

Intertextuality in interaction: Reframing family arguments in public and private*

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Abstract

Building on Becker's notion of prior text and Bakhtin's of dialogicality, I explore intertextuality in family discourse by tracing how three couples' conflicts about domestic responsibilities are recycled, reframed, and rekeyed over time, both between each other and in conversation with others: in one case with a friend, and in another with the couple's child. I use the term 'recycling' for situations where a topic is closed then arises again later in the same or a different conversation; 'reframing' for a change in what the conversation is about; and 'rekeying' for a change in the tone or tenor of an interaction. I trace a conflict in each of three families—the first two briefly, the third at length—in order to examine how speakers negotiate conflicts about the division of household responsibilities. In the third example, analysis helps explain why the issue of household responsibilities carries so much weight. In all three examples, restoring harmony was accomplished in part by reframing in a humorous key, and in ways that reinforced the speakers' shared family identities. The paper thus demonstrates how the abstract concept, intertextuality, actually works in everyday interaction.

Keywords: intertextuality; family discourse; framing; conflict talk; interactional sociolinguistics.

1. Introduction

Recent research on intertextuality (Agha and Wortham 2005; Bauman 2004, 2005; Hamilton 1996; Tannen forthcoming [1989]) draws and expands on concepts that Bakhtin (1981) calls dialogicality and Becker (1995) calls 'prior text' or *jarwa dhosok* (pushing old language into new contexts). In the present paper, I explore intertextuality in family discourse by tracing how three couples' conflicts about domestic responsibil-

conflict in a couple's conversation allows us to understand more deeply how language works for people in their daily lives. For many years, I have examined patterns of repetition in conversation, investigating their role in creating, conveying, and interpreting meaning, as well as in creating and reflecting interpersonal involvement (Tannen forthcoming [1989]). Examining patterns of repetition is another way of talking about intertextuality—the term introduced by Julia Kristeva (1980) to extend Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogicality to written texts, or, as Bauman (2005) suggests we call it, interdiscursivity. A brief review of these theoretical threads will set the stage for the ensuing analysis.

In Becker's (1995) holistic and deeply humanistic view, 'linguaging' (the term he prefers to the more static 'language') 'is context shaping.'

A language, then, is a system of rules and structures, which, in the Saussurian view, relates meanings and sounds, both of which are outside it. A language is essentially a dictionary and a grammar.

Linguaging, on the other hand, is context shaping. . . . Linguaging can be understood as taking old texts from memory and reshaping them into present contexts. (1995: 9, italics in original)

For Becker, 'All linguaging is what in Java is called *jarwa dhosok*, taking old language (*jarwa*) and pushing (*dhosok*) it into new contexts' (1995: 185)—or, as he now (personal communication in 1995) prefers to call it—present contexts. In other words, in speaking, individuals recall language they have heard in the past and adapt it to the present interaction, thus creating the context in which they are speaking.¹

Much work in the past two decades has explored Bakhtin's notion of dialogicality, or, as it is alternatively called, polyvocality. Bakhtin's writing is replete with eloquent statements of this concept. I will cite only two: 'Every conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people's words' (1981: 338), and 'When we select words in the process of constructing an utterance, we by no means always take them from the system of language in their neutral, *dictionary* form. We usually take them from *other utterances* . . .' (1986: 87, italics in original). Bakhtin's claim, like Becker's, is that a speaker, in formulating an utterance, finds words that have garnered meaning from their prior use, meanings that the current speaker can elaborate on but echoes of which no speaker can erase. Such previous uses of words, and the meanings associated with them, constitute Bakhtin's 'dialogicality' and Becker's 'prior text'.

