occur with disagreement strategies were drawn up as a list. Eight high frequency items that can quickly be searched for with corpus software were identified on the basis of their reported proclivity to co-occur with disagreement sequences. Although many of these items have been identified in relation to the prefacing of disagreement, the corpus analysis is not restricted to turn initial occurrences of these markers:

- *well*
- *you know*

- *I think*
- *I don't think*
- *I mean*
- *yes/yeah but*
- *I don't know*
- *I guess*

There are also a number of corpus-informed reasons why these eight items were selected. The majority of these items are very high frequency in spoken language in general. *Yeah* features prominently in the top ten most frequent words in many spoken corpora. *You know*, *I mean* and *I think* are the top three most frequent two-word chunks in the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE; see O’Keeffe et al. 2007). *You know* is also the most frequent two-word chunk in the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE; see O’Keeffe et al. 2011). *I don't know* is the most frequent three word chunk in both the Cambridge International Corpus (O’Keeffe et al. 2007) and LCIE (O’Keeffe et al. 2011). In addition to these markers, corpus studies have highlighted other markers with similar functions that occur more frequently in Irish English than in other Englishes – for example *shur* and *now* (Clancy and Vaughan, 2012) – and these markers will also feature in the analysis. The use of a corpus pragmatic method to study phenomena such as disagreement sequences facilitates a two-pronged approach where, in addition to the text itself, annotations and other non-linguistic encoding can be potentially exploited. The analysis here makes use of speaker tags, generally indicated using symbols such as <\$1>, <\$2>, <\$3>, etc.), in order to quickly search for turn initial items such as *well*. This also expedites the process involved in sorting through a large number of high frequency items in order to determine their function within utterances – it is likely that turn initial *well* will be pragmatic rather than lexical in nature and, therefore, more likely to be connected to a disagreement sequence. The high frequency of these items is something of a double-edged sword for the researcher. On the one

hand, because they are high frequency, they should provide a successful path toward the location of disagreement sequences in the corpus. On the other, the running of concordances on these items in order to discover how frequently they index disagreement requires a good deal of manual sifting in order to quantitatively reveal the extent of this relationship.

This research design utilised here differs from previous corpus studies of conflict talk in a number of important ways. The Limerick Corpus of Irish English was not specifically designed to study conflict (cf. Goodwin and Goodwin 1990; Bova and Arcidiacono 2015), nor was conflict one of the areas that the corpus designers were necessarily interested in. Instead, the purpose of LCIE is to provide a representative sample of the English spoken in Ireland. Previous studies have seen much mention of *corpus*, though this does not frequently co-occur with either *linguistics* or *methods*. A corpus can be defined as is a principled collection of texts stored on a computer for electronic analysis (see, for example, McEnery and Wilson 1996; Kennedy 1998). Corpus linguistics, then, to borrow from McEnery and Hardie (2012:1), is “an area which focuses on a set of procedures, or methods, for studying language.” These methods or procedures increasingly involve the use of computer software tools, primarily concordancers, which allow for the production of results in the form of, for example, frequency lists or concordance lines. Although some quantitative results have been reported on (for example, Vuchinich 1990; Holtgraves 1997; Rees-Miller 2000), no recourse has been made thus far to electronic corpus methods or procedures in the study of conflict talk. It seems most likely that many of the previous studies ‘read’ their corpus, an intensely qualitative way of performing corpus analysis as the researcher manually scans the entire corpus, rather than utilise corpus software. This is evident in research into conflict sequences when, for example, a corpus is used in tandem with an ethnographic approach (Rees-Miller 2000; Georgakopoulou 2001) or where a corpus is blended with approaches to language analysis, the most frequent of these being conversation analysis (Goodwin and Goodwin

1990; Muntigl and Turnbull 1998). Where a larger corpus that has not been specifically designed to study conflict has been analysed – Norrick and Spitz (2008) utilise the 249,000-word Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English and the one-million-word Wellington Spoken Corpus – the methodology used to locate conflict sequences within these datasets is not elucidated.

