
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conflict Talks between Couples in *Modern Family* Based on Speech Act Theory

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ABSTRACT

Conflict talk, also known as controversial discourse, is a kind of confrontational communicative behavior arising from differences between two or more parties in views, interests and desires. This study regards conflict talk as a kind of compound speech act. Based on the observation and interpretation of the linguistic data, this study mainly collects the conflict talks between couples in the American sitcom *Modern Family* and adopts both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze the pragmatic characteristics and pragmatic functions of the conflict talks between American couples from the perspective of locutionary act, illocutionary act, perlocutionary effect on the theoretical basis of the speech act theory. The research verifies the feasibility of speech act theory in analyzing conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family*. It helps us to understand conflict talks between couples from the point of pragmatics better.

KEYWORDS

Speech Act Theory; conflict talks; between couples; *Modern Family*

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1. Introduction

Conflict talk refers to a state of conflict between two or more parties due to differences in views or positions. It is a very common and complex language phenomenon in human communication activities. The study of conflict talk has broad space. Since the late 1970s, many scholars at home and abroad have studied conflict talk from different fields, such as philosophy, rhetoric, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and linguistics. According to the existing literature, the vast majority of articles study the conflict from the perspective of three stages, including the beginning, development and end of the conflict, but there is a little pragmatic discussion about conflict talk based on the speech act theory and even less research about the conflict talks between couples in the American sitcom *Modern Family*.

Speech act theory, one of the most classical theories proposed by the British philosopher John Austin in the late 1950s and early 1960s, is of great significance in the pragmatic study of language. Austin (1962) put forward his main idea, "to say something is to do something", "by saying or in saying something we are doing something". The essence of a speech act is the communicative intention conveyed by a speaker through discourse. Whether we are making a request to someone or apologizing to others, we are performing speech acts as long as the words we say convey certain communicative intentions and accomplish certain functions. Austin's speech act theory revealed a model which explained how acts were performed by means of language. And he suggested that a speaker might be performing three kinds of acts simultaneously when speaking: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act (Austin, 1962).

After the emergence of Austin's speech act theory, a large number of scholars started to discuss and study it in the 1960s and 70s. The famous American philosopher-linguist John Searle has revised and developed the speech act theory, reclassifying Austin's classification of illocutionary act. Searle (1981) divided the illocutionary acts into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations.

Based on the speech act theory, this paper analyzes the conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family*. Discussing the characteristics of the different speech act of conflict talk can make readers understand this complex linguistic phenomenon more thoroughly and help enrich the relevant exploration of conflict talk in the field of pragmatics. Moreover, this research is conducive to making conflict talk more understandable and logical and to avoiding and alleviating the occurrence of conflict among family members, especially between couples. To a large extent, it also contributes to establishing a harmonious family and society.

The study mainly collects the conflict talks between couples in the American sitcom *Modern Family*, then analyzes the pragmatic characteristics and pragmatic functions of the conflict talks between American couples on the theoretical basis of the speech act theory. The paper will adopt both qualitative and quantitative approaches to deal with the following questions:

- (1) What physical characteristics are involved in the locutionary acts of the conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family*?
- (2) What types of illocutionary acts are used by the participants in the conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family*? How often are they applied respectively?
- (3) What perlocutionary effects are brought about by the conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family*?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Definition of Conflict Talk

The study of conflict talk began in the 1960s, but so far, scholars at home and abroad have not reached a unified opinion on its definition.

Grimshaw (1990) was the first scholar to propose the term "conflict talk". In his view, conflict talk is a kind of verbal interaction in human communication, which refers to such confrontational speech acts as quarrels, disputes, squabbles, arguments and the like. In conflict talks, the participants take different opinions or positions on the same event and object to the other person's words or actions in turn, regardless of whether the conflict can be reconciled. Barki and Hartwick (2004:234) put forward the idea that conflict talk refers to a dynamic process of interaction between interdependent parties in communication about their negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the realization of their pragmatic intentions. In the view of Zhao Yingling (2004:37), conflict talk is treated as a general term that includes many kinds of speech acts and speech events. She suggests that conflict talk arises when one side of the communication objects to the other side's utterances or actions, and both sides have different opinions about someone or something.