In earlier work (Tannen forthcoming [1989]) I examined repetition as one of several linguistic strategies that, I demonstrate, constitute ordinary conversation but which are generally regarded as quintessentially literary. (The two others that I examine closely are what I call constructed

I use the term 'recycling' to refer to situations where a topic that arose in one conversation is discussed again in a later conversation. 'Later' could be later the same day, the next day, or several days later. This term says nothing about the way in which the topic is discussed; it refers only to the appearance of a topic that had appeared before. Reframing and rekeying, in contrast, are terms that describe the relationship between initial and subsequent iterations of a topic. By 'reframing' I refer to a change in what the discussion is about. For example, in the third case that I examine below, the topic at issue is whether or not Neil will promise to take a cardboard box to the post office for Clara while she is away on a business trip, in the event that the letter carrier does not take it. Later, however, the discussion focuses on whether or not Clara can depend on Neil for support if she encounters difficulties at work. The later exchange is a continuation (in my terms, a recycling) of 'the same' argument, because Clara's reasoning is: if I can't depend on you for something small like taking a box to the post office, I fear I will not be able to depend on you when I need your support for something big. Thus the argument is still about the box, but it has been reframed as an argument about emotional support.

Rekeying, on the other hand, refers to a change in the tone or tenor of an interaction. In proposing the term 'key', Goffman (1974: 43–44) notes that the analogy to music is intended; he defines 'key' as 'the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else.' Among the examples of rekeyings that Goffman presents is the rehearsal of a play. In another example, he suggests that when a speaker complains of another making a joke out of something that should have been taken seriously, 'what the speaker has in mind is that the activity ... was improperly cast by this other into a playful key' (1974: 82). A rekeying occurs when the speakers' tone of voice, amplitude, lexical emphasis, rhythm, intonational contours, or other qualities of speech indicate a change of emotional stance. For example, in the box-to-the-post office interaction, the simple request for a favor is recycled with overtones of anger; it is rekeyed again when the same topic is treated with laughter and yet again when it is discussed with philosophical equanimity.

In what follows, I first present two brief examples of reframing and rekeying of a conflict over two contexts on separate days. Then I explore in more detail a third example in which there are multiple reframings and rekeyings over the course of a day.

5. Example (2): Did she or didn't she write in the pregnancy journal?

A second brief example of intertextuality in interaction illustrates how a private altercation is recycled, reframed, and rekeyed in a public context, with the participation of a third party. The topic first arises when Janet, who is seven months pregnant, accuses Steve of not preparing for the arrival of their second child with the same enthusiasm and diligence with which he anticipated the first. Specifically, she chastises Steve for not reading books that provide expert advice on parenting, and for not writing in the pregnancy journal, a notebook in which parents record their thoughts about a coming birth. As they lie in bed at the end of a day, Janet tells Steve, 'You don't read your books, you don't do your entries. You did a lot of entries last time.' In this as in many other instances throughout the week of taping, Steve readily admits fault. Two days later he recycles the topic, reframing it by promising reform ('I'll definitely need to write in the book tonight').

A day after that, Steve moves the argument from the private domain of conversation with Janet to the public domain of a conversation with a friend. He reframes and rekeys the conflict by using it as material in a three-way conversation with a fellow actor named Nina. It is Saturday, and the three have come together to participate in a children's theater production. In the context of a conversation with Janet and Nina about how second children never get as much attention as first-borns, Steve says, 'I'm getting grief from her because I haven't been writing in the pregnancy journal, I haven't been reading my books until the wee hours of the morning.' Note that the phrase 'the wee hours of the morning' contains justification for his lapse: he is so busy that were he to do what Janet asks, he would have to do it at a time of day that everyone knows he should be sleeping. Janet then says, 'Yeah but I haven't either really.' (These lines are part of a longer exchange that Gordon [2003: 112–122] analyzes for the layering and laminating of frames.)

We cannot know whether or not Janet has been writing in the pregnancy journal; it is possible that she falsely claims not to have done so in order to establish solidarity with Nina and Steve. (I have described elsewhere [Tannen 2001] that girls and women often create rapport by claiming sameness, even when this entails compromising literal truth to achieve emotional truth in the demonstration of goodwill). In any case, Janet and Steve rekey their conflict as good-natured and rancor-free by reframing it in public performance. Although the interchange begins with Steve registering a complaint against Janet, the very act of talking publicly about a dispute that arose in private displays and reinforces their identity as a married couple. In other words, the conversation with Nina becomes a

sitting by the door and asks about it. Clara explains that it is a package she is returning to a department store, Nordstrom's, and that she will leave it by the mailbox for the letter carrier to pick up. Neil says he doubts the carrier will take a box of that size: it must be delivered to the post office. Since Clara is about to embark on a week-long business trip the following day, she asks Neil if he can take the box to the post office in the event the letter carrier does not pick it up. He responds in a way other than she expected.⁵

(3) a.

