CONFLICT TALK AND NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Conflict is seen disrupting and even threatening human beings, physically or mentally. However, conflict is also considered a useful way to build people’s identity and to acquire skill in negotiation. To get insight those effects, recognising the structure of conflict is crucial. In this paper, I am examining of how conflict is enacted, escalated, and terminated as well as the role of narrative in conflict. The study of conflict talk is important particularly for stake holders, as it will give better understanding to possibly reduce the dangerous risk of conflict talk and to create such a programme in conflict resolution.

INTRODUCTION

For some people conflict is often associated with something bad which should be avoided, while some others view conflict as something that brings positive effects. Conflict is believed to be devastating which can be harmful in nature as it threatens someone else both physically and psychologically (Smith 2003) but it is also assured that conflict can also be very helpful in building children’s identity and helping them to acquire negotiation skill and cultural values (Goodwin in Corsaro and Rizzo, 1990:24). In order to get vivid description of the problems and the effects of conflict on the disputants and others, addressing the nature and the aspects underlying conflict becomes crucial.

An enormous amount of research on conflict have been carried out ranging from conflict resolution (Glinow, Shapiro, Brett, 2004 &Vuchinich, 1990), conflict prevention (Hunter, Elias, Norris, 2001), conflict settings such as in family, schools and organization (Eder, 1990 & O’Donnel, 1990), to conflict mechanism including nature, object, access and claims, as well as argument in conflict talk (Corzarro & Rizzo, 1990; Goodwin & Godwin, 1990). Studies on conflict have also been conducted from the views of many different disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, education, linguistic, and any others. Psychologists study the effects of conflict on the sufferers’ mental health and find the results of the intervention programmes for mental rehabilitation, educators view conflict from the educational perspective by doing an action research or designing curriculum for conflict prevention and resolution in order to solve the conflict problems in the classroom, while linguists try to understand conflict from the language used such as in reporting conflict or as a tool in conflict negotiation.
However, relatively little attention has been paid to conflict talk or oppositional practices in intercultural communication particularly in school setting. Similarly, the availability of the sources for conflict such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, and other social factors in connection to discourse practices need to be explored, as there has been a close relationship between talk, discourse used by the disputants and conflict or violence. Talk is used to claim in children disputing (Corsaro and Rizzo, 1990); talk is also used as a ritual insult (Labov, 1977). In addition, talk is also able to terminate conflict if one of the opponents withdraws from the confrontation (Vuchinich, 1990). This means that talk plays a pivotal role in enacting conflict among students and also serves as a useful instrument to resolve problems.

THE PHENOMENON OF SCHOOL CONFLICT IN RECENT TIME

The number of student fights of different schools in Indonesia has been increasing recently and surprisingly the fights not only occur among students from secondary school level but also from primary school level. This condition forces the government to take serious measures as an effort to reduce the conflicts among those students. As reported recently in several national newspapers that the Minister of Education issues a warning that third year students involved in students fight will not be allowed to take the national exam. The consequence of not taking the national exam is that they cannot graduate from related education level and therefore they are strongly recommended to take the re-exam in the following year or to take other possible alternative that is called as “Paket A” which equals to the national examination. As a result of not taking the national exam, the students will not be given the certificate of graduation which is usually used to apply for jobs or to pursue higher education level.

That the government should take actions demonstrate how serious school conflict is. This concern is also obvious from the efforts that have been taken by the government to reduce the number of school conflict by merging two schools which always involve in the conflict; however, the number of conflict is still increasing, perhaps school conflict has been very long time perceived as a school tradition, as it is reported that the school conflict has happened since many years (www.pelitaonline.com). The merging of the schools potentially creates another problem. The schools doubled in number of students resulting in difficulties in handling bullying and conflict. It is in line with what Garbarino and DeLara (2004:403) said about the “feeling safer” within smaller schools. They assert that the fewer number of
students, the bigger chance for them to know each other. Knowing each other also helps them to prepare and predict the misbehaviour of others.

While Birch (2009), Samovar and Porter (1991) assert that pervasive different goals among participants and different social economic, religion and inequality right tend to be a trigger of conflict. Smith further explains that the factors commonly contribute to the school violence are “nationality, socio-economic, type of school, and pupil characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, social class, and family background” (2003:6). Following Birch, Samovar and Porter, it is obvious that Indonesia has all potential characteristics to have school conflict and violence. The geographical factors, the diverse ethnicity and religion, the increasing inequality of socioeconomic factors, and the academic system which pressing the students are easily being a source for students to have frictions.