Conflict talk is a dynamic process of mutual communication. In the process of communicative activities, due to different interests, opinions, positions, attitudes or communication needs held by the participants, there may be arguments, quarrels, objections, rebuttals or other confrontational verbal acts between them. Such discourses and verbal acts are collectively referred to as conflict talk. Conflict talk involves the specific stages in the whole process of dynamic generation, so it is a kind of compound speech act.

2.2 Previous Studies of Conflict Talk

Before the 1990s, the study of conflict talk in the field of foreign linguistics was mostly discussed from the perspective of speech act and communicative interaction, focusing more on the event itself and human behavior and less on language characteristics and discourse composition. In the 1990s, Grimshaw (1990) used new perspectives and directions to study conflict talk. Their research initially focused on the linguistic structure of conflict events and then concentrated on language strategies in the process of conflict, as well as the construction and embodiment of consciousness form and self-image in conflict talk.

In terms of sociolinguistics, S. Phillips (1990) argued that in American courts, the intervention of judges as a third party could have a mitigating effect in the event of a conflict between the two parties. Boxer (2002) believed that the social cause of conflict talk is the difference between the two sides in gender, social distance, social status and power. Liu Yong (2012) took the conflict talk in *Country Love* as the research object discussed the characteristics and management strategies of conflict talk between father and son under the relationship of power disparity.

In terms of pragmatics, P. Muntigl and W. Turnbull (1998) discussed the structure of conflict talk in a paper published in the journal *Pragmatics*. Herring (1996) noted the phenomenon of pragmatic conflict in computer-mediated communication. Ran Yongping (2010) has studied conflict talk in terms of pragmatics. He expounds on the definition of conflict talk and discusses the characteristics of conflict talk, summarizes the results of the research on conflict talk at home and abroad from different angles and talks about the prospect for further explorations of the research topics and scope of conflict talk. Xu Shuyao (2019) described the language strategy of conflict talks between couples in *Desperate Housewives* on the theoretical basis of the cooperation principle. Her study is of great theoretical and practical significance for further grasping the relation between gender differences and the use of language strategy.

The relevant research makes not only a concrete study of the structural characteristics of conflict talk but also the conflict talk under the influence of different context factors, which broaden the field of view for the further study of conflict talk.

From what has been mentioned above, we can know that the previous studies of conflict talk abroad involve many fields. However, this research is apparently different since both the linguistic data and the research angle is less appeared in previous studies. This thesis studies the conflict talks between couples in the American sitcom *Modern Family* based on the speech act theory and analyzes their pragmatic characteristics and pragmatic functions in detail, which include not only the linguistic characteristics but also the development of conflict talk.

2.3 Previous Studies of the Sitcom *Modern Family*

Modern Family, a sitcom presented in mockumentary style, has been well-loved by the audience since its release and has won the Emmy Award five times in a row as the best comedy. So far, there have been many scholars taking *Modern Family* as the research object and studying it from various perspectives. And this thesis mainly reviews the studies of the sitcom *Modern Family* from three aspects.

In terms of pragmatics, Zhang Jing (2018) studied the conflict talk among family members in *Modern Family*, categorized the patterns of conflict talk, and used memetics and conversational analysis to try to construct a related theoretical model and explain the various stages of conflict talk. Li Xue (2019), taking *Modern Family* as the research object, analyzed the gender differences in language use by adopting Grice's Cooperation Principle. She has found that women are more inclined to cooperate and often use certain means to make the conversation go smoothly, while men usually violate the Cooperation Principle for various communicative purposes, such as maintaining face or avoiding embarrassment.

In terms of translation, Liu Rong (2015), under the guidance of functional equivalence theory, analyzed four translation methods of subtitles of American sitcoms based on the translation of *Modern Family*, which include condensation, addition, domestication and annotation. Jiang Jian (2016), taking *Modern Family* as the research subject, has found that Andrew Chesterman's translation ethics can well provide guidance and theoretical help for the translation of humorous subtitles in sitcoms.

