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## **The representation of conflict in the discourse of Italian melodrama<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is part of an extensive study of cinematic dialogue in a variety of film genres in Italian, which aims to address the disregard for the verbal plane that characterises film theory and, particularly, genre theory. Assuming a pragmatic and functional semantic perspective, it analyses the scripted dialogues in films against the backdrop of the literature on real life discourse. The focus of the paper is confrontational talk in Italian melodramas from early 1960s to the present. Conflict in such films is, to an extent, comparable to the cooperative sequential rebuttal of speakers' turns that typically occurs in comedies. However, melodramas are also marked by more incisive and subtle patterns of confrontation that can be summarised as 'disaffiliative dysfluency'. The forms of such break in the conversational flow are discussed and illustrated with selected scenes from a number of films.

*Key words:* (un)cooperation, adjacency pairs, repair, move, fallacy in questioning, presupposition.

### **Introduction. Aims of the study**

Cinematic dialogue is a special text, 'not solely the province of screenwriters' but the collective product of directors, editors, sound specialists, actors and so forth (Kozloff, 2000: 122). Although film dialogue is fictitious, the final result of the invisible process of writing is spoken discourse, so that it can be assumed that it uses real-life dialogue as a template and reproduces the interactional mechanisms found in everyday exchanges. M. L. Pratt's (1977) pioneering work approached literary discourse from a speech-act perspective and insisted on the comparability of fictional and real-life talk on the basis of the generic pragmatic rules that underlie both. Similarly, this study assumes that there is a relationship between film dialogue and real-life talk and for this reason the discourse of film scripts is analyzed in the light of the research on natural conversation.

Scripted dialogue provides an excellent test for research on real-life conversation as it reflects authentic discourse conventions while at the same time emphasizing and overdramatizing them. In the light of this, the present study investigates the conflict discourse of Italian film scripts with the aim of identifying diverse discourse styles, which may be indexed to specific film genres. In so doing, it shows how linguistic analysis can redress the academic disregard for the verbal component of films, which, due to the unchallenged monopoly of the visual, has long been viewed as irrelevant and illegitimate.<sup>2</sup>

The rationale for the choice of conflict is multifaceted. First, scripted conflict is present in films of all times and genres, although confrontation is portrayed in various manners, due to the type of film or variables of context, speakers and type of interaction. Secondly, as Herman says, albeit with reference to the language of theatre, '[c]onflict situations have high dramatic value since they are productive of tension and generate suspense and involvement of the audience in outcomes' (1995: 137). Moments of dialogic tension are very meaningful segments in a film that often shed light on the whole narrative. Thirdly, conflict often offers the opportunity to synthesize the relationship between characters in a film and can have the function of re-focussing the film narrative. Although this study does not rule out the visual aspect of cinematic communication, because of its primarily verbal nature, conflict provides an ideal terrain for an investigation of the linguistic plane in films.

Five decades of Italian cinema are represented in this study and ten representative melodramas have been chosen from the early 1960s to today's new realism. From such a corpus, selected exchanges have been isolated and analysed in qualitative terms with the intent of showing the different ways in which film conflict is shaped. The claim of this study is that melodrama expresses the emotional intensity typical of this genre by means of distinctive discursive patterns. As it marks pivotal moments in the film narrative, the verbal articulation of conflict can usefully highlight the specific nature of dialogue in this film genre.

### **Defining argument as the expression of conflict**

The term 'argument' in this study indicates a verbally expressed clash or opposition, an instance of interpersonal conflict as discourse – which can be accompanied or emphasized by non-verbal behaviour – between two or more interlocutors. In this light, the term corresponds to the articulation of an emotional, affective or intellectual conflict between at least two individuals who dispute over contrasting positions. Most recent studies view argument in terms of a series of speech acts with which speakers attack each other (Vuchinich, 1990: 123). Alternatively, dispute is seen in terms of adjacency pairs, i.e. a 'pragmatically related pair[s] of speech acts' (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980: 252) like question-answer or invitation-acceptance/decline, in which an evaluative statement of any kind is refuted and contradicted in the following turn.<sup>3</sup> Attention is generally paid to both lexical and prosodic elements in the chain of moves, which indicate modulated or downgraded or, alternatively, aggressive and blunt disagreement. Hesitation markers, pauses, or such phrases as 'Yes, but' can soften the disagreement while the insistence on one own's views can heighten it ('I do believe though', 'I disagree with what you said'). Attention to word order is also a recurring feature in these studies for expressing both open disagreement and agreement as a preparatory step to further dissent (cf. Kotthoff, 1993). Finally, the relevance of the use of sarcasm and irony is widely recognised by these studies.

An argument can take various forms. It can be shaped as a series of 'conflicting versions of the "same" event' (Fele, 1991, p. 10, my translation) or oppositional formats 'connecting to the preceding contribution ... but interpret[ing] it to the contrary' (Kotthoff, 1993: 202). An argument exchange need not extend over a number of oppositional turns, structurally marked by repetition, substitution, intonational contours and even interruptions and turn overlaps. As pointed out by Maynard (1985), it is the second move that opens the conflict by interpreting the first

turn as 'arguable' and responding to that accordingly, as in the following fabricated example.

