Agonism in academic discourse

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Abstract

The pervasiveness of agonism, that is, ritualized adversativeness, in contemporary western academic discourse is the source of both obfuscation of knowledge and personal suffering in academia. Framing academic discourse as a metaphorical battle leads to a variety of negative consequences, many of which have ethical as well as personal dimensions. Among these consequences is a widespread assumption that critical dialogue is synonymous with negative critique, at the expense of other types of ‘critical thinking’. Another is the requirement that scholars search for weaknesses in others’ work at the expense of seeking strengths, understanding the roots of theoretical differences, or integrating disparate but related ideas. Agonism also encourages the conceptualization of complex and subtle work as falling into two simplified warring camps. Finally, it leads to the exclusion or marginalization of those who lack a taste for agonistic interchange. Alternative approaches to intellectual interchange need not entirely replace agonistic ones but should be accommodated alongside them.

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1. Introduction and overview

In doing discourse analysis, we use discourse to do our analysis, yet we seldom examine the discourse we use. There are, of course, important exceptions, such as Tracy (1997) on departmental colloquia, Fleischman (1998) on the erasure of the personal in academic writing, Goffman (1981) on “The Lecture”, Herring (1996) on e-mail lists, Chafe and Danielewicz (1987) who include “academic speaking” and “academic writing” in their comparison of spoken and written language, and Swales’ (1990) study of academic writing as well as his recent examination of the physical and interactional contexts that give rise to it (1998). Perhaps most closely related to my topic is Hunston (1993), who examines oppositional argumentation in biology, history, and sociolinguistics articles (two each), and concludes that the less empirical disciplines are more ‘argumentative’. Here I turn my attention to an aspect of academic discourse that, as far I know, has not previously been examined: what I call “agonism”.

Ong (1981: 24), from whom I borrow the term, defines agonism as “programmed contentiousness”, “ceremonial combat”. I use the term to refer not to conflict, disagreement, or disputes per se, but rather to ritualized adversativeness. In academic discourse, this means conventionalized oppositional formats that result from an underlying ideology by which intellectual interchange is conceptualized as a metaphorical battle. In a recent book (Tannen, 1998), I explore the role and effects of agonism in three domains of public discourse: journalism, politics, and law. Here I turn to the discourse domain in which I first identified the phenomenon and began thinking about it: the academy.

My goal is to uncover agonistic elements in academic discourse and to examine their effects on our pursuit of knowledge and on the community of scholars engaged in that pursuit. In arguing that an ideology of agonism provides a usually unquestioned foundation for much of our oral and written interchange, I focus on exposing the destructive aspects of this ideology and its attendant practices. I do not, however, call for an end to agonism – a goal that would be unrealistic even if it were desirable, which I am not sure it is. Rather, I argue for a broadening of our modes of inquiry, so that agonism is, one might say, demoted from its place of ascendancy, and for a re-keying or ‘toning down’ of the more extreme incarnations of agonism in academic discourse.

In what follows, I begin by sketching my own early interest in agonism in conversational discourse. Then I briefly present some historical background, tracing the seeds of agonism in academic discourse to classical Greek philosophy and the medieval university. Against this backdrop, I move to examining agonistic elements as well as the cultural and ideological assumptions that underlie them in academic discourse: both spoken (at conferences, in classrooms, and in intellectual discussions) and written (in grant proposals, journal articles, books, and reviews of all of these). I demonstrate some unfortunate consequences of the agonistic character of these discourse types, both for the pursuit of knowledge and for the community of scholars and others who hope to gain from our knowledge. I then suggest that the existence and perpetuation of agonistic elements in academic discourse depends on
the ideological conviction that the pursuit of information, on one hand, and the people who pursue it, on the other, can be separated, whereas in reality—as we know and argue with respect to other domains of discourse—they cannot. Finally, I suggest alternative metaphors and conventions that might supplement those I have characterized as agonistic, and further suggest that moving away from the more extreme and destructive agonistic conventions would be part of a trend that Fleischman (1998) identifies as restoring “the person of the scholar” to the endeavor of scholarship.

2. Background: agonism in conversational discourse

My interest in ritualized opposition in conversation goes back to my earliest work (for example, Tannen, 1984) in which I identify and describe what I call “high-involvement” conversational style. One aspect of this style is the use of dynamic opposition, friendly contentiousness, as a cooperative rather than disruptive conversational strategy. A later co-authored article (Tannen and Kakává, 1992) illustrates a similar phenomenon in Modern Greek conversation: family members and close friends use aggravated disagreement as a means to display and create intimacy. The use of verbal disagreement as a means of reflecting and creating intimacy in friendly conversation has been shown by many other researchers, including Schifferlin (1984) for East European Jewish speakers in Philadelphia, Blum-Kulka (1997), Blum-Kulka et al. (this issue) for Israelis, Kakává (1993, this issue) for Greeks, and Corsaro and Rizzo (1990) for Italians.

More recently, I have drawn on these findings to develop a theoretical framework of the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity (Tannen, 1994). I show that adversativeness, or the expression of conflict and verbal aggression (along with other linguistic strategies such as indirectness, interruption, silence vs. volubility, and topic raising), can be used in interaction to negotiate either power, or solidarity, or both at once. In other words, expressing dynamic disagreement can be a power play (a desire to one-up another), or a show of solidarity (where only family members or close friends can engage in such exchanges), or both (where a friendly competition to one-up each other is an activity in which intimates engage). I would now use the term “agonism” to characterize the use of dynamic opposition and verbal aggression as a means of reinforcing intimacy, because it is a ritual rather than literal attack.

In my work on conversational style, then, I demonstrated that oppositional moves in conversation, traditionally assumed to be destructive power plays, could also function constructively to create rapport.1 With regard to academic discourse, my program is the reverse: to demonstrate that oppositional moves traditionally assumed to be constructive can have hitherto unexamined destructive consequences. As background to this analysis, I begin by tracing the roots of agonism in academic discourse to ancient Greek philosophy and the medieval university.

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1 In a similar spirit, I argued that ‘interruption’, usually seen as a violation of interlocutors’ speaking rights, could function interactionally as ‘cooperative overlap’—a display of enthusiastic listenership (Tannen, 1984).