The c.175,000-word corpus of family discourse, a domain conceptualised as intimate (see McCarthy, 1998; Clancy, 2016), discussed in the following analysis section features a variety of different conversational contexts. For example, in addition to the prototypical dinner table talk, the corpus contains data collected when the families were engaged in everyday activities such as cooking, driving, getting ready for Christmas or assembling furniture. Much of the data was collected without a researcher being present and is, therefore, more likely to be highly representative of spontaneous and naturally-occurring intimate discourse. Many previous corpus studies of conflict talk in intimate settings also feature spontaneous and naturally-occurring data (see, for example, Vuchinich 1984; Muntigl and Turnbull 1998; Georgakopoulou 2001; Norrick and Spitz 2008). This is in contrast to, for example, corpus research that features data from a university context where researchers employed a number of different data collection techniques such as Kotthoff's (1993) task-based prompts, Holtgrave's (1997) experimental sessions or Rees-Miller's (2000) notebook recordings. It should be noted here that the broad-based nature of the transcription conventions in the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE) precludes the examination of paralinguistic resources. In addition, because LCIE's data collection process did not involve any visual recording, there is also no recourse to the kinesic mechanisms utilised by conversational participants during conflict episodes. It is acknowledged that non-verbal communication plays a crucial role in conflict management and mitigation; however, were these resources, or reference to them, to form part of this paper, it would result in mere

speculation. Instead, the focus is on linguistic items that can be concretely measured within the corpus.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1 Locating and quantifying conflict sequences in the corpus of family discourse

The first step in the analytic process is a highly iterative one, the results of which provide the frequency of occurrence of the selected items as pragmatic markers in the corpus. Pragmatic markers are defined here in their broadest sense as items such as discourse markers, stance markers, mitigators or interjections that function outside the structural limits of the clause and encode intention and interpersonal meaning (Carter and McCarthy, 2006). Due to the polysemous nature of items such as *well*, *know* and *think*, which have other uses apart from pragmatic marking, in table 1 the lexical uses have been excluded and the results from the family data presented. This was done by generating concordance lines for each of the items and manually deleting those lines that contained any items with a lexical meaning, such as in the sentence *I know that person well*. In addition, the results for *well* only include occurrences of the marker at turn initial position. They do, however, include instances where *well* has been preceded by discourse markers such as *ok* or *yeah*. Furthermore, consistent with Holtgraves (1997), *I think*, *I don't know*, *I mean* and *I don't think* are only counted where the marker occurs either as a turn in itself or immediately preceding or following the first

expressed opinion in the turn. In all cases, guessed instances of the items were also excluded from the frequency counts.¹

Table 1: Frequency of occurrence of the selected items as pragmatic markers in the family corpus

Corpus	FAMILY		
Corpus size	176,410		
Conflict marker	Frequency	Freq per 1,000	%
<i>well</i>	348	2	39.7
<i>I think</i>	177	1	20.2
<i>you know</i>	136	0.8	15.5
<i>yeah but*</i>	83	0.5	9.5
<i>I don't know</i>	50	0.3	5.7
<i>I mean</i>	42	0.2	4.8
<i>I don't think</i>	40	0.2	4.6
<i>I guess</i>	0	0	0
TOTAL	876	5	

*these figures represent the combined frequencies of *yeah but* and *yes but*

Table 1 demonstrates that, when the lexical functions are removed, these markers occur at a frequency of 5 occurrences per 1,000 words. The item *well* is the most frequent marker followed by *I think* and *you know*. The markers *well*, *I think*, and *you know* have the highest proportional share of frequency accounting for 75.4% of the occurrences of all markers. The *yeah but* strategy is the fourth most frequently used marker with a proportional share of 9.5%. The predominant use of *I don't know* in its literal, lexical sense in the family corpus is demonstrated by its frequency of 0.2 occurrences per 1,000 words. This infrequent use of the item may also contribute to the frequency of *I mean* in the family corpus. In the COBUILD/Birmingham Spoken Corpus, a two-million-word corpus representing everyday casual conversation, meetings and discussions, Diani (2004) found that 85 instances of *I mean* and *I don't know* co-occurring. The markers acted in combination, either immediately prefacing or following one another. In instances where *I mean* prefaced *I don't know*, she

¹ Transcribed texts from the Limerick Corpus of Irish English feature guessed utterances or parts of utterances, for example in extract (1) here (marked by <H>...</H>), where the transcriber is not 100% certain of what was said but can glean enough evidence from the co-text etc. to surmise what might have been said.

found that the tentativeness value was increased; where *I mean* followed *I don't know*, the combination modified “the speaker’s initial declaration of insufficient knowledge so as to support her/his argument” (p. 168). Therefore, if there is a tendency for the markers to co-occur, a reduction in the frequency of use of one may lead to a corresponding reduction in the other. Fox Tree and Schrock (2002) also argue that *I mean* is speaker oriented and, therefore, may be less likely to occur in family discourse as, similarly to the use of *I think*, it could threaten group identity and solidarity. Interestingly, there are no occurrences of *I guess* in the corpus, perhaps indicating a varietal preference for its non-use Irish English.