- (1) A: Why did YOU do it? I said I was going to help.  
B: Rubbish! you never help, you're so selfish, you just expect to be waited on.

An argument can also take the form of a more or less clear refusal to cooperate in terms of abiding by the conversational maxims (cf. Grice, 1975), albeit for the purpose of disagreeing, with another speaker; it can be expressed by a break in the exchange and conveyed by silence or deliberate malfunctioning of the communication flow. In this case, conflict discourse can become indirect and tangential; hence 'argument' becomes synonymous with a break in the 'dialogicity' (cfr. Blum-Kulka, Blondheim and Hachohen, 2002) or with the flouting of norms of conversational cooperation, as in the two following exchanges in which potentially conflictual moves are deliberately misinterpreted (2) or ignored (3).

- (2) 1. A: Why did you do this?  
B: D' you mean writing the letter to the school?  
A: You know damn well what I mean, why did you want to act behind my back?
- (3) 2. A: Why did you do this?  
B: [No response]  
A: Answer me, I want an answer. Have you decided to throw away your life?  
B: Leave me alone.

This study focuses in particular on verbal conflict shaped as a token of uncooperative discourse and a break in the conversational flow, which, it is suggested, is often found in the dialogue of melodrama. Through a series of confrontational exchanges from selected films the forms of such 'dysfluency' will be explored.

### **Past studies on conflicting discourse in real life**

With the purpose of reflecting on the portrayal of conflict in film dialogue, this study relies on the literature on confrontational discourse and disputes in real life and the discursive patterns emerging from those linguistic investigations. Studies of argument have focused on the various forms of opposition on which speakers embark, i.e. such speech acts as challenge, contradiction, demand for evidence, accusation, threat, disconfirmation, insult and the like. Since the ground-breaking study by Labov (1972) on ritual insult or 'sounding' as a widespread speech act amongst black inner-city adolescents, who trade insults with their peers in competitive and escalating sequences, numerous studies have investigated conflict discourse among young individuals and children and identified regular patterns of repetition, inversion and escalation (Camras, 1977; Brenneis and Lein, 1977 and Lein and Brenneis, 1978; Goodwin, 1983; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987 among others).

Conflict is culturally sensitive. Different cultures have different strategies for face-saving, which has a significant impact on ways of handling conflict. For instance, American blacks in the Bronx and whites have contrasting views as to what constitutes appropriate behaviour in a public debate. The expression of emotional

affect is a preferred feature among blacks as it “indicates that people are sincere and serious about what they are saying” (Kochman, 1981:18). By contrast, whites are taught to appear objective, self-controlled and emotionless, therefore they tend to “use discussion that is devoid of affect and dynamic opposition” (p. 19). The Japanese concern with saving face (Noguchi, 1987) greatly reduces their ability to argue openly, whereas Americans tend to carry the conflict forward regardless of threats to their face, although to a lesser degree when compared to Greeks and Greek-Americans (Kakava, 1995). The issue of cultural context is relevant to this study of melodrama in so far as the films analysed are produced within the specific boundaries of the Italian culture and therefore reflect the cultural/social values of that particular country.

As Katriel (1986) and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) maintain, confrontation is not always disguised, mitigated or indirect. Therefore, the open expression of verbal confrontation challenges the established belief, harking back to Sacks (1973), Goffman (1967) and Pomerantz (1975 and 1984), that disagreement is a dispreferred behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

The renewed interest in argumentation (such as the devotion to conflict of the entire issue 2002 no. 34 of the *Journal of Pragmatics*) has highlighted the positive and sociable functions of conflict. For Blum-Kulka, Blondheim and Hachohen (2002) patterns of highly argumentative Jewish discourse have migrated from Talmudic texts to television talk which exhibits a strong argumentative complexity, episodic break in the dialogicity and disagreement both at the level of content and argumentation and in terms of turn-design features (i.e. absence of mitigating elements). Various degrees of disagreement are found in Israeli political talk from ‘ungrounded’ (total rejection of previous proposition), to ‘grounded’ (refutation of previous proposition followed by justification) and ‘downgraded’ (mitigated) disagreement. Other studies (Katriel, 1986; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Schiffrin, 1984, Kakava, 2002) represent argument as a positively connoted form of interaction in certain cultures, synonymous with social solidarity as participants show cooperativeness in disagreeing.

Argument is further subject to contextual constraints. Several studies have investigated a variety of contexts where disagreement is not only an acceptable behaviour but even a necessary requisite of the exchange. This is the case of therapeutic discourse (Krainer, 1988 and Fele, 1991) and news interviews (Greatbatch, 1992; Scott, 1998; Clayman, 1988) in which various degrees of hostility find their forum under the patronage of news interviewers. Formal and informal institutional discourse express argument in different ways (Hutchby, 1996). The formal types, represented by law courts, some news interviews and some classroom discourse, are characterised by a fixed pre-established turn system by which speakers have to abide, and show that ‘a significant form of mitigation is built into the dispute sequence itself’ (ibid: 32). The informal discourse, exemplified among others by psychiatric, doctor-patient, family therapy talk, exhibits a much more varied and unpredictable turn-taking system and shows closeness to conversational forms. Context has a significant role in this study of the representation of argument in films. The instances of confrontational dialogue in the corpus are close encounters between family members and friends or, in general, between speakers who, due to extraordinary circumstances, still engage in seemingly intimate exchanges.

