

# **FORMS OF CONFLICT DISCOURSE AS A REFLECTION OF CONFLICT DYNAMICS: PECULIARITIES OF REGIONAL MEDIA**

## **ВИДЫ КОНФЛИКТНОГО ДИСКУРСА КАК ОТРАЖЕНИЕ ДИНАМИКИ КОНФЛИКТА: ОСОБЕННОСТИ РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫХ СМИ**

*Elena I. Kokkonen, PhD, Associate Professor,  
Chair of Sociology and Bilingual Education,  
Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University,  
Veliky Novgorod, Russia  
keli77@mail.ru*

*Елена Иоганновна Кокконен, кандидат психологических наук, доцент,  
кафедра социологии и билингвального образования,  
Новгородский государственный университет имени Ярослава Мудрого,  
Великий Новгород, Россия  
keli77@mail.ru*

*From the perspective of discursive psychology, discourse is “the primary arena for human action, understanding and intersubjectivity” (Potter, 2012: 114). Conflict discourse as it appears in media texts refers to the descriptions of situations and psychological states that play an important role in the formation of particular actions, and the tactics disputants use to criticize other parties’ moves and position themselves for accountability. The Novgorodian media (newspapers and e-papers) are enclosed within the information field of the region and reflect changing situations within its frame through different forms of conflict discourse. It presupposes that descriptions of the situation change as the situation alters under the influence of participants involved in confrontation. Thus the media bring into focus and fix parties’ positions, their motives, their conflict interaction as it develops, and their conflict resolution (termination) if it happens; they influence to some extent the trajectory of a developing situation.*

**Key words:** *conflict discourse; conflict dynamics; regional media; forms of conflict discourse; language peculiarities of the conflict discourse forms.*

*В рамках дискурсивной психологии Дж. Поттера конфликтный дискурс (КД) – это языковые формы, которые создают конфликтогенную версию реальности, т.е. ресурсы для оценок, конструирования фактических версий и выполнения конкретных действий; для СМИ – источники критики, объяснений и оправданий. Новгородские СМИ (печатные издания и интернет-газеты) замкнуты на информационное пространство региона и отражают то, что происходит через различные виды КД. Таким образом, динамика конфликта разворачивается в фокусе СМИ, фиксируя позиции участников, их мотивы, само конфликтное взаимодействие, разрешение (завершение) ситуации, если они наступают, и в определенной степени влияет на траекторию его развития.*

**Ключевые слова:** конфликтный дискурс; динамика конфликта; региональные СМИ; виды конфликтного дискурса; языковые особенности конфликтного дискурса.

## **Conflict discourse as a research tool for studying a regional media field**

Immensity is not characteristic for the Novgorodian media field. It presents the typical features of media communications of a small Russian region, the most prominent of which is a dominant position of media founded by the authorities. Improvements in a regional media field greatly depend on business development and regional socio-cultural specificity. As for the Novgorod region, it lacks serious natural and human resources and its advertising market is in clear decline as it hasn't yet recovered from the economic recession. All of these factors make media seek the support of local authorities. Thus, it can be said that the regional media field has distinct territorial frames.

Nevertheless, the Novgorodian media field also encompasses social and socio-political media founded by independent editors. Although their specific characteristic is a bigger share of federal news, the advantages of all regional media in the world of readers' expectations of familiar faces and the "flavour" of local news can't help but being taken into consideration. Thus, conflict discourse can be found in discourses of various spheres of communication: political, business, religious, ecological, cultural, sports and others; this implies that there are different arenas where the local authorities pursue a policy of positive image formation and their opponents counteract them.

Conflict discourse can be a research tool for studying a regional media field, which is a polydiscursive formation. It is filled with discourse provoking events, personages and opinions that trigger the initiation, expansion and subsiding of different forms of the discourse in question thereby exposing the dynamics of developing situations in the region.

The research of the Novgorodian regional media was carried out from September 2012 to September 2013. The objects of the research were two newspapers, issued in paper and electronic versions, one e-paper and one newspaper with no online version. The local authorities founded the first two newspapers while the last two were founded by the independent editors.

Monitoring was used as a research method allowing continuous observation within the frames of the regional media field. This dynamic social communication phenomenon keenly reacts to social and cultural changes, depending on both information and cultural policies of the authorities at different levels and the position of the media association. The unit of observation period was a month as this is long enough even for a weekly paper to publish several issues but not too long so as to lose track of a developing situation. Quantitative analysis allowed the researchers to trace the changing intensity of conflict discourse and associate it with media materials. Content analysis made it possible to reveal the forms of conflict discourse at different phases of the developing conflicts.