Previous research (see, for example, Schiffrin 1984; Maynard 1985; Hutchby 1996; Norrick and Spitz 2008) has suggested that conflict sequences contain a minimum of three turns or moves that are characterised by participants mutually challenging one another as illustrated in (1):

(1) [**Context:** Participants are discussing using another person’s password to access a computer at university. <\$1>, <\$2>, etc. tags awarded in order of different speaker’s appearance in conversation in the original transcriptions; <\$H> indicates the beginning and <\\$H> the end, of guessed content]

[**Speaker information:** <\$1> son (23), <\$2> daughter (22)]

<\$1> I was with Susan an all and she was trying to access it. She said she never was able to. Jane had to let her <\$H> use her password <\\$H>.

<\$3> And d’you not have Jane’s password no?

<\$1> **Well** Susan I wouldn’t ask Susan to give me Jane’s password and Jane wasn’t there so I mean that’s why I don’t have it done.

<\$3> **Yeah but** shur you’re not going to do anything like.

<\$1> **I know but** I still wouldn’t do it.

<\$3> Mm hm.

In this argument sequence, challenge is prefaced by the use of *well* and the counterargument strategies *yeah but* and *I know but* which function to push the disagreement back into the turn. Importantly, the extract also contains other markers within the turns that have been associated with having pragmatic functions such as *so*, *I mean*, *shur* (a pragmatic marker particular to Irish English) and *like* (Vaughan and Clancy 2016). In order to discover which of the items actually occur within sequences such as (1), this definition of what constitutes a conflict sequence is applied to the instances of these markers illustrated in table 1 and the results are presented in table 2. In the case of *well*, *you know*, *I don't know* and *I think*, WordSmith Tools Version 7.0 (Scott 2017) was used to randomly select 100 concordance lines. Each occurrence of the remaining markers were sorted.

Table 2 builds on the results thus far and illustrates the number of occasions each marker occurs in conjunction with an argument sequence as illustrated in (1). In addition, it represents this frequency of occurrence as a proportion of the overall frequency for each marker (in the form of a percentage value). This allows us to provide a measure of the strength of the connection between each marker and conflict sequences in family discourse.

Table 2: Frequency of use of the markers in conflict sequences in family discourse

Corpus	FAMILY		
Corpus size	176,410		
Conflict marker	Frequency	Frequency w/ argument	%
<i>well</i>	100	23	23
<i>I think</i>	100	23	23
<i>you know</i>	100	15	15
<i>yeah but*</i>	83	32	38.6
<i>I don't know</i>	50	6	12
<i>I mean</i>	42	7	16.7
<i>I don't think</i>	40	4	10
TOTAL	515	110	21

Table 2 demonstrates that this range of markers does indeed represent a successful pathway to accessing disagreement sequences in a larger dataset that has not been specifically designed to study conflict. In terms of frequency, an examination of a total of 515 occurrences of these markers yielded 110 argument sequences; therefore, these markers co-occur with argument approximately one in every five times they are used. Table 2 shows that some of the markers are more commonly associated with conflict talk than others. Although there is a wide discrepancy between the frequencies of occurrence of each marker in general, some of the markers show very similar proportions in relation to their indexing argument sequences. 23% of instances of both *well* and *I think* are associated with disagreement sequences. Between 12-15% of the occurrences of *you know* and *I don't know* co-occur with disagreement sequences, and this figure rises to 16% for *I mean*. Table 2 also demonstrates that *yeah but* is the proportionally the most frequently disagreement strategy in the family corpus. *Yeah but* is used in a disagreement sequence almost four in every ten times it occurs. This figure is almost twice the average for the markers analysed. The relative infrequent use of mitigators such as *I don't think* and *I don't know* in comparison to the *yeah but* strategy appears to support Blum-Kulka's (1997) notion of 'mitigated directness' as characteristic of family discourse where family members have licence to be more direct with one another due to the strong relationship bond between them (see also Clancy 2016).