In conclusion, confrontational talk challenges the notion that preference for agreement is ‘the conversational default option’ (Blum-Kulka, Blondheim & Hachohen, 2002: 1573). After all, conflictual exchanges have long been seen as the perfect vehicle for ‘learning, conceptual change and switching argumentative stances’

especially by researchers of Piagetian formation (Stein, Bernas and Calicchia, 1997: 236); equally, critical dissent has been extolled as a necessary requisite for academic investigation and those who cannot practise it are eventually defeated and encouraged to leave the arena (Tannen, 2002).

### **Questions of film genre and definition of the corpus**

The Italian corpus analysed in the present work comprises ten Italian films belonging to the category of melodrama and exhibiting an average of three confrontations in each film. The concept of genre, suspended between artistic and commercial criteria, is in itself quite 'uncertain' (cf. McConnell, 1977). The present study accepts the categorisations of these films provided by the critical literature and the commercial publicity and later checks them against the plane of scripted dialogue. It is the contention of this study that different film genres exhibit different discourse styles, and more specifically, different ways of expressing conflict. Therefore, a characterisation of conflict talk in melodrama as an aspect of the discourse in that type of films can contribute to a better understanding of this genre and provide useful insights for genre theory.

'Melodrama', is a term generally used in the film industry to denote narratives involving dramatic passion. Melodrama crosses various narrative domains and many are the forms that go under this heading, from crime melodrama, to psychological and family melodrama. The dramatic films included in the present corpus belong to the category of 'social problem films', although Neale concedes that such a term is 'a critical invention' (2000: 112). Thematically, they confront such topical social issues as family dysfunctionality, social deprivation and juvenile delinquency, criminality or institutional deafness to poverty and isolation. Centring on an individual's fight against social institutions, these films combine dramatic confrontation and social analysis with the ideological objective of 'arous[ing] indignation over some facet of contemporary life' (Roffman & Purdy, 1981: 305, quoted in Neale, 2000: 114). The findings of this study, therefore, ought to be taken as referring in particular to this type of melodrama.

### **Conflict talk in the film script: The methodological frameworks for the analysis**

In melodramas, as in other film genres, characters clash by opposing contrasting views and refuting their interlocutor's. Eggins and Slade (1997), who revisit Halliday's functional-semantic model (1984, 1994) and apply it to the investigation of casual conversation, identify functional moves that are "a functional-semantic reinterpretation of the turn-constructional unit (TCU) of conversational analysis" (186). The move is a segment of talk at the end of which speaker change can occur without this being perceived as an interruption. In Eggins and Slade's model (1997: 202) the confronting response to a reacting move can be a 'decline' for instance to an offer, a blunt disaccord as for 'disagree' or 'contradict' or a suspended move as for 'withhold' as shown in Figure 1 below.

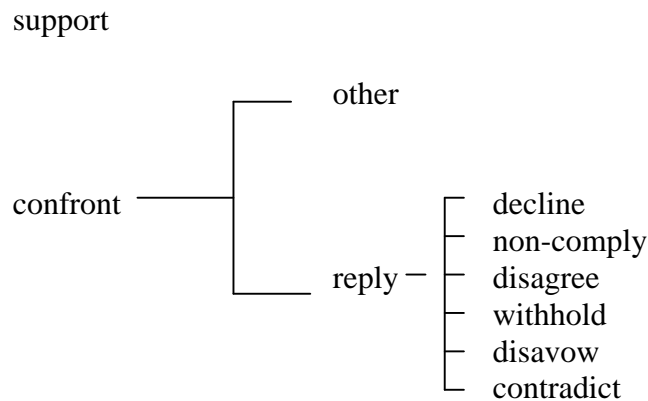


Figure 1.

A typical confrontational exchange in melodramas may exhibit a series of contradicting and disagreeing moves in response to an initiation as in the following scene from *Una giornata particolare* (*A Special Day*, Scola, 1977), the melancholic romantic encounter of a disillusioned housewife and a homosexual anti-fascist intellectual on the day of Hitler's historical visit to Mussolini in Rome.

It is early morning and the whole family is getting ready for the fascist parade to greet the Führer. On coming out of the bathroom, the chauvinist husband dried his hands on his wife's skirt. There is clear tension between the two; the man bemoans his wife's slovenliness, while she expresses her disconcert for the pornographic magazines he brought to the house.

- (4)
1. Wife: Se ti ci vuoi soffia' pure il naso non fa' complimenti. <sup>5</sup>
  2. Husband: Capirai, vai in giro che fai schifo!
  3. Son: Sabato mi hanno fregato pure il 'pon pon'.
  4. Husband: Non si dice 'pon pon', è parola straniera, chiamalo fiocco, mappa, non so italianizza, chiamalo 'ponpono'.
  5. Wife: E tu italianizza pure i giornali che porti a casa!
  6. Husband: Ma che sta' a di'? vostra madre si è alzata storta stamattina.