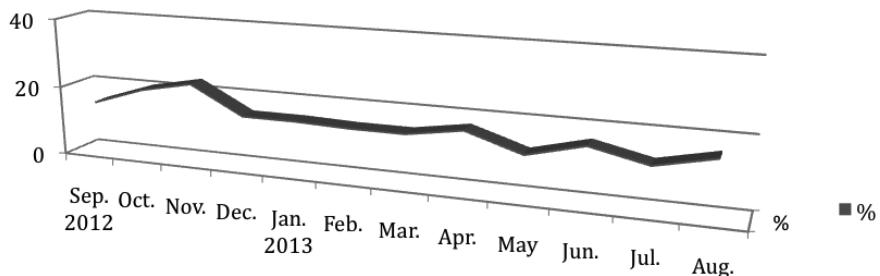
An illustration of the monitoring results after the first month can be seen in the following table.

**Table 1**  
**Intensity of conflict discourse in September 2012**

Names of papers	Texts presenting conflict discourse in relation with the total number of materials
Novaya Novgorodskaya Gazeta (paper)	28 % (22/78)
Vashi novosti (e-paper)	14 % (31/216)
Novgorodskie vedomosti (paper)	18 % (61/332)
Novgorodskie vedomosti (e-version)	12,5 % (35/281)
Novgorod (paper)	10 % (11/110)
Novgorod (e-version)	7,5 % (6/80)
Average	15%

The monthly calculation of the intensity of conflict discourse during the whole research period shows the following results presented in Diagram 1.

**Diagram 1**  
**The intensity of conflict discourse,  
September 2012-August 2013**



## **Forms of conflict discourse as they appear at different phases**

To better understand conflict dynamics it is important to define what conflict discourse implies. Santoi Leung presents the various ways the term conflict has been conceptualized. She analyzed the literature in numerous fields (philosophy, rhetoric, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and linguistics) and singled out *disagreement*, *the adversative episode*, *oppositional argument*, *disputes and disputing*, *quarrel*, *the contracting routine*, and *conflict talk* (Leung, 2005: 2). The researcher came to the conclusion that conflict talk is the most appropriate term for conflict discourse as it covers the phenomenon in the broadest sense and “captures the central idea that participants take alternative positions on the same issue but it does not imply a restriction to a single speech act nor a single turn sequence nor a single topic of contention” (*ibid*: 3).

However, the specific feature of media texts is that they reflect interpretations and responses to an event at a certain moment and therefore can imply both a single speech act and turn-taking acts. It depends on the position the author or editor takes and what speech tactics they choose to highlight events. Thus, the abovementioned terms can be considered as forms of conflict discourse that reveal the dynamics of a developing conflict through the main stages: the latent phase, the open phase (emergence and escalation), and the termination phase (de-escalation and settlement) (Antsupov, Shipilov, 2000: 262–269).

## **Win-oriented forms of conflict discourse**

The analysis of the Russian regional media (as exemplified by the Novgorod region) shows that *the adversative episode* is characteristic for the latent stage and de-escalation. An adversative episode, as it is understood by Eisenberg and Garvey, is “a sequence which begins with an opposition. This opposition may be in reply to an action, a request for action, or an assertion” (Leung, 2005: 5). In the latent phase it shows

differing interests or values that have the potential to spark conflict. As for de-escalation, it suggests highlighting reduced grievances, at least for one side, as the goals of the involved parties change. In this case, publications are supposed to demonstrate that participants regard those goals as unattainable or requiring unacceptable burdens. Adversative episodes can be found in media texts covering political, economical, social and cultural issues. E-papers prefer this form of conflict discourse more than newspapers and periodical media that are issued both in paper and electronic versions.