In terms of sociology, Guo Meiting (2016:228) discussed the differences and similarities in family culture between China and America through the research on *Modern Family*. Shang Peipei (2017) discussed the transformation in both family patterns, family functions and family relationships of contemporary Americans based on the cases picked from *Modern Family*.

3. Methodology

The main two research methods of this paper are qualitative and quantitative analysis. Firstly, collect sufficient conflict talks between couples from the American sitcom *Modern Family*. After manual statistics, the relevant data will be classified and analyzed.

Based on Searle's speech act theory, this paper analyzes the conflict talks between American couples from the perspective of locutionary act, illocutionary act, perlocutionary effect. Among them, the illocutionary acts are classified according to Austin's speech act theory, and then the frequency of each sub-type is calculated. Next, the statistical results of the data are analyzed in the qualitative approach in order to try to find pragmatic features.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Locutionary Acts of the Conflict Talks between Couples in *Modern Family*

According to Austin (1962), a locutionary act refers to the movement of one's vocal organs to generate a series of sounds that contain a definite sense and reference. To carry out what Austin called a "locutionary act" is to utter words of particular form and meaning. Thus, a locutionary act is a meaningful act performed by means of syntax, lexicon and phonology, emphasizing the literal meaning.

The thesis analyzes in detail the locutionary acts of the conflict talks between couples in *f* from the perspective of syntactic characteristics.

4.1.1 Rhetorical Questions

There are a large number of rhetorical questions in *Modern Family*, which are mostly used in conflict talks and thus become a prominent feature of conflict talks. Conflict talks are obviously confrontational and negative. The behaviors in the course of the conflict, such as negation, resistance, blame and abuse, reflect the dissatisfaction of speakers, and rhetorical questions have the pragmatic function of helping speakers to express negative emotions. Speakers also use rhetorical questions to convey instructions and requirements, which can enhance the force of utterances to deter others or further intensify the conflict. Therefore, the study of the prominent characteristics of conflict talks has to refer to rhetorical questions.

Example 1

Claire: Phil, why didn't you just tell me?

Phil: Save it, Claire. I know you put the hit out on my bear slippers.

Claire: Those are just very unsexy.

Phil: Oh, cause you always dress so sexy? Let's check out this nightwear. Luke's junior high gym shorts and the drawstring is an old shoelace.

Claire: Well, at least I'm not one of those wives that spends a fortune on lingerie. I mean, look, when the shoelace broke, I fixed it with a staple.

Phil: Well, why don't we add a little spice for our vacation? I mean, Gloria wears a floor-length, beaded nightgown to bed.

(Season 9, Episode 16)

In the above example, both Claire and Phil use rhetorical questions but do not really ask a question. In fact, Claire thinks that Phil should tell her what he has done, while Phil thinks that Claire should add spice for their vacation. Both of them use rhetorical questions to show their discontent and convey their requirements at the same time.

4.1.2 Imperative Sentences

Imperative sentences are to ask the other side to do or not to do something, which usually expresses a request, command, or advice. In *Modern Family*, imperative sentences, mostly found in the conflict talks, make the speaker's words more strong and more powerful. And negative imperative sentences sometimes can express the speaker's strong disapproval or harsh criticism of certain actions.

Example 2

Jay: Please don't throw the remote again.

Gloria: Oh, I was just, like, trying to get a signal. Don't blame me for breaking the other ones. One got stepped on, and the other one fell down the garbage disposal.

Jay: You're not even trying.

Gloria: Anyways, stop worrying about the remote control and worry about your own dog. She's peeing in the corner. Maybe if you ever leave her outside, she will guard us, and we wouldn't need cameras.

Jay: First of all, Stella's not peeing in the corner because I housebroke her myself. Second of all, no dog of mine should ever have to work.

(Season 8, Episode 2)

In the example, Jay tells Gloria that she should not throw the remote again. He is actually blaming Gloria. Next, Gloria understands his words and responds with words in the same pattern of imperative sentences in order to make her words more powerful. Then the argument goes on.