1. Wife: *If you wish to blow your nose on it, feel free.*
2. Husband: *It figures, you go dressed like that, it's revolting!*
3. Son: *Last Saturday I had my 'pon pon' stolen.*
4. Husband: *You don't say 'pon pon', it's a foreign word, call it tuft, tassel, I don't know, italianise it, call it 'ponpono'.* <sup>6</sup>
5. Wife: *And you italianise the magazines you bring home!*
6. Husband: *What are you talking about? Your mother woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.*

In the above scene confronting replies take the form of a humorous/ironical <sup>7</sup> offer in (1), a bluntly contradicting move in (4) that works as a direct unmitigated repair, <sup>8</sup> and a conflicting disavowal in (6) following the wife's further ironical statement in (5). Similarly, in *Che ora è?* (Scola, 1988) the contrast between a father and his son at critical moments is marked by blatant contradictions.



- (5) Father: Fra un mese hai finito il servizio militare e non siamo riusciti a capire cosa vuoi. [Son sighs] Sai qual è il guaio? [Son nods] Che forse non lo sai neanche tu [Son nods in disapproval]

Son: No, io lo so, lo so benissimo. Io lo so che almeno per un certo: o momento un certo: o periodo cioè so che a Roma almeno per ora credo che almeno per ora non ci voglio tornare.

Father: *In a month's time you'll finish military service and we haven't yet managed to understand what you want.* [Son sighs] *Do you know what the problem is?* [Son nods] *That maybe you don't know yourself.* [Son nods in disapproval]

Son: *No, I know it, I know it very well. I know that at least for a: a certain time for a certain period I mean I know that at least for now I think that at least for now I don't want to go back to Rome.*

Such an associative and cooperative confrontation realised through conflicting turns is similar to the refutation that repeatedly takes place in comedies as, for example, Pompucci's *Mille bolle blu* (1993) containing, among others, the following fight between two brothers and their sister at their father's deathbed.

- (6) Tecla: ... Io ho il diritto di cominciare a vivere.

Older brother: Nun fa' la vittima.

Tecla: So' vent'anni che aspetto, io non mi so' sposata per voi.

Younger brother: Tu non ti sei voluta sposare e ora (viene) questo che vuole i nostri soldi.

Tecla: I soldi sono i miei.

Tecla: ... *I have the right to have a life.*

Older brother: *Don't play the victim.*

Tecla: *I've been waiting for twenty years, I didn't get married because of you.*

Younger brother: *You didn't want to get married and now this one (comes) who wants our money.*

Tecla: *It's my money.*

However, although comedy and drama shares some basic forms of confrontation, such an associative conflict does not exhaust the complexity of the dramatic interaction, which is significantly marked by other deeper and more intense expressions of conflict. To return to Eggins and Slade's model (1997), the confronting responses that characterise melodramatic conflict correspond to 'non-comply', a move by which speakers deliberately fail to fulfil the interactional expectations of their interlocutors. In order to trace these alternative modalities of confrontation, the present study adopts a framework derived from pragmatics and focusing on incomplete or deliberately unsuccessful sequencing of such adjacency pairs as question-answer. It will be shown how such a framework aptly highlights the subtly disaffiliative confrontation portrayed in this film genre.

Blum-Kulka, Blondheim and Hachohen (2002) treat breakdowns in dialogicity as a token of confrontation and identify the philosophical foundation of non-cooperation in a breach of the ethical obligations that speakers have to speak, listen and respond in

order to keep a conversation going. These authors refer to Mauss's work (1954) on social connections as gifts that people are obliged to exchange in a never-ending chain. In a conversational exchange, a break in the question-answer pair can be seen as a sign of disrespect for social rules in so far as the 'gift' of a question is metaphorically not acknowledged by the respondent and sent back. In cases of such communication breakdowns as these, 'communication exists on the semantic level, because what is said is understood, but there is no, or only partial, communication on the pragmatic level, because there is no effective cooperation. The intentions and objectives of speaker and hearer are different, opposed, or even contradictory' (Marcondes, 1985: 424).

Walton's work on the fallacy of questioning (1989 and 1991) provides a useful framework against which to analyse conflict in melodrama and in particular look at the adversative treatment of questions in interaction as a token of confrontation. Following research by Jacobs (1989), Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), among others, Walton looks at uncooperative questions that are biased or intended to trick the respondent. Such *loaded questions* are questions 'where the respondent is not committed to the presupposition (or some part of the presupposition) of the question. In a stronger sense, a question may be said to be *loaded* where the respondent is committed to the opposite of the presupposition, or some part of it' (Walton, 1991: 340). Questions of this type are seen as failing to fulfil the real function of cooperative questioning and are viewed as perpetrating a 'fallacy in questioning'. A similar fallacy is represented by complex questions, which are ambiguous and misleading for 'containing a multiple presupposition' (ibid.). As an exemplification of heavily fallacious questions, Walton uses the notorious question, 'Have you stopped beating your spouse?', which is intended to unequivocally trap the respondent to an admission of responsibility: whichever way s/he decides to answer the question, the respondent will have unwillingly pleaded guilty to the presupposition of domestic violence.