Clara: If I put that box out tomorrow and then the guy doesn't pick it up . . .

Neil: I'll bring it back in the house.

Clara: And, can you take it to the post office?

Neil: <louder> I'll try, but I don't know if I'll have time to take it there.>

With Neil's last line (and observable from the increase in loudness with which he spoke), the unmarked question–answer sequence is rekeyed as oppositional: Neil declines to accede unequivocally to Clara's request. He suggests rectifying the situation in a less time-consuming way: taking the box back into the house.

Clara then reframes her request for Neil's help: rather than addressing the issue of the box, she challenges his response to her request. Her high pitch, together with her emphatic enunciation of individual words, indicates the rekeying of the exchange as oppositional and emotionally weighted, as does the increased amplitude with which Neil emphasizes words in his reply.

(3) b.

Clara: <high> But I don't know why you can't just say,> 'Yes, I'll take it.' It's like, you- you can't COMMIT to MAILING a BOX for me?

Neil: I SAID, I'd try to TAKE it, but I don't know what HE'S going to be like all week!

Clara: Well, it doesn't matter what he's like, you dump him in the car and you drop [(?)]

Neil: [Well then,] I- I'll take it, just leave it in the house. I'll take your box for ya . . . Hey- let's go, Jason.

At this point the dispute seems to have been resolved and contained: Neil has agreed to deliver Clara's box to the post office. But it soon resurfaces in expanded form, reframed as being not about taking a box to the post office but about the division of household labor. Now it is Neil who registers a complaint:

that we're doing more than our share of the housework, let's sit down and do a schedule.

Thus Clara reframes the argument by suggesting action: they should write down who does what chores, to resolve their competing claims. She then verbally lists chores that she does regularly and Neil never does, such as assembling photo albums, shopping for Jason's clothes, and undertaking preparations for parties and holidays like Christmas. Neil responds by mentioning chores he does, such as laundry. The argument has thus been reframed as dueling chore lists.

In the next reframing, the universe of complaint is expanded to a wider domain and an issue even more fundamental to the couple's relationship: whether Neil can be counted on for emotional support. At the time of taping, the 2000 presidential election had taken place but the result was still undecided. The eventual outcome would have a significant impact on Clara's professional life: she held a high-level civil service position in a federal agency where she worked directly under the agency's head who was a political appointee as well as Clara's good friend. If George W. Bush were to take office, Clara's boss would be replaced by a Republican appointee who, presumably, would be hostile to the agency's mission and to employees who had been closely associated with his predecessor, as Clara was. Clara refers to these circumstances in explaining that Neil's resistance to helping her out with the box makes her fear that he will not be emotionally supportive if this worrisome circumstance becomes reality:

(3) f.

Clara: and- and- you know THAT'S one of the things that's bothering me about this, is THAT'S going to get worse. Becau:se, because, I'M going to need your support, when I- what I'm going through, what I think is in front of me. A:nd, with the- with the transition. I'm I'm a little u- more uptight than normal, because, I don't know who my next boss is going to be, and if they're going to have it in for me. I KNOW that I've heard THREE bad stories about the last time the Republicans came in. And what happened to people on MY hallway.

Neil: Yeah.

Clara: . . . And, and- and I- what- and I kind of FREAK OUT, when, when I think, 'Okay, I ask him to take the box, he doesn't want to do that, Oh my GO:D, what's gonna happen when-

Neil: Well-

Clara: he really DOES have to support me on something that matters more than returning a Nordstrom's package? And- and- and it- and it SCARES me!