Lexically, an adversative episode is marked in headlines, which present two individuals (subjects) or an individual and a subject opposed to each other with the help of semantic conversives. Conversives imply the situation is to be viewed in win-lose terms or power-submission terms. According to Tatiana V. Shmeleva the addresser takes on the role of “a modest informer,” that is, an author of reified information not expressing any attitude to the situation described (Shmeleva, 2010). The introduction of contrasting conversive pairs suggests stronger expression. The addresser in this case is “an estimating informer”, an author permitting themselves assessments of certain aspects of the problem described. The following examples can illustrate the specificity of this form of conflict discourse: *“Fleiderer” demands 1 million rubles from Boris Shumilkin* (Vashi novosti: Biznes (Your News: Business)), *“Baltnefteprovod” doesn’t utilize the dangerous wastes left after the spill* (Vashi novosti: Ekologiya (Your News: Ecology)), *It’s not the governor’s concern* (Novgorodskie vedomosti: Politika (Novgorodian News: (Politics), e-version), *We have money to repair houses, yards and roads. Executives are the problem* (Novgorod: Ekonomika (Novgorod: Economics), e-version).

As for media texts, they usually present only a one-sided viewpoint and are full of quotes, and often lack conclusions. By providing addressees ‘direct access’ to an event, authors seem to withdraw from a situation, giving readers a chance to make assessments (Holt, 1996). But Harvey Sacks considers ‘the sheer fact of doing quoting can be the expressing of a position’ (Sacks, 1992: 309).

Thus, an adversative episode is the *manifest conflict* as Morton Deutsch defines it; quotes present a fragment of the situation but not the underlying conflict, it may be considered “a safer way to express what is going on because the underlying conflict is seen as too volatile or too dangerous to deal with directly” (Deutsch, 1973: 13). However, addressing conflict in this way makes it difficult to prevent it from being destructive.

The specific feature of any conflict is that it starts at the moment when at least one of the opponents perceives the situation as a threat to their status or position. An adversative episode can become a “triggering event” that develops into emergence. In other words, an episode may be perceived as the first appearance of a conflict or as a confrontation that erupts resulting out of a dormant conflict. Interpretations of participants are of importance as they are the base for images of people involved in the situation: their personal traits and professional skills. Arguments emerge out of opposition.

The *oppositional argument* results out of an adversative episode and marks the open phase of a conflict. Deborah Schiffrin describes it as follows: “one or more speakers openly support disputed positions” (Leung, 2005: 2). In the regional media it mostly implies highlighting politicians’ statements, political or economic experts’ opinions, social activists’ open letters and grass root campaigns in particular. It presupposes taking a hard-line stance on the issues described. According to Tatiana V. Shmeleva the addresser takes on the role of “mouthpiece”, the one who speaks on behalf of others.

An oppositional argument implies goals formulated so that adversaries are required to make more radical and extreme changes. It leads to *escalation*: an increase in the intensity of a conflict and in the severity of tactics used in pursuing them. Parties begin to make stronger threats and impose harsher negative sanctions; issues move from specific to general and participants’ goals change from “doing well” to winning. The aforementioned changes are specific for the *underlying conflict*. In the regional media the *oppositional argument* is usually presented by a series of articles showing power-plays of adversaries and highlighting the hearings which may result out of such

publications. Newspapers that have only printed versions prefer this form of discourse more than e-papers. It helps to keep the degree of interest, especially if it is a weekly newspaper. For periodical media issued both in paper and electronic versions it is less preferable but still takes a top position among the conflict discourse forms.

Lexically, an *oppositional argument* is marked in headlines by means of modal operators of obligation or necessity, rarely modal operators of possibility, formally marked negative words (words with negative prefixes), inherently negative words and double negations. The same proves to be true for media texts. Here's how the conflict formula works: the stronger the conflictogene is used, the stronger the response can be. The following examples can illustrate the specificity of this form of conflict discourse: *We don't need any intercessors* (Novgorodskie vedomosti: Ekonomika (Novgorodian News: Economics), paper). *Left Wing demarche* (Novgorodskie vedomosti: Politika (Novgorodian News: Politics), paper). *Do you dare to use school teachers for PR?* (Novaya Novgorodskaya Gazeta: Politika (New Novgorodian Newspaper: Politics)), *Chancers in the Housing and utilities sector* (Novgorod, Ekonomika (Economics)).

Escalation, however, cannot continue indefinitely. De-escalation can be temporary or can lead toward settlement or resolution. However, escalation may also lead to a stalemate, a situation in which neither side can win.

In general, win-oriented forms of conflict discourse take top positions in the regional media field.

### **Negotiation-oriented forms of conflict discourse**

Presenting the situation as a *disagreement* is a better way to deal with a conflict. Kotthoff speculates that it “takes some accountable effort” (Leung, 2005: 7); “there often are interspersed turns within an episode where disagreement is formulated in line with the preference for agreement”. It can be a particular case of the *manifest conflict* but it presents an opportunity for negotiations and a potential settlement. In the regional media, disagreements are found in reports, reviews and brief articles.