Walton claims that '[m]ost of the workaday critical problems of argumentation in dealing with questioning are not fallacious questions, but are cases of questions that are unfairly one-sided or biased' (1991: 348). If faced with a tricky or intentionally manipulative question, what is the best strategy for a respondent to avoid being trapped or tricked by its presupposition(s)? Walton claims that it is best 'to reply to it with a question, or with a repudiation of its presupposition' (ibid.: 344). Hence, in the case of a loaded or aggressive question, although this may appear as 'a fallacy of irrelevance (evading the question)' (ibid.: 351), the best way to reply is with an answer that does not satisfy the presupposition contained in the question. The original questioner can of course reserve the right to represent and reformulate the original question in the attempt to get the respondent to address it. In this case, the sequel of question-answer-question described by Walton is shaped as follows:

Complex, aggressive     → loaded questions	Reply instead of answer, taken     → as evasive	Attempt to force direct answer
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The pattern identified by Walton of loaded or aggressive questions which are purposefully evaded by a respondent and are represented by the original questioner in the attempt to obtain the expected answer bears much relevance to this investigation of the conflict discourse in dramas. In the films observed, many conflict sequences conveying a deep tension between the interlocutors, contain questions which, from a purely formal viewpoint, cannot generally be classified as straightforwardly

fallacious, in the same way that a question like ‘Have you stopped beating your spouse?’ is fallacious. In some cases these questions are not intrinsically hostile but, due to the overall confrontational event of which they are part, they are treated by the respondent in the same way in which a fallacious question is best addressed by a skilful respondent. Then conflict is signalled by question evasion, i.e., by the presence of an apparent fallacy of irrelevance, of an act which ignores the constricting rules of answering questions in ordinary conversation.

### The analysis of conflict in the film scripts

Several strategies are identified in the analyzed films for dealing with an aggressive question or with a question that can be perceived as such: (i.) reply instead of answer, <sup>9</sup>i.e., a response that repudiates or ignores the presupposition of the original question by not satisfying it; (ii.) total question avoidance i.e., straightforward silence; or (iii.) reply in the form of a new question. In what follows, I shall discuss some scenes from selected Italian films that exhibit these three formats.

#### *i. Reply for an answer*

An exemplification of the first type of strategy is found in the following scene from *I cento passi* (Giordana, 2001). This is an example of cinema of civil commitment, which brings to the screen the murder of Peppino Impastato, who recklessly denounced the Mafia criminal system and was blasted by a load of dynamite on a railway line on the night of 8th of May 1978. Peppino’s father, Luigi, storms into the dining room where his whole family is sitting at the table, waving a copy of the newspaper, *L’idea socialista*, which has published Peppino’s further attack to the Mafia.

- (7) 1 Luigi: Che minchia mi rappresenta questa?!<sup>10</sup>  
**[Peppino ostenta tranquillità:]**  
 2 Peppino: ...Un giornale...  
 3 Luigi [**Furioso**]: Ah sì, un giornale! E la firma?! Giuseppe Impastato! [**Lo afferra per il collo**] Quello stronzo di Venuti non ce le ha le palle per firmarselo da solo questo giornale?  
 4 Peppino [**Calm**]: Stefano Venuti non c’entra. È stata mia l’idea..  
 5 Luigi: Bravo, pure l’idea ti è venuta... E come c’è scritto? La Mafia è una montagna di merda! E adesso io come ce la metto la faccia fuori dalla porta?
- 1 Luigi: *What the fuck is this?!*  
**[Peppino parades his calm]**  
 2 **Peppino:** : ... *A newspaper...*  
 3 Luigi: [**Furious**]: *Oh yeah, a newspaper! And the signature?! Giuseppe Impastato! [He grabs him by the neck] Hasn’t that bastard of Venuti have the balls to sign his own newspaper?*  
 4 Peppino: [**Calm**]: *Stefano Venuti has nothing to do with this. It was my idea.*  
 5 Luigi: *Good, you even had the idea... And what does it say? The Mafia is a mountain of crap! How can I show my face outside this house now?*

The opening question in (1) is charged with insulting aggressiveness (‘What the fuck’) mixed with deliberately careless pronominal reference (‘this’). Clearly, Luigi is demanding an explanation from his son as to why he dared to attack the

Mafia-managed project of building the third runway of the main Sicilian airport at the bottom of a mountain (the mountain of crap in his question). From a purely formal point of view, Luigi's question is not an immediately loaded or complex question that commits a fallacy in questioning. However, it is referentially ambiguous, especially in the use of the female demonstrative pronoun 'questa' whose 'exophoric' or external reference (Halliday & Hasan, 1979) to 'la firma', i.e. Peppino's signature to the newspaper article in (3), may not be immediately clear. It is this ambiguity coupled with the vituperative vulgarity of the opening that makes the question complex and hostile. Peppino appears ostentatiously calm in his reply to his father's question. Since Luigi has waved a newspaper in the face of his son and used the vague pronoun 'questa' ('this'), Peppino artfully deflects his father's personal attack, *his argumentum ad hominem* (Walton, 1991: 340), by repudiating the proposition of his question. He strategically plays dumb and pretends to interpret his father's question as an information-seeking question pertaining to the nature of the object he is waving in his hand: in other words, 'What is this?' 'It is a newspaper'. He deliberately disregards the feminine gender of the pronoun which would make the reference to the newspaper (masculine in Italian) impossible. Following this opening Question-Answer adjacency pair, the conflict uncovers in all its fury between son and father. To Peppino's challenge, Luigi responds with uncontrollable irritation and with parodic mimicry of his answer (Oh yeah, a newspaper! And the signature?! Giuseppe Impastato!).