The source of this conflict is a common gender difference, one that I discuss at length elsewhere (Tannen 1990).⁶ The type of support that Clara has described is one that many women take for granted: a hug, a sympathetic demeanor, a reassuring 'I know how you feel'. Neil, like many men, offers support by proposing action to address the source of her emotional distress. Ironically, the action which he proposes—that she quit her job—becomes to her further evidence of lack of support in her sense: not only does she fear he will not be 'supportive' if she runs into trouble at work, but, even worse, it now seems that he so devalues the work she does that he would have her give it up.

Neil and Clara have reached an impasse; their succeeding exchanges recycle these divergent positions. The resolution to the conflict comes in the form of a major reframing and rekeying initiated by a third party: their four-and-a-half-year-old son Jason. By taking the role of mediator, Jason inadvertently introduces a note of humor, as both Clara and Neil are amused to see their young child take this adult role. It also triggers a major reframing: Neil and Clara realign with each other as a parenting team to Jason, and then realign yet again, including Jason in the larger family unit by invoking a family formula: reference to George W. Bush having been arrested for drunk driving. (Gordon [2004] examines numerous references to George W. Bush's drunk-driving conviction over the course of this family's taped discourse.)

(3) j.

Jason: Mom,

Clara: What, Jason?

Jason: How about you guys pick, u:m, um, um, see what, you guys want, um, um, like i:f Daddy wants YOU to do something, and you want HIM to do something you can both do it, okay?

Clara: <sing-song> [That's a GREAT idea,] Jason!>

Neil: <serious> [That's a good idea, Jason.]>

Clara: <chuckles>

Neil: <serious> Hey Jason?>

Clara: <sing-song> Jason has the PERFECT idea!>

Neil: Hey Jason?

Jason: Mm?

Neil: I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll try to support your mo:mmy, okay?

Clara: <high> Yea:h!>

Neil: Even if that- alcoholic [car driving man becomes the President,]

Clara: [<laughs>]

Neil: <laughing> okay?

Jason: Okay, <laughs>

Furthermore, the key is now calm, reflective, and slightly humorous, and their voices are not raised. They use the gender-specific character of some of the chores as a source of humor: she chuckles as she mentions the unlikely prospect of Neil doing ‘the kind of shopping’ she does, and he chuckles as he refers to the equally unlikely prospect of her doing yard work. Whereas previously they cited the chores they did as accusations against the other for not doing them, here the fact that each does different chores is noted with satisfaction (‘I’d like to keep it you doing that stuff and me doing my stuff’). Most dramatically, the exchange ends with Neil informing Clara that he left some of her clothes at the dry cleaners, with no trace of anger or annoyance. The matter-of-fact, business-as-usual key in which he conveys this information signals that the couple is reframing their division of labor as a source of harmony rather than discord.

Clara and Neil exchange several other, similarly rekeyed references to the argument as they watch Jason play and later as they drive home. For example, at one point Clara asks ‘(You gonna help me) with those dishes?’, Neil replies, ‘Nope’, and Clara laughs. Whereas earlier his resistance to agreeing to do a chore that Clara requested was spoken with apparent resentment, here his resistance is marked by humor—indeed, it seems uttered for the purpose of humor, as if he is mocking (in Goffman’s terms, ‘guying’) his own refusal. On the way home from the children’s party, they consider stopping by a Starbucks to get coffee. Neil says, ‘You can run in there’, and Clara responds, ‘You’re always asking me to do things though.’ Then they both laugh. Again, Clara seems to be repeating a complaint Neil had made (in earnest) by making a (nonserious) parallel complaint against him. It’s funny not only because of this repetition, but also because getting coffee at Starbucks while Neil and Jason wait in the car is a noticeably less onerous task than those they had been arguing about earlier.

Not all the references to the argument are thus rekeyed as humorous, however, as they drive home. Neil continues to talk about the points of contention: why Clara asks him to take her dry cleaning when he takes his own, and why she does not want to consider solving the problem of her stressful job by quitting. During these exchanges, the key is still contentious, but the emotional intensity is far less than it was before, as the pitch, amplitude, and intonational contours that characterize their speech are closer to what is observed in unmarked everyday conversation.