4.2 The mitigation and structure of conflict sequences in the corpus of family discourse

The quantitative analysis presented is in no way designed to suggest that these are the only markers that index disagreement sequences in the corpus of family discourse. Rather, the analysis was designed to test the effectiveness of using markers that have been identified as prefacing conflict in the previous literature in order to locate these sequences. In doing so, a number of other questions have been raised in relation to the nature of conflict in family

discourse. Argument sequences aside, in general, family discourse appears to be characterised by lower levels of the pragmatic markers *I think* and *I mean* and, by association, *I don't know*. This is, in part, due to the strong bond that exists between family members and its role in mitigating the discourse between them (Blum-Kulka 1997; Clancy 2011; Clancy 2016). However, it has been shown that family discourse does feature more frequent occurrences of the pragmatic markers *like* and *now* than say the discourse of close friends (Clancy 2016). Table 2 shows that, from the selection of markers chosen for analysis, *yeah but* is the one most frequently associated with conflict sequences. This marker allows for brief agreement with a speaker before immediate disagreement as on three separate occasions, marked in bold, in (2):

(2)[**Context:** Participants are discussing penalty points on driving licences. Specifically, they are arguing about the number of years that penalty points, formal reprimands that have been endorsed on a driving licence record to show that a specific driving offence has been committed, remain on a driving licence]

[**Speaker information:** unknown]

<\$2> But you don't if it's points you've accumulated the year before they're still carried forward for the three years you know what I'm saying it's only if you get points this year and you don't get points next year and the year again that's when you get the clean slate.

<\$1> That's what I'm saying every three years you get a clean slate.

<\$2> **Yeah but** if you get only the points for this year are wiped out Jenny the points for the year before or the year before that aren't wiped out because the three years aren't up do you know what I'm saying?

<\$1> **Yeah but** when the three years are up.

<\$2> **Yeah but** they'll be doing them in bits so you don't really get the clean slate if you

have points gathered.

<\$1> Yeah I know.

The argument revolves around whether or not *all* penalty points accumulated are removed every three years or not, hence the *clean slate*. Speaker 1 appears to think that every three years all penalty points are removed; however, speaker 2 correctly challenges this assumption with *Yeah but they'll be doing them in bits so you don't really get the clean slate if you have points gathered*. The argument speaker 2 is making is that penalty points have a three-year life span from when they are received, not that all your penalty points accumulated over a time period of three years are simultaneously removed once this period has elapsed. The *yeah but* strategy features on three occasions, however, there are no other markers that preface the disagreement. In addition to the *yeah but* strategy, that allows for mitigated disagreement through weak agreement (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson 2000), the extract also demonstrates other strategies used in conjunction with disagreement, foremost amongst these is repetition or 'format tying' (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998:231) within the utterances using the semantic items *clean slate* and *saying*. In the extract, <\$2> twice uses *saying* in the pragmatic *do you know what I'm saying* which functions to both check understanding and appeal for solidarity. Repetition plays an important role in intimate discourse in general. Gordon (2009) argues that in family discourse, repetition functions to signal rapport, involvement and group membership (see also Tannen, 1989), whereas Tannen (2006) demonstrates its role in renegotiating, reshaping and, ultimately, resolving conflicts between couples.

The co-occurrence of the prefacing of argument with pragmatic markers either in turn medial or final position seems to be a feature of argument sequences in family discourse. This is evident in (3).

(3)[**Context:** Participants are discussing a job that <\$1> has applied for with the Central Statistics Office (CSO)]

[**Speaker information:** <\$1> daughter (21), <\$2> daughter (22)]

<\$1> Yeah I'd love to get the CSO thing you know.

<\$2> **Yeah but** that's in Cork isn't it?

<\$1> Yeah oh no it's like you could do it you know wherever you want like Cork City or I could do it in Cork East or whatever.

<\$2> And would you get a car like or something?

<\$1> You need a car like.

<\$2> Oh you need your own car.

<\$1> **Yeah but** I'll have use of the car hopefully.

