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# The Pragmatics of Disagreement on Screen: Faulty Interactions?

## Yasmina Reza and Roman Polanski's 2011 *Carnage* as a Case Study

Virginie Iché

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### Introduction

#### Cooperation and Coordination in Naturally-Occurring Conversations

- 1 Naturally-occurring conversations have been described as a collaborative activity between two or more participants: Grice's central tenet, the cooperative principle, holds that every speaker participates in the conversational exchange as is required "by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange" (1975, 45) and in keeping with the stage at which the participation occurs. However, cooperation has often been (mis)understood as meaning "being benevolent to the other person" (Jobert 2010, my translation)—hence the need, maybe, to shift the focus from cooperation to coordination. While, as Clark reminds us, "conversations look planned and goal-oriented only in retrospect" (1996, 319), speakers do coordinate with one another without being aware of specific organizational rules. They only intuitively "follow them" in the sense that they try "to succeed in contributing to the conversation" (Clark 1996, 351). In that sense, conversations are "joint actions" in which co-participants work together towards the building of common ground.


#### Disagreement in Naturally-Occurring Conversations

- 2 Building common ground in conversation does not entail, however, that a speaker will always agree with the other speaker. Expressing opposing views can be part of the "joint action" that a conversation is. Cognitive scientists Duran and Fusaroli (2017)

have shown that speakers asked to disagree with another