As a contrast to printed newspapers and e-papers, periodical media issued both in paper and electronic versions give preference to this form of discourse.

The specific feature of such publications is that most of them are akin to “I-statements” or “I-messages”. I-statements give partners information about them, but do it in a less threatening way in contrast to You-statements. You-statements trigger defensiveness and emotional resistance. The addresser in this case is “an estimating informer” but what differs them from the addresser preferring the adversative episode is that they explain what they have experienced, trying to assure that it is the situation that is unacceptable or unbearable, not the people. Their goal is not an experience of power and domination.

A disagreement works seemingly well in the latent phase as participants haven't fixed their positions yet and there is room for maneuver. Conflict tends to develop through stages, from an awareness that differences exist to a hardening of attitudes. Thus, when escalation leads to a stalemate, disagreement can be considered a face-threatening act since “disagreeing with someone threatens that person's positive face” (*ibid*). Leung considers that in this case “participants cannot only connect back to the action of the previous speaker”, but the situation can also make them “display opposition across turns via format tying” (*ibid*: 9).

Lexically, disagreements are marked in headlines by allusions, implied or indirect references to an event, a film, a book or a part of another text. They are meant to classify the experience with which the author is tackling. As for media texts, they contain metaphors, gradable lexemes, intensifiers, and approximators of degree and quantity. The following examples can illustrate the specificity of this form of conflict discourse: *House for a Niff-Niff* (apartments for orphans), *My house is my castle* (problems of privatization), *Dirty work. Novgorodian enterprises pay less attention to sustainability* (Novgorodskie vedomosti: obschestvo (Novgorodian News: Society), *Bone in the throat* (the problem of stray dogs), *Chronic benefit* (medicines for benefit recipients) (Novgorod: obschestvo (Novgorod: Society)).

*Conflict talk* is the most complicated among the conflict discourse forms: “participants pay close attention to talk in the previous turns and

use this to construct appropriate subsequent talk” (ibid: 3). It implies a combination of such forms as disagreement, adversative episodes, oppositional arguments as well as contracting routine. It reveals itself in the open phase and is apparently the underlying conflict. The addresser takes on the role of “reporter” or “analyst” as Shmeleva defines it: a participant presents a view from the side, a bottom-up approach; at least they create the effect of presence.

In the regional media, conflict talk mostly includes adversative episodes to describe situations along with disagreement or oppositional arguments to make assessments and conclusions. The combination of adversative episodes and disagreement is an attempt to deal with a conflict based on objective grounds and lead it to potential negotiations. The combination of adversative episodes and oppositional arguments may lead a conflict to a stalemate. However, it’s less intensive than oppositional arguments alone as disputants are not supposed to be driven into a corner. They can still put on a positive face if not save face altogether. Conflict talk is found in surveys of events, commentaries, and interviews. It’s a preferable form of conflict discourse in the pre-election period and is typical for both printed and electronic media.

Lexically, conflict talk is marked in headlines by allusions and metaphors. What makes it different from disagreement is that conflict talk classifies the situation, referring it to a certain group, while making a frame for it that influences negotiation tactics and potential outcomes. As for media texts they comprise features characteristic for adversative episodes, disagreement and oppositional arguments. The following examples can illustrate the specificity of this form of conflict discourse: *Cry from the heart of “Novgorodskiy Bekon”* (Vashi novosti: Biznes) (Your News: Business), *Profitable position. Why the orderly Profsoyusnaya st. became a disorganized marketplace* (Profitable position – *Dokhodnoye mesto*, a play by Alexander Ostrovsky) (Novgorodskie vedomosti: Biznes) (Novgorodian News: Business), *Second lesson of mathematics from “EdRo”* (Ed/inaya/ Ro/ssiya/ – United Russia) (Novaya Novgoroskaya Gazeta: Politika (New Novgorodian Newspaper: Politics), *Emergency meeting* (Novgorod: politika, biznes (Politics, Business)).

However, conflict talk often yields to oppositional arguments and adversative episodes as win-oriented forms of conflict discourse are stronger in the regional media. Yet, the media do not dismiss the importance of negotiation-oriented forms of conflict discourse: these forms fit into the format of both social and political newspapers as well as socially-oriented forms of conflict discourse.