<\$2> And you need a full licence or something like.

<\$1> Am well you need kind of you know a knowledge of a county and just the basics like.

Speaker 1 and 2 disagree about the suitability of the job through a series of challenges and counterclaims (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998) to speaker 1's *I'd love to get the CSO thing*. The first *yeah but* disagrees with this initial claim by offering partial agreement while at the same time offering the counterclaim that the new job would entail moving to Cork. In the extract, speaker 2 offers two further challenges using the question *And would you get a car like or something?* and the declarative *And you need a full licence or something like* which indicate that speaker 1 has neither car nor licence and further emphasises the unsuitability of the job. Speaker 1 offers two counterclaims to each of these, the second one containing the other instance of *yeah but*. In terms of the markers that have featured thus far in the analysis, the final turn in the extract is also prefaced by *well*. The two instances of *yeah but* and the occurrence of *well* in the extract preface the claims and counterclaims with the disagreement

pushed back in the turn. However, the extract is also characterised by the number of pragmatic items that appear at the end of the turns, for example, the disjunctives *or whatever* and *or something*, the tag question *isn't it?* and the marker *you know*. The extract also features six occurrences of the item *like*, three of which are the last items in their respective turns.

Clancy (2016) has shown that disjunctives are three times more frequent in the speech of intimates than in the spoken component of the BNC. Disjunctives have been shown to function interpersonally as negative politeness markers which function to hedge propositional content as inaccurate or approximate, or to indicate alternative options and express tentativeness in relation to offers, proposals and requests (Overstreet 1999; Aijmer 2013). Therefore, in (3) the disjunctives are used to mitigate the disagreement. One of the patterns that emerges from both (2) and (3) is that disagreement is being mitigated at medial or turn final position rather than at the beginning of the turn. Of interest also is the clustering of these mitigating devices at the end of the turn, for example, in (3), there are two instances where *like* and *or something* cluster. Vaughan et al. (2017) also noted this clustering in relation to vague category markers and items such as *you know* and *like*. They found that in intimate settings, such as in family discourse, vagueness is, on occasion, open to direct challenge. Therefore, armed with this knowledge, speakers sometimes add extra pragmatic items to the end of the turn which affords them an “extra dimension of interpersonal protection, thus facilitating a challenge should one be deemed necessary” (p.219). Therefore, in the data in this corpus, it seems that argument sequences are prefaced relatively infrequently using many of the markers that have been identified as frequent in the previous research. Instead, family members can disagree more immediately using strategies such as *yeah but* as they are aware that they have the option to mitigate at either turn medial or, more frequently, turn final positions (see also Clancy and Vaughan 2012).

The definition of argument sequences as three turns or more that feature sustained disagreement is also worthy of some attention here. The previous literature, perhaps because many of the datasets used have been designed specifically with the study of conflict in mind, often contains extracts in which the turns in question immediately follow one another as in (1), (2) and (3). However, intimate discourse, and indeed, unstructured, spontaneous conversation in general, is characterised by frequent overlap, interruption, latched turns, aborted utterances, co-constructed sequences and so on. Family discourse is also routinely multi-party discourse which often leads to multiple conversations simultaneously taking place amongst family members with these often intertwined together resulting in what might appear to be, on the surface, messy transcripts. This phenomenon is manifest in (4):

(4)[**Context:** Participants are arguing about the geographical location of Bath in the United Kingdom.

<\$O> indicates the beginning, and <\\$O>, the end of a speaker overlap. + final indicates an interrupted utterance; + initial indicates a resumed utterance]

[**Speaker information:** <\$1> mother, <\$2> son (age 24), <\$5> son (age 14), <\$6> father]

<\$2> <\$H> I think it's near Bath <\\$H>.

<\$6> It's not far from Bath is it?

<\$2> I'm not sure actually now.

<\$6> I think tis near to+

<\$1> Bath. I thought Bath was by the sea.

<\$2> So did I yeah I thought Bath <\$O> was close enough <\\$O> to the sea.

<\$6> <\$O> No no <\\$O> <\$O> Bath <\\$O> is inland.

<\$5> <\$O> There's am <\\$O>+

<\$1> Tisint.

<\$5> +two+

<\$2> It is yeah it <\$O> is but it's <\\$O> not far inland.