## ii. Silence as an answer

In films as in real life, silence is often the conflictual reply to an aggressive question or the way speakers convey their intention to disengage from the interaction through a non-comply as a token of confrontation. A stall in the communication coupled with coercive and infelicitous questions characterizes, among other confronting moves, the conflict discourse of Amelio's *Colpire al cuore* (*A Blow to the Heart*, 1988), set during the terrorist decade of the Italian 'Anni di piombo'. The film portrays the clash between a father, a university teacher, colluding with the left-wing terrorists who once were his students, and his fifteen-year-old son, Andrea, who decides to side with the law and reports his father to the *carabinieri*, the Italian gendarmes. In the following scene, the father is questioning Andrea about a photo the boy has taken surreptitiously of him meeting with a young terrorist at large. The atmosphere is dense with fear, suspicion and bitterness, and the photo Andrea has taken of his father and the young woman stands between them as a symbolically dividing wall.

- (8) 1 Father: Una fotografia perfetta, perfettamente a fuoco sia le facce che i titoli del giornale. Con un obiettivo più potente si poteva anche leggere la data, ma i titoli bastano, è una prova inconfutabile. Io mi incontro con una latitante proprio mentre la polizia la sta cercando, è questo che volevi dimostrare no? **[The son looks at his father – Silence]** Lo sai che foto come questa sono la specialità dei delinquenti, di quelli che sequestrano qualcuno e poi mandano--- ma già tu lo sai, sennò da dove l'avresti imparato? Ma tu non stai dalla parte dei delinquenti, tu stai dalla parte della legge. Le forze dell'ordine ti hanno assunto come fotografo ufficiale, sennò non si capisce. Questo foto non l'hai portata dai carabinieri, l'hai infilata tra le mie carte di nascosto perché? Che cos'è? un avvertimento? Volevi farmi paura eh? Mi volevi far paura? Perché?+ **[Andrea attempts to get up and leave]** No, no, sta seduto, non ce l'ho mica con te no, questa foto riprenditela, fanne quello che vuoi, tieni, ma

vorrei solamente capire, vorrei sapere perché ce l'hai con me, che cosa ti ho fatto, vorrei sapere che cos'è che mi rimproveri, che cosa ti aspetti da me. Vorresti un padre che ti dicesse dov'è il bene e dov'è il male? Piacerebbe anche a me, ma padri così perfetti non ce ne son più.

2 Son: Figli così perfetti ancora meno.

3 Father: Dunque sono IO che ho sbagliato. Allora non ti resta che darmi un voto. Quanto mi merito? La sufficienza o nemmeno quella?

4 Son: Oggi non si boccia più nessuno.

5 Father: Di bene in meglio, il sarcasmo, chi te l'ha insegnata questa dialettica, il tuo professore di filosofia?

6 Son: Guarda caso era un tuo studente.

7 Father: Allora hai ragione, non si boccia più nessuno.

8 Son: Scommetto che hai voglia di darmi uno schiaffo. **[Father slaps him in the face. Son gets up and leaves]**

1 Father: *A perfect photo, perfectly focused, both the people's faces and the newspaper titles, with a better lens one would be able to read the date, however, the titles are enough, this is indisputable evidence. I meet with a person at large just when the police are looking for her, that's what you wanted to prove isn't it? [The son looks at him – Silence] Do you know that photos like this one are the speciality of criminals, of those people who kidnap someone and then send you----- of course you know that, or else where would you have learned that? However, you are not on the side of the criminals, you are on the side of the law. The police have hired you as their official photographer, or else this does not make sense. You haven't taken this photo to the carabinieri though, you stealthily slipped it between my papers why? What is it? A warning? Did you want to scare me? You wanted to scare me? Why?+ [The son attempts to get up and leave] No, no, do sit down, I'm not angry with you, here take this photo, do whatever you want with it, yet I'd like to understand, I'd like to know why you're so much against me, what did I do to you, I'd like to know what you are blaming me for, what you expect of me, would you like a father who could tell you good from evil? I'd like that myself but such perfect fathers are no longer around.*

2 Son: *Perfect sons don't exist either.*

3 Father: *Then I AM the one who wronged. Then the only thing you have to do is give me a mark. What mark do I deserve? A passing mark or not even that?*

4 Son: *Nowadays no one is failed.*

5 Father: *It's getting better and better, sarcasm, who has taught you such dialectics, your philosophy teacher?*

6 Son: *It is no accident that he was one of your students.*

7 Father: *You're right, nobody is failed nowadays*

8 Son: *I bet you feel like slapping me. [Father slaps him in the face. Son gets up and leaves]*

The first part of the above exchange is monologicistic. The son's participation to the dialogue solely rests on his glance and later his attempt to leave the confrontational arena conveys his desire to sever communication with his father. In the father's string of questions, many are infelicitous and devious queries aiming to trap Andrea. The coerciveness of the opening tag question is unequivocal, ('I meet with a person at large just when the police are looking for her, that's what you wanted to prove isn't