Although there has not been any research conducted on the causes of students fights in Indonesia but it can be said that one of the common reasons of the fights is merely a case of misunderstanding among students as a result of the act of mocking each other. Cartledge and Johnson (2004) state that misunderstanding is highly affected by the failure of seeing others properly, this is because of diverse background knowledge the people have. In this sense, misunderstanding followed by disagreement in dealing with such issues is considered as a fundamental factor to conflict (Morsey and Ivey 1996).

To get insights into conflict, it is necessary to include the functions of the conflict in social relationship. FitzGerald (2003) views male conflict as a symbol of closeness, sincerity and spontaneity, while conflict for female is seen as a tool for keeping relationship in their interaction. Therefore, it is characterised that male conflict is coloured by the dominance of others (Goodwin, 1998), orientation of autonomy (Adler, Kless, and Adler, 1992), and full of competitiveness (Coates, 1994). The research done by Goodwin & Goodwin (1990:93) in a sling-shot battle has indicated the competitiveness among male is pervasive.

In addition, social and situational context also contribute to the structure of conflict talk. The people from South Europe does not share the same patterns of conflict talk as of East Asian, Latin American also shows different style of confrontation compared to South East Asian (FitzGerald, 2003). It can be said that cultural groups perform different kinds of conflict patterns. Indonesian might be possible to perform differently when they engaged in conflict compared to those of, for example, Malaysian or Singaporean.
THE NATURE OF CONFLICT TALK

Conflict is ubiquitously and pervasively found in human life whether it is in the form of verbal or physical conflict. Eisenberg and Garvey (1981:150) propose the definition of conflict as “an interaction which grows out of an opposition to request for action, an assertion, or and action...and ends with a resolution or dissipation of conflict”. Opposition seems to be the key in defining conflict where as stated by (Sheldon, 1993) it is a result from incompatibility in wants, goals and behaviour. Another point to consider in conflict definition is that there is an interaction between the parties, which uses language, gestures, or other related communication instruments as a response from other actions.

The definition of conflict particularly in relation to conflict talk is quite complex as many disciplines such as sociology, politic, linguistic, and education are involved on this area. Various definitions related to conflict such as insults, disputes, disagreement, opposition, mediation, negotiation might be just a few to propose. Grimshaw in Stewart and Maxwell (2010) for example presents conflict talk “...to capture the notion that parties occupy alternative positions vis-à-vis the same issue or issues. These positions may be reconcilable or irreconcilable, and the discourse within the event(s) is not restricted to a particular speech act, turn sequence, or issue” (pp. 12).

One thing to point out in discussing conflict talk is that the different position between the parties. Tannen (1990:149) asserts that conflict happens “if someone cannot stand on the other’s foot although they are on the same spot”. This means that the parties are in the opposite of rapport and affiliation. This attribution is supported by Vuchinich (1990:118) who states that conflict talk refers to the opposing position between or among disputants in “successive turn at talk”. Hutchby (1996) agrees to define conflict talk as the confrontation of talk. He further explains that aggressive interruptive overlapping is the characteristic of the conflict talk.

Dispute in Corsaro & Rizzo (1990) and ritual insult in Labov (1977) can also be used to describe the nature of conflict talk. Dispute shown by pre-schoolers when claiming their belongings in the playing activities and the rejection of claiming shown by other students in Corsaro and Rizzo’ work provides an understanding towards the definition of conflict talk.

The confrontation talk is also illustrated by Labov during the investigation towards the ritual insults occurred in urban city of New York. He pointed out that when a young Black English practice ritual insult to attack others such as “your mother looks like a taxi driver”, using part of the body such as “your mother so old she can stretch her head and lick out her ass” (ibid:...
and the opponents attack him back by using verbal disputes it indicates that there have been oppositional activities which refers to conflict talk. In this sense, conflict talk is not viewed seriously rather it is intended for having fun (Clark et al, 1996).

In line with Vuchinich and Hutchby’s idea, Webber & Kyriacou (2010) emphasise that conflict talk as confronting moves or negative reactions is accounted as the inversion of appreciation and congratulations. Although Webber & Kyriacou view conflict talk in academic discussion unlike conflict in outer academic setting in term of the discourse used, following the concept of disagreement, the oppositional positions among the participants is regarded as conflict talk. They provide an example of academic conflict talk such as, “It’s just not correct until this has been proven; maybe I disagree with Dr G. And I agree with you” (ibid: 89). What can be drawn here is that conflict talk is not restricted to high tension of conflicting situation rather it is more on the opposition and argument among disputants in their verbal communicative interaction.

Although conflict and disagreement are slightly different in terms of their entailment, conflict entails disagreement while disagreement does not always entail conflict (Smith, Peterson, and Leung, 1998); following the concept of Grimshaw, Hutchby and Webber & Kyriacou in connection with conflict talk, every talk in which participants can be seen as opposing each other can be included as conflict talk.