## **Resolution-oriented forms of conflict discourse**

*Disputes and disputing* is characteristic for the latent stage as “disputes are not necessarily arguments <...> a stretch of discourse must involve an exchange of views on whether it is worthwhile to believe some assertion or take some action” (*ibid*: 3). This is a constructive way of dealing with a conflict. Disputing prompts participants to admit that the problem exists and to make efforts to reach an accommodation between both parties. But it is the interpretation that is of importance because it influences the development of a conflict. If instead of the common interpretation that disputing is a tool for conflict resolution, participants display aggravated disagreement, possibly leading the situation to escalation.

In the regional media, disputes occasionally take leading positions. It happens when the media bring into focus town-dwellers’ or local private entrepreneurs’ problems. Thus, disputing is found in surveys of events and commentaries. Periodical media are considered to be channels for interaction with the powers that be. The addresser takes on the role of “reporter” with resulting sequences.

Lexically, a dispute is marked in headlines by rhetorical questions, the answers to which are described in the following texts: quantifiers referring to objective reality, pointing out how long the problem has been in focus, and modal operators of possibility. The same is true for the contents of media texts. In contrast to the contracting routine disputing makes it possible to avoid escalation and resolve existing problems. The following examples can illustrate the specificity of this form of conflict discourse:

*At the first spring meeting “Business club” again put a question about administrative barriers* (Vashi novosti: biznes) (Your News: Business), *Caught on the Net. Is the game worth the candle?* (Novgorodskie vedomosti: obschestvo (Novgorodian News: Society)); *Who to complain to? “Profs” probably live well* (Novaya Novgorodskaya Gazeta: Obschestvo (New Novgorodian Newspaper: Society)).

The *contracting routine* is possible in the settlement phase that follows de-escalation if negotiations have been successful. It implies agreement to reach an accommodation that will satisfy both parties. But it cannot guarantee the agreement will not be violated and that is why it can not be considered reconciliation.

In the regional media, this is rarely found. Supposedly this happens because the media focus shifts to new events that are of current importance. The role the addresser takes on in this case is of a “modest informer”. Lexically, the contracting routine contains positive lexemes breaking the conflict framework without referring to the previous moves. The following examples can illustrate the specificity of this form of conflict discourse: *Minister of Culture signs the decree on conservation zones of Yuriev monastery* (Vashi novosti: Kultura) (Your News: Culture), *“Zemlyanichka” redeems its position. Not all children sanitary camps are ready for the first turn* (Novgorodskie vedomosti: obschestvo (Novgorodian News: Society)), *End of the Jerry shop* (Novgorod: obschestvo (Society)).

## Conclusions

While developing conflict situations change as the goals of participants change, periodical media reflect these changes through different forms of conflict discourse. They show how the trend described reverses. On the one hand, newspapers present disputants’ grounds: arguments in support of their position, appeals against arbitrary decisions and appeals for action and collaboration. On the other hand, periodicals present editors’ or

journalists' viewpoint that may as well influence the developing situation and hence change its trajectory.

Taking on the role of "reporter" or "analyst" the journalist may disclose facts that have been overlooked. In turn, the situation may either deteriorate or alleviate. Thus, journalists have a set of tools to manage conflict situations as well as adversaries involved. Forms of conflict discourse used to describe issues prove that it is so. Conflict dynamics and conflict discourse forms are mutually dependable.

## References

- Antsupov, A. J., Shipilov, A. I. (2000). *Conflictology. Textbook*. Moscow: Unity.
- Deutsch, M. (1973). *The Resolution of Conflict*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
- Holt, E. (1996). Reporting on Talk: The Use of Direct Reported Speech in Conversation'. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 29(3), 219–245.
- Leung, S. (2002). *Conflict Talk: A Discourse Analytical Perspective*. Teachers College Columbia University Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics 2(2). <http://journal.tc-library.org/index.php/tesol/article/view/20/27>
- Potter, J. (2012). Discourse Analysis and Discursive Psychology. In Cooper, H. (Ed.). *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology: Vol. 2. Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological*. Washington: American Psychological Association Press, 111–130.
- Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on Conversation*. Vol. I, II. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shmeleva, T. (2010). *Avtor v mediinom tekste* [The Author in Media Text]. [http://www.novsu.ru/npe/files/um/1588617/portrait/Data/avtor\\_v\\_mEDIATEKSTE.html](http://www.novsu.ru/npe/files/um/1588617/portrait/Data/avtor_v_mEDIATEKSTE.html)