<\$6> <\$O> It is inland <\\$O>.

In (4), the speakers are arguing about the geographical location of Bath in the United Kingdom; speaker 6 (the father) is sure that Bath is inland, whereas speakers 1 and 2 (the mother and an older male sibling respectively) think it is close to the sea. The sequence features some turn prefacing using *I think/I thought* and there are other devices such as *yeah...but* and vague language such as *not far* and *close enough*. However, speaker 5 (a younger male sibling) is also involved in the conversation although not in the disagreement sequence. He is reading information about this area in the UK directly from a computer screen but is being ignored and regularly interrupted by the other speakers. This interruption is unproblematic and does not lead to further disagreement due to the “unequal intimates” (Blum-Kulka 1997:37) relationship that exists in the family. Family discourse is, by definition, hierarchical with parents holding more conversational power than children. This power relationship is often assumed and accepted and, therefore, largely unproblematic. In terms of disagreement sequences therefore, again the unique characteristics of the family discourse lead to a reconsideration of what has been previously demonstrated in the study of conflict talk. In family discourse, it is possible for argument sequences to take place where the turns are not necessarily physically adjacent to one another but may be embedded within longer sequences that are interspersed with other participants engaged in other conversations. Therefore, rather than referring to these episodes as sequences in relation to family discourse, it might be that they need to be reconsidered as ‘exchanges’ (see Hoey 1993; Clancy 2002).

5. Conclusion

It is argued here that intimate relationships, of which the family is the totem, bear witness to participants engaged in a never-ending process of the negotiation of closeness (Bochner

1984; Tannen 2005; Turner and West 2006; Placencia 2008). This negotiation is invariably characterised by both convergence and conflict. Analysing naturally-occurring instances of conflict presents the researcher with difficulties in firstly accessing instances of intimate interaction and then identifying wherein the negotiation of closeness, in the form of conflict episodes, is occurring. The previous research suggests that speakers distance themselves from disagreement through the prefacing of turns using a range of different linguistic markers such as *well*, *I think* or *I mean*. The present study used a corpus of family discourse gleaned from the larger Limerick Corpus of Irish English, in order to examine patterns of co-occurrence of a specific set of linguistic markers within disagreement sequences in intimate talk. The use of a corpus pragmatic approach revealed the frequency with which these markers index disagreement sequences in Irish family discourse – approximately one in every five instances of their use. Another pattern unearthed was the identification of the *yeah but* strategy, which facilitates brief agreement and then immediate disagreement, as the marker proportionally most frequently associated with the prefacing of disagreement in the data. Indeed, in relation to the markers examined, it is presented as central to family disagreement sequences in the corpus. The *yeah but* strategy could arguably be one of the linguistic resources available to family members which allows them an accepted way to quickly facilitate participation in conflict episodes, akin to Ventola's (1979) observation that friends who know each other for a long period of time use fewer approach strategies (such as ice breakers or small talk) and move more quickly toward registering their full involvement in the conversation. Naturally, these findings are not presented as universal given that they emerged from one corpus, however, as the analytic method is, in part, extrapolated from a set of linguistic hooks shown in other studies to preface disagreement, the results represent important potential patterns for testing against similar datasets.

The analysis also revealed that family members can employ *yeah but* to become more quickly involved in conflict sequences safe in the knowledge that mitigation in the form of markers such as *like*, disjunctives such as *or whatever* or tag questions can be performed later in the turn. This use of terminal mitigation, coupled with other involvement strategies such as co-operative overlap and interruption, may also contribute to non-sequential disagreement where the speaker turns are not physically adjacent to one another. Intimate discourse is by no means a simple symmetrical discourse; instead it is characterised by frequent overlap, interruption, abrupt topic change and short turns with little inter-turn pausing. Family discourse is also often multi-party which, in the analysis presented here at least, can result in more than one conversation occurring simultaneously between family members. This may trigger non-sequential conflict episodes where turns do not take place in an orderly fashion but instead form one thread woven into the conversational tapestry that is the on-going discourse of being a family. Corpus pragmatics is still a relatively new field and, as corpus annotation schema evolve, it is here that future research will unearth further insights into the linguistic patterning characteristic of the fabric of the perpetual (re)negotiation of intimacy in family discourse.

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