4.1.3 Negative Sentences

Negative sentences are mainly used to make a negative judgment on entities or negate an existing proposition. Conflict talks are formed because of different interests, opinions, positions, attitudes or communication needs held by the participants, so negative sentences are widely used to negate the other side's opinions or ideas in the course of conflict talks. Generally speaking, negation plays an important role in the development of conflicts.

Example 3

Claire: There's no shame in admitting defeat.

Phil: You don't understand. He's getting tired.

Claire: He's not tired. That's the point. He's a machine.

Phil: Just once, would you believe in me?! As my wife, aren't you supposed to be my... Rock! Damn it!

(Season 9, Episode 2)

In the example, "He's not tired" is obviously the negation of "He's getting tired". Claire straightly expresses his opinion different from Phil's. It is the direct reason for the conflict developing.

4.1.4 Repetition

Repetition, as a common structure in language use, is one of the important means of language communication. It is a linguistic phenomenon that shows its unique needs for expression and pragmatic functions. In the course of conflict talks, the speaker is usually emotional and often use repetitive words to achieve the goal of emphasizing and venting emotions. Therefore, repetition greatly contributes to the expression of utterance in conflict talks. Repetitive words can accentuate the tone, make the common verbal behavior such as negation, complaint, provocation more powerful, and sometimes further intensify the conflict.

Example 4

Jay: You owe me and Chuck Norris an apology. But I'm talking about the dent in your car. Did you hit something we can talk about, or should I hose the front and find a body shop that doesn't ask questions?

Gloria: I didn't hit anything. Someone must have hit me when I was inside the store with Joe. But talking about accidents, if your dog pees one more time in one of my slippers, I may accidentally leave her at the beach.

Jay: I would never let that happen. And don't lash out at her. If you crashed the car, just tell me.

Gloria: I didn't. And I don't appreciate being called a liar.

Jay: Are you kidding? You can never admit to making a mistake, and it drives me crazy.

(Season 9, Episode 3)

In the above example, Gloria repeated "I didn't" twice to refute Jay. In the conflict talk, Gloria uses repetition to express her strong denial, rebuttal and dissatisfaction to Jay.

4.2 Illocutionary Acts of the Conflict Talks between Couples in Modern Family

An illocutionary act refers to the act performed by "uttering" and accomplished by means of speech. In other words, it is contained in the locutionary act. Generally speaking, an illocutionary act expresses the force of a command. Therefore, an illocutionary act is to utter the words which can make the speech powerful in a particular context. It is the act of expressing the speaker's intention, emphasizing the behavior performed at the same time as speaking.

This thesis classifies the illocutionary acts of the conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family* based on Austin's speech act theory, including five types: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations.

4.2.1 Assertives

An illocutionary act of assertives, also known as a representative, refers to the act of telling what the speaker firmly believes to be true or right. When performing this type of act, the speaker must make his utterances accord with the objective reality, which at least he considers to be true. Statements of assertions, facts, beliefs, truths can be seen as the most typical of the assertives.

An illocutionary act of assertive is to tell something or a message that the speaker believes to be true. In daily communication, the speaker's description or explanation of objective facts may lead to conflict talks. However, it is not the direct reason for the conflict. It is the listener's completely different opinions and negative emotions, such as discontent, that actually cause the conflict. According to the statistics, there are 32 assertives in the linguistic data collected from *Modern Family*, accounting for 37.65% of the total.

Example 5

Claire: I let you win.

Phil: You what?

Claire: Oh, I had you beat, easily. I didn't even break a sweat. As a matter of fact, I almost pulled a muscle holding back. But, I saw how much it meant to you, and I let you win.

Phil: Oh, wow, yeah. No, that makes a lot of sense. I get it. Like the way all the other horses wanted Secretariat to feel good.

Claire: Now you're Secretariat?

Phil: I don't know. Was Secretariat married to a crazy person?

Claire: Oh, God, Phil, I 100% let you win.

Phil: Then, you could 100% beat me again.

Claire: Oh, I could. Same course?

Phil: I've only gotten stronger. How about we add a few challenges? Monkey bars?

(Season 9, Episode 19)

In the above example, Claire tells the truth that she could have had Phil beat easily in the previous game, but she let Phil win for some reason. The illocutionary act is that she is stronger than Phil. However, Phil does not believe what Claire has said so he proposes playing a match again. Then the conflict continues.