it?’). By that question the father hints at the fact that Andrea was trying to prove, probably to the police, that his father was colluding with a terrorist. The son’s reply is silence and a sad yet inquisitive look at his father. As Walton (1991) suggests, avoiding a response is the most efficient tactic to deal with infelicitous questions. But the father has not yet finished his sermon. The next question is even more devious and fallacious in its proposition that Andrea has learned the photographing technique from political criminals: ‘Do you know that photos like this one are the speciality of criminals, of those people who kidnap someone and then send you----- of course you know that, or else where would you have learned that?’ The question is not followed by a pause as it is not meant to receive a proper answer. Yet it is a prelude to the following chain of questions with which the father besieges Andrea (‘You haven’t taken this photo to the carabinieri though, you stealthily slipped it between my papers, why? What is it? A warning? Did you want to scare me? You wanted to scare me? Why?’). As before, Andrea perceives these questions as his father’s attempt to trick him into admitting his fault; hence he resorts to leaving the scene but is curtailed by his father who falsely claims he is not angry with him. Such a move seems to soften at least momentarily the conflict, which then re-opens to the father’s self-pity, i.e. he is not a perfect father, however, perfect and moral fathers who can tell good from evil no longer exist. Andrea falls in the trap and grabs the hand that his father is stretching out to him. For a moment there is halt in the tension but soon the conflict resumes.

The second part of the argument is based on the father’s questions, which are infelicitous in being sarcastic: ‘What mark do I deserve? A passing mark or not even that?/It’s getting better and better, sarcasm, who has taught you such dialectics, your philosophy teacher?’ The son pursues the avoidance strategy by responding with a withhold that delays the answer or in fact a non-comply that only replies to part of the proposition contained in the father’s initial question: ‘Nowadays no one is failed/ It is no accident that he was one of your students’. The conflict grows exponentially to the final physical aggression.

### *iii. Questions as replies*

The final pattern of replying to aggressive or threatening questions with other questions is a common defying strategy in confrontation, widely represented in the corpus.

The conflict discourse in *Ladro di bambini (Stolen Children)* by Amelio (1992) for example expresses a perception of disagreement as more often incisively marked by uncooperativeness than insistent rebuttal of subsequent contradicting turns. The film narrates the attempt of gendarme Antonio to find a home for two children from an abusive and deprived single-parent family. During their journey to Sicily,<sup>11</sup> Antonio develops a fatherly relationship with young Rosetta, prostituted by her mother, and Luciano, suffering from asthma; however, at the beginning of the film the tension between Antonio and the children is palpable.

Although there are cases of other-correction expressing disagreement,<sup>12</sup> the often recurring technique is the use of malfunctioning question-answer pairs which suggest the speakers’ intention to break the communication and deny any shared patrimony of reference. In the following sequence on the train, Antonio avoids Rosetta’s question in (6) by replying with a direct correction or other-repair, then in (10) he replies with a new question to Rosetta’s query. Sandwiched between these two avoided questions is a canonical direct other-repair (8) clearly implying disagreement (Schegloff, Jefferson, Sacks, 1977: 381) and conveying confrontation.

- (9) Scene 11<sup>13</sup>
- 5 Rosetta: Dov'è andato l'altro poliziotto?... Vi siete litigati?  
 6 Antonio: Non è un poliziotto... È un carabiniere.  
 7 Rosetta: È uguale.  
 8 Antonio: Non è uguale.  
 9 Rosetta: [**Guardando la giberna della bandoliera di Antonio**] La tieni lì la pistola?  
 10 Antonio: Oh, ma che t'interessa?
- 5 Rosetta: *Where is the other policeman?... Did you have an argument?*  
 6 Antonio: *He is not a policeman... He's a gendarme*  
 7 Rosetta: *It's the same.*  
 8 Antonio: *It's not the same.*  
 9 Rosetta: [**Looking at the cartridge-pouch of Antonio's bandolier**] *Do you keep your gun there?*  
 10 Antonio: *What do you care?*

Similarly two scenes later, Antonio refuses to cooperate again. He does not avoid an answer to Rosetta's question but his reply is extremely indirect and implicit as it betrays his unwillingness to do the disambiguation work necessary for recovering the implicature (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Antonio replies with a question to Rosetta's question. This is a sign of his annoyance that the arrival at their appointed destination is not a 'manifest' fact to Rosetta, i.e. it is not a fact that she is capable of 'representing mentally' and whose 'representation' she accepts as 'true or probably true' (ibid.: 39).

- (10) 1 Rosetta: Siamo arrivati?  
 2 Antonio: Che, non lo vedi?
- 1 Rosetta: *Are we there?*  
 2 Antonio: *Can't you see that?*