The argument is recycled one last time later that day. In a major reframing and rekeying, the disagreement becomes the basis for reestablishing family harmony. At the end of the day, the couple align with each other as they discuss Jason’s reaction to their argument and their reaction to him:

needs to see that' because 'if he doesn't see it then it's like he grows up clueless and he doesn't know how to do it in his own relationship?').

To recap, then: The conversation about the box was initially framed around the question, Will Neil promise to take Clara's box to the post office if the letter carrier does not pick it up? It was then reframed around the topic of chores, specifically asking who does what chores, and who does more. Along with this reframing came a rekeying, as Clara and Neil both spoke with evident annoyance, indicating that an argument was brewing. The interchange was again reframed, this time focused on the questions: What does it mean for their relationship that Neil does not say he will definitely take the box to the post office if necessary? Will Clara be able to depend on him if her work situation becomes difficult? This leads to yet another reframing, as the topic shifts to the pros and cons of Clara's job. At this point, the pitch, amplitude, rhythm, and other aspects of voice quality make clear that the interchange has been rekeyed to reflect a high level of exasperation, that is, an argument. As the argument continues, it is reframed around the question: What constitutes support of a spouse? Yet another reframing is triggered by their son Jason's proposal that each parent do what the other asks. His proposal also triggers a rekeying, as Neil and Clara laugh together about 'that alcoholic car-driving man'. As the locus changes to the children's party, the key also changes again, this time to casual banter. A final reframing occurs as the couple assure each other, in effect, 'It's OK if Jason hears us argue; we're good parents'. Finally, their talk is reframed as a philosophical discussion of parenting and rekeyed as harmonious.

Thus, thanks to the research design by which Neil and Clara taped their conversations over the course of a week (it is not by chance, I suspect, that this argument was captured on tape on Sunday—that is, after they had been taping themselves for a week and therefore had become accustomed to managing the recorders and having them on), it has been possible to trace a single topic as it was recycled, reframed, and rekeyed throughout the course of a day.

Although my analysis has focused on how this argument was reframed and rekeyed on this day, it is of interest to know how it was ultimately resolved. In reply to a query I put to her in an e-mail message three years later, Clara explained that she had indeed drawn up a list of the chores she regularly did, and Neil, on seeing how long the list was, did not bring up the issue of chores again. She also printed out a spreadsheet of their income and expenses, which made clear that Clara's higher income enabled their lifestyle. This closed the issue of whether she should consider quitting her job. In answer to my query about what happened to the box, Clara said that, to the best of her recollection, the letter carrier picked it up after all.

same' topic took on new meanings as the conversation progressed. A second sense was seen as 'the same' topics resurfaced in later conversations, at later times, with new participants, and in different physical settings, each time providing resources for reframing the interactions. Thus, understanding intertextuality in interaction yields insight into how language works to create, convey, and interpret meaning and to express and negotiate interpersonal relationships.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

((<i>words</i>))	Double parentheses with italics enclose transcriber's comments
(words)	Single parentheses enclose uncertain transcription
-	A hyphen indicates a truncated word
?	A question mark indicates relatively strong rising intonation
.	A period indicates falling, final intonation
,	A comma indicates continuing intonation
..	Unspaced dots indicate silence
. . .	Spaced dots indicate ellipsis: words left out
:	A colon indicates an elongated vowel
CAPS	Capitals indicate emphatic stress
< <i>laughs</i> >	Angle brackets enclose descriptions of vocal noises, e.g., <i>laughs</i> , <i>coughs</i>
< <i>manner</i> >words>	Angle brackets enclose descriptions of the manner in which an utterance is spoken, e.g., <i>high-pitched</i> , <i>laughing</i> , <i>incredulous</i> ; the manner continues until the second right angle bracket
words [words]	
[words]	Square brackets enclose simultaneous talk

Notes

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