To easily identify the notion of conflict talk, the terms disputes, disagreement, and argument are interchangeably used. In more specific, conflict talk which refers to only on individual and group conflict rather than organisation and academic conflict is preferred.

CONFLICT TALK AND ARGUMENT

What constitutes in conflict talk? Researchers say that argument is the core in the communicative practices. Argument supports and constructs the ways in which conflict talk is going to continue or not. In other word, argument is crucial in conflicting situation. Clark et al (1996) in their research reveal that children who do not have argument in conflict are associated with “basket case”. This entails that argument heavily contributes to the confrontation and opposition where the two involved parties are not willing to be the basket case and the competition to achieve its higher position is inevitably for them.

Understanding that argument is crucial in maintaining the position, getting insights the structure of arguments will benefit to clarify the extent to which the disputants use it in their conflict discourse. Based on the work of Toulmin 1958 cited in Draper, 1988 argument consists of a claim and backing. “A claim (an asserted proposition of the world) is supported
by data and warrant” (ibid: 21). To support his argument, he further provides an example “Peterson is not Roman Catholic (claim) because he is Swede (datum) and very few Swedes are Roman Catholic (warrant)” (ibid: 21). It can be said that before someone is able to make claim he/she should have datum and warrant.

However, in conflicting situation particularly for male, the structure of argument is not necessarily needed because the orientation of conflict talk is for achieving higher position. In this sense, disputants will deploy a particular strategy to achieve that goal regardless for example, the datum and the warrant to support their argument. It is what Lein and Brenneis (1978) said about conflict talk pattern, namely “repetition, escalation, and inversion”. The first type of conflict talk refers to the same pattern of the first speaker’s talk to reply or attach his/her opponent. When the first speaker said “you are goat” then the second speaker reply by the using same pattern like “you are pig”. This pattern is used as the strategy to maintain the equal position.

The second type of the conflict talk structure is that when each of the speakers tries to use higher intonation or the worse meaning than the previous talk or by employing the name of the object that is perceived to be able to have higher impact on the first speaker, “you are ugly” then replied the opponent by saying “you are uglier”. While the third type is that the strategy to use inversion from the previous speaker, for example, when the first speaker said, “you are stupid”, the opponent will reply by saying the inversion “no, you are stupid”.

CONFLICT TALK AND THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN CONFLICT

Sinetron is one of the most popular programmes on television which is commonly watched by various ages; children, teenager, and adult people. Although sinetron is mostly exaggerated in term of its story and actions but it can also be used to represent the daily life condition, particularly in this study is in a school setting. A sinetron which might be able to depict the representation of the students conflict talk is Cinta Bersemi di Putih Abu-Abu broadcasted by SCTV. The following is the extracts of this sinetron episode 023 part 1 obtained from youtube.

In discussing this episode, at least three parts of the conflict course is identified. The first excerpt (extract 1) shows how conflict talk is enacted. The second part, shown in extract 2 relates to the escalation of the conflict talk to be more serious and the last part is the resolution of the conflict talk as shown in extract 3. In short, the analysis of these extracts
begins with the identification of how conflict talk is enacted, developed, and resolved then is followed by the role of narrative in conflict.

The initial problem occurs when Luna is stopped by three students in front of the gate. These students then hold her bike so that she is unable to move. While holding the bike, they tease and provoke Luna so that she is very scarce. Trying to touch her cheek and provoking her not to go to school is one of the ways to make Luna scarce.

Extract 1

7 Boy 1: Eits...mad (holding Luna’s bike), (are you) alone, aren’t you?
8 Boy 2: Where is your boyfriend who usually takes you (to school)
9 Luna: move away„I want to go
10 Boy 3: where are you going to go? (you are) beautiful but ferocious
11 Boy 1: her beauty is only appearance, actually
12 Boy 2: the cycle is cute, isn’t it?
13 Boy 1: yeah...(while holding the horn) what’s this?
14 Luna: release it!
15 Boy 1 & 2: ohh...(wondering)
17 Boy 2: Just get acquaintance but (she) dares to touch...(she is) noisy, isn’t she?
18 Boy 1: I want too (to be touched) please...(trying to touch Luna’s cheek)
19 Luna: I have said. Move away. I want to go.
20 Boy 3: why are you in a hurry, where are you going to go?
21 Stay with us...go to school? It’s no point
22 Boy 2: yeah
23 Boy 1: be absent once will be fine, isn’t it?
24 Boy 2: yeah...
25 Luna: (shouting) Security...someone bothers me (escape)
26 Boy 1, 2 & 3 (look around). Where are you going...

The above extract has shown that three of the students want to make a trouble with Luna as well as her boyfriend, Alex (line 8-23). Moreover in line 18 indicates how they try to touch Luna and line 21 provoking her to leave the school.