## Discussion of the results and conclusion

Arguments and quarrels, as Walton highlights (1991: 340), 'can have a valuable cathartic function of releasing violent emotions by means other than physical fighting. The quarrel provides a setting for the expression of powerful but deeply held-in feelings, which would not have an appropriate context for release in normal conversation'. The adoption of a pragmatic perspective in combination with a semantic-functional framework has shown the distinctive features of conflict talk in Italian dramatic films. Vis-à-vis the expression of conflict such discourse shares interactional features with other genres. Similar to comedies, for example, in melodrama the articulation of confrontation is direct and based on opposition formats 'whose central point is turned into the extreme opposite from what the first speaker meant' (Kotthoff, 1993: 202). Sequential refutation, therefore, defines argument in intimate and symmetrical contexts, in the case of exchanges between family members and friends, both in comedies and melodramas.<sup>14</sup> However, beside the occasional resort to straightforward oppositional and contradictory moves, melodrama is marked by additional modalities as has been illustrated in this study. Contrary to what

happens in comedy, when tension is very high, the verbal articulation of argument in drama is disclosed in ways that hardly resemble open confrontation. Drama prefers disaffiliative and uncooperative disagreement and its adversarial conflict is marked by non-fluency and lack of conversational reciprocity at a superficial and deep level. Disaffiliative non-fluency is expressed by question-answer adjacency pairs in which the second pair part only apparently fits the first part, as the case of a reply to a question, or deliberately ignores it, in the case of silence or a further question. This study, therefore, suggests that the concept of film genre needs to be refined and cinematic genres must be characterised not only in narrative or thematic terms or in view of their iconographic and musical conventions but also in terms of the intrinsic discourse they exhibit. In different types of films, characters speak and interact in different manners; therefore, genre definitions must not fail to take on board the verbal plane of discourse if an accountable conception of genre is to be reached.

One last consideration relates to the issue of the cultural representation of the present study of Italian cinema. Conflict is culture-sensitive and reflects cultural diversity. Therefore, it is plausible to consider that the way characters on the screen clash verbally reflects the directors' or script writers' interpretation of a cultural code. Such a consideration calls for a future comparative study of different genres in different national cinemas.



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## **Films**

*Colpire al cuore (A Blow to the Heart)*, Amelio, 1982

*Che ora è?* Scola, 1988.

*Ladro di bambini (Stolen Children)* Amelio, 1992



*Mille bolle blu*, Pompucci, 1993.

*I cento passi*, Giordana, Fava, Zapelli, 2001.

## **Appendix** Transcription symbols

+	Short pause
++	Longer pause
Te:ext	Stretched vowel
=	Latched-on turns
%Text%	Overlapped turns
(? ?)	Inaudible, untranscribable text
(Text)	Uncertain transcription
[ <b>Comment</b> ]	Information on non-verbal behaviour
Tex---	Interrupted, incomplete word or phrase
TEXT	Emphasized text
.,?!	Punctuation roughly indicates intonation

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this work was presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Pragmatics Conference. I wish to express my thanks to Dr. Lynne Murphy for her comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> The last twenty years have been marked by the incisive entrance of verbal language into the work of a large number of avant-garde filmmakers and, as Wees attests, there has been “a revitalization of the interest, both practically and theoretically, in the relationship between images and words” (1984:11); however, such a change has not been mirrored in film studies. Very little research has been dedicated to the verbal plane of cinematic communication. Recent contributions include Rossi (1999) and Kozloff (2000), who blames genre theory for avoiding a serious discussion of film dialogue (p. 136).

<sup>3</sup> Along the same lines, Kotthoff (1993: 202) talks about ‘opposition formats’ which ‘always connect locally to the preceding contribution, whose central point is turned into the extreme opposite from what the first speaker meant. Opponents’ formulations are incorporated but interpreted to the contrary’.

<sup>4</sup> Expressions of disagreement are usually sequentially delayed as much as possible or else mitigated by being prefaced by ingratiating and softening phrases or signalled by markers of hesitation and hedging.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the excerpts used in this paper are my transcriptions of the film scripts.

<sup>6</sup> In the name of forceful nationalism, under the Fascist regime foreign words were outlawed.

<sup>7</sup> Eggins and Slade (1997: 157) suggest that in addition to phonological cues, humour is marked grammatically by the amplification of the use of negative or positive evaluative lexis.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Repair’ is an aligning move that ‘conversational parties use in dealing with problems or ‘troubles’ that arise in conversation’ (McLaughlin, 1984: 208). Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks (1977) identified speakers’ preference for redressing their own troubles as opposed to having them addressed by other interlocutors.

<sup>9</sup> I am aware that Lakoff’s well known distinction between answer and reply (1973: 459-60) is in total contrast with Walton’s. The term ‘answer’ refers to ‘responses to the verb of questioning itself rather than to its complement as in the case of question: What time is it? and answer: Ask Fred. Or What a dumb question! The term ‘reply’ refers to an act, which supplies the questioner with the required information and is a response to the performative act as in the question: ‘How tall is Harry?’ Reply ‘6’3’’. For coherence purposes, however, in this study the definitions of answer and reply adopted are Walton’s.

<sup>10</sup> Published film script (Giordana, Fava and Zapelli, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> The journey to the South of Italy symbolically reverses the previous unfortunate migration of the family to the North (cf. Small, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Scene 22

Rosetta: Quella è San Pietro? La basilica?

Antonio [**distrattamente**]. Sì. (...)

Rosetta: Ignorante! Quella non è San Pietro. È più grande. Non l’hai mai vista in televisione?

Rosetta: *Is that St. Peter’s? The cathedral?*

Antonio: [**carelessly**] *Yes (...)*

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Rosetta: *Idiot! That is not St. Peter's. That's much bigger. Haven't you ever seen it on tv?*

(Published script, Amelio, 1992: 29).

<sup>13</sup> Published script (Amelio, 1992: 13).

<sup>14</sup> My research on the representation of confrontation in film genres is work in progress.