4.2.2 Directives

An illocutionary act of directive refers to the act of attempting to make the hearer do something according to the speaker's intention. When performing this type of act, the speaker expresses what he wants and makes the hearer perform some actions. Orders, suggestions, warnings, requests, invitations are all typical examples of this type of act.

In *Modern Family*, it is observed that an illocutionary act of directive in conflict talks between couples usually convey commands, requests or suggestions. The speaker issues instructions to the listener and hopes that the listener will perform in accordance with the intention of the speaker. According to the statistics, there are 24 directives in the linguistic data collected from *Modern Family*, accounting for 28.24% of the total.

A command is a speech act in which the speaker gives instructions that he or she wants the listener to obey absolutely and immediately, which is sometimes performed when the speaker is very emotional or angry. The expression of strong command often omits the subject, and the utterances are short and powerful, thus usually formed in the pattern of imperative sentences.

Example 6

Jay: Stop hogging, my best friend!

Gloria: Okay, if you're so upset, then you can take him. But stop saying "best friend". You're too old to be using that word. Hannah from Montana has a best friend. You don't.

Jay: At least my best friend isn't my son.

(Season 9, Episode 4)

In the above example, Jay is dissatisfied with Gloria's behavior and then gives the order to stop Gloria hogging his best friend, but Gloria does not submit to him. Then the conflict between them intensifies.

A requirement is a type of directive between a command and a suggestion, and the tone of requirement is softer compared to that of command but stronger than that of suggestion. The requirement is sometimes expressed with the word "please" in order to soothe the tone.

4.2.3 Commissives

An illocutionary act of commissives means that the speaker is committed to some future course of action. When performing this type of act, the speaker is to promise sincerely that he will definitely do something to keep an arrangement or agreement. Commitments, promises, vows are the most typical cases.

In the light of the linguistic data collected from *Modern Family*, threatening is the most typical case in conflict talks between couples. One side of the conflict usually employs the threat in order to make his utterance powerful enough to frighten or shock the other side and make the other side follow his idea. In addition, promising is also very common among commissives in conflict talks. According to the statistics, there are seven commissives in the linguistic data, accounting for 8.24% of the total.

Let's look at the conversation between Jay and Gloria in Example 4:

Jay: You owe me and Chuck Norris an apology. But I'm talking about the dent in your car. Did you hit something we can talk about, or should I hose the front and find a body shop that doesn't ask questions?

Gloria: I didn't hit anything. Someone must have hit me when I was inside the store with Joe. But talking about accidents, if your dog pees one more time in one of my slippers, I may accidentally leave her at the beach.

Jay: I would never let that happen. And don't lash out at her. If you crashed the car, just tell me.

(Season 9, Episode 3)

In the conversation, Gloria threatens Jay with leaving the dog Stella out of the house if the dog pees in her slippers again. If Jay does not want to make the thing worse, he must discipline his dog. In other words, Gloria gives the threat to force Jay to follow her idea. Threatening is a type of rather effective illocutionary act of commissive.

4.2.4 Expressives

An illocutionary act of expression is closely relevant to the speaker's personal point of view. In the conversation, the type of speech act, which performs the function of expressing the speaker's attitude, opinion and position, is collectively referred to as the illocutionary act of expressives. This type of act includes the speaker's expression of complaint, reproach, evaluation, opinion, and negation or rejection towards an existing state or thing. What's more, in the course of conflict talks, the speaker's evaluation and opinion are generally negative, while the listener disagrees or is dissatisfied with the speaker's view, thus further leading to conflict. According to the statistics, there are 20 expressives in the linguistic data collected from *Modern Family*, accounting for 23.53% of the total.

To some extent, an illocutionary act of expression is interrelated with that of assertive in that what actually causes the conflict is the different opinions towards the description or statement of what the speaker believes to be true. Therefore, these two types of acts usually appear together.

Example 7

Gloria: Jay, as a Catholic, I do not feel right about this.

Jay: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. It's the perfect family costume.

Gloria: It doesn't make sense. Joe should be the Jesus.

Jay: "Joe" short for "Joseph". "Jay" short for "Jaysus". It's the only way it makes sense.

Gloria: But he's the child.

Jay: You're overthinking it.

(Season 8, Episode 5)

In this example, Gloria's utterances show her attitude and feeling. She does not feel right about the family costume which Jay has arranged. She disagrees with Jay's idea and thinks that they should make changes. Therefore, a series of conflict talks between the couple are developing.

4.2.5 Declarations

An illocutionary act of declaration refers to the act which can lead to immediate changes by saying something. When performing this type of act, the speaker says something officially or publicly to reach the consistency between what he has said and reality. The official or formal statements such as appointments, dismissals, announcements are typical examples of this category.

Compared with the other four types of illocutionary acts, the category of declarations is less common in conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family*. According to the statistics, there are two declarations in the linguistic data, accounting for 2.35% of the total.

Example 8

Jay: I'm trying to overturn this dumb rule the club passed banning cigars within 40 feet of the main lodge.

Gloria: When my country passed a law that allowed them to drown 14 years old, you said, "These things happen."

Jay: I just bought a box of El Conquistador Especiales. And they deserve to be smoked in a fine leather chair, not out by the foundation in some heavily-spidered area.

Claire: I don't want this in my house.

Jay: Can't smoke at home, can't smoke at the club. Maybe Stella has room in her doghouse.

(Season 8, Episode 8)

In the conversation, Claire is to declare that smoking is not allowed in their house, and her words immediately come into effect. But Jay is very dissatisfied with Gloria's decision. Therefore, the conflict is developing.

4.3 Perlocutionary Acts of the Conflict Talks between Couples in Modern Family

The perlocutionary act refers to the consequences of uttering, that is, the result of the speech act. Due to the "force in discourse" contained in the illocutionary act, the perlocutionary act means that the speaker's utterance usually has a certain influence on the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of the hearer and thus brings about some changes. But it should be emphasized that the perlocutionary act is not the act in the process of uttering but the result of utterance produced after the expression of discourse. Austin believes that perlocutionary act always includes consequences and that the consequences should be distinguished between the intended and the unintended. Thus, the perlocutionary act pays attention to the influence of the speaker on the hearer, emphasizing the effect of discourse.

This thesis discusses the perlocutionary effects of the conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family*, which are equal to the results of conflict talks. A complete conflict conversation has the characteristics of the language game and non-cooperation and ends with a unilateral victory or the topic shelved after the verbal dispute. By analyzing the linguistic data, it is concluded that there are mainly four types of perlocutionary effects of the conflict talks between couples in *Modern Family*: compromise, withdrawal, third party intervention and topic-changing.

4.3.1 Compromise

Compromise means that when the two sides of the communication have totally different views, one side has to give in and agree to the other's view after the dispute, thus reaching the consensus of the two sides and ending the conflict talk. Compromise is mainly manifested in one side's willingness to accept the other's opinion or obey the other's instruction. Either party involved in the communicative activity can choose to compromise with the other, or both sides can compromise with each other at the same time.

Let's look at the conversation between Jay and Gloria in Example 4:

Gloria: What about Phil and Claire to take care of Joe?

Jay: I don't know. Isn't Phil kind of silly?

Gloria: What are you talking about? Phil is a great father. He's kind. He's fun. Even Lily likes him. Jay: But is he too likeable? Where's the gravitas?

Gloria: He's full of energy. He's sensitive, and he never ever gets grumpy.

Jay: Fine. Why don't you give Joe to Super Dad right now, them?

Gloria: Oh, my God, are you really jealous because Phil might be a better father than you?

Jay: I know it's stupid. Not to mention the fact that Joe gets Claire in the deal. She is a fantastic mother. Runs a company hell of a role model. He could never do better than that for a mother.

Gloria: You know what, Phil and Claire have already raised their kids. I think it's time for them to travel.

(Season 8, Episode 10)

In this conversation, Gloria and Jay start the conflict due to their disagreement on whether their son Joe should be looked after by Phil and Claire. After a series of verbal disputes, Gloria is persuaded successfully and makes a compromise with Jay. Then the conflict is resolved.