The following extract is about the escalation of the conflict talk and the possibility to develop into violence.

Extract 2

32 Alex: oh, you are who have bothered my girlfriend. What actually do you want,
34 bother my girl friend?(you) Just make a trouble..
35 Boy 1: don’t over reacting Lex, take it easy
36 Boy 2: The girl you protect. (she is) worthless.
37 Boy 3: you don’t like if your girlfriend is bothered?
38 Boy 1: yeah..you don’t like
39 Alex: ohh.....you challenge me?
Conflict often happens when two of the parties are in the equal position and both of them are unwilling to draw from the confrontation. The aspects which contribute to this situation might be because they do not want to be a basket case (loser) and possibly both of them share similar conflict style, dominating (Cai & Fink (2002) where the characteristic of the person who owns this style is seeing others lower than himself and he/she strongly feels that he/she would be able to defeat the opponent. Line 32 provides information of how Alex ascertains that the boys really bother his girlfriend. Instead of denying the accusation, the boys tend to underestimate Alex’s girlfriend and offer the opportunity to have further reactions (line 37 & 38). This offering is responded by Alex by asking them to have physical conflict (line 39). This extract shows that both parties compete to maintain higher position. If this happens, conflict and violence may be occurs. This extract also indicates that conflict talk could be possible to escalate into violence and violence commonly is preceded by conflict talk.

The next extract is about how the resolution is achieved through the negotiation about changing physical conflict to the basketball competition.

Extract 3

40 M1: Stop-stop.....it’s not the right time again to have physical conflict.
41 How about having 3 on 3 basketball competition.
42 To make it fair, who losses the game should say sorry,
43 what do you think?
44 Boy 1: who’s afraid. Playing basketball 3 on 3 against all of you, closing my eyes,
45 I am winning.
44 M1: don’t be boastful. Let’s prove it after school. I am waiting after school.
45 Boy 1: who’s afraid, I am waiting too..let’s see
46 M2: let’s go men

Conflict termination may occur if one opponent withdraws from the conversational activity (Vuchinich, 1990) or maybe there is an outsider who is able to offer a solution which is perceived by both of the parties as the best solution to calm down the situation. Line 40 shows that the outsider (M1) proposes the argument that physical conflict is obviously obsolete by offering a solution to have basketball competition. The disputants agree with the solution from M1 (line 43) because both of them think that will have the chance to win the competition. One opponent is confident to be able to defeat others while Alex and friends also feel that they will be able to win the competition.
Having discussed the course of conflict talk, this following is about discussing the role of narrative to enact conflict. The following extract shows how Luna’s story can influence the hearers to have actions.

Extract 4

27    Luna : uh..uh..(breathless)
28    Alex, M1, 2 & 3: Luna are you ok? Lun..what’s happen? What’s happening Lun?
29    Luna: Oh dear...when I want to enter this school, those boys who have ever played basketball with our school bothered me Lex.
30    Oh dear....how lucky I am, I can escape.
31    Swear, I am scarce Lex
32    Alex: what? Damn..how brave they are;
33    I will let them regret to be born in this world.
34    Ok now you can go, let me and them (Alex’ friends) take care of it

It can be seen from line 29-32 of how Luna narrates her story about having bothered by three students in front of the school gate. She dramatizes her story by acting as if she were run after the crimes (line 27) and is followed by her description about the doers by identifying with a group of students who have ever competed with their school in basketball competition. Her story seems powerful in invoking the emotion and anger of the hearers. Line 33 shows that Alex gets very angry after hearing Luna’s story. “Damn..how brave they are”. Then he said that he will fight the boys (line 34). This is what Briggs’ (1996) argument about the role of narrative which can invoke others’ people involvement in conflicting situation.

CONCLUSION

What can be drawn from this study in line with narrative is that narrative in one side plays significant role to stir up trouble in conflict talk (Brenneis, 1996) but in other side narrative is powerful to reveal the sequence of events in conflict talk. The traditional structure of narrative (Labov, 1976; Labov & Waletzki, 1977) consists of 1). abstract (the initial component and sometimes is regarded as a summary of a story), 2) orientation (settings of place, time and the actors of the story), 3) complicating action and resolution (the heart of the story), 4) evaluation (aspect of story that can be explicit or embedded as when narrator comments such as ‘it was so funny’), and 5) coda (the last comment come after the resolution of the story) can be used to trace of how a particular event more specifically in this study conflict talk is developed into violence.

Therefore, it is beneficial for the teachers or stake holders to use narrative as an instrument to reveal students conflict from the emic perspective, from the point of view of narrators whose
stories are from their lived experience. Moreover, tracing and recognising of how conflict is enacted, escalated, and terminated including the settings of who, where, when can be done through narrative story.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