4.3.2 Withdrawal

In the process of conflict talks, one party of the communication is unwilling to engage in the dispute with the other and then actively chooses to escape, withdraw from the current conflict conversation or leave the current place of communication. As a consequence, the communicative activity of conflict talks cannot continue, which leads to the end of conflict talks. This result of conflict talks is the withdrawal of one party.

Example 9

Gloria: Jay! Did you bring Stella?

Jay: No! She must have tracked us here. What's that, girl? What? Did we leave the stove on? (Then Jay goes away)

(Season 9, Episode 16)

In the example, Gloria blames Jay for bringing Stella with them. But Jay does not want to have a quarrel with Gloria, and then he gives a brief explanation and quickly escapes from the current place of communication. Therefore, the conflict is ended.

4.3.3 Third-Party Intervention

Third-party intervention means that in addition to the two parties of communication, a third party has joined the communication of conflict talks so that the verbal conflict is suspended temporarily or ended. The third-party can play the role of regulating and easing, and both parties will end the conflict talks under the third-party adjustment. There are mainly three types of results brought about by third-party intervention in the communication of conflict talks: interrupting conflict, resolving conflict and stopping the conflict.

Example 10

Claire: Really, Phil? You just turned and ran?

Phil: Sweetheart, I...I...

Claire: Don't you run again.

Phil: Okay.

Claire: I have one question. Why?

Phil: It's complicated.

Claire: How is it complicated? You printed fake stationery and forged a letter so you could have a stupid batting cage.

Luke: It's not his fault.

Phil: Luke...

Luke: I'm gonna tell her.

(Season 9, Episode 11)

In this example, Claire is very angry at Phil's doing, but Luke, as a third party, joins the conversation at the moment of the standoff. Luke gives an explanation for his father Phil, and then Claire's anger is gradually defused. Therefore, the conflict is resolved because of the third-party intervention.

4.3.4 Topic-Changing

Topic-changing means that when the two sides of communication have contradictory views on a certain topic, one side wants to avoid the continuation of the standoff that the two sides cannot reach a consensus nor make a compromise with each other, and then chooses to deliberately ignore the current topic and start a new communicative topic to divert the other's attention, so that the conflict talks have to stop, and the relationship between the two sides can be maintained.

Example 11

Gloria: So you didn't get my tickets.

Jay: The website was insane. You'd need the reflexes of a mongoose.

Gloria: You lied to me.

Jay: Well, look around! Everybody's lying and forging paintings, driving blind, swapping ashes.

(Season 8, Episode 17)

In this conversation, Gloria is mad at Jay in that Jay does not keep his promise and even tells a lie. Jay attributes his fault to the website, but Gloria's emotion is not pacified. Then the conflict begins. In order to stop the conflict, Jay starts to talk about other people around them to divert Gloria's attention.

5. Conclusion

The research of conflict talk has been going on for a long time. According to the research results of the past, the previous research is mostly conducted from the perspective of the traditional three stages of conflict talk: the beginning, the development and the end. But this thesis studies conflict talk based on speech act theory and analyzes the common linguistic forms in conflict talk in more detail.

The thesis selects the American sitcom *Modern Family* season 8 and season 9 as the source of linguistic data and establishes the corresponding corpus by collecting the conflict talks of two couples in the sitcom. The thesis regards conflict talk as a type of complex speech act. Adopting speech act theory, the research discusses the conflict talks of two couples by means of observation, theoretical interpretation, inductive analysis, quantitative and qualitative analysis, and expounds the locutionary act, illocutionary act, perlocutionary effect of conflict talks in different contexts, as well as their main pragmatic functions.

However, due to the limitation of the author's personal knowledge, the research field of this thesis is relatively limited and narrow. In addition, in the process of collecting relevant linguistic data, the thesis may have omissions in the collection and induction of the concrete forms of conflict talks. It is necessary to keep looking for gaps in future research so that the conclusion of the study can be more comprehensive and accurate. Therefore, there is still a long way to go on studying the conflict talks between couples in the American sitcom *Modern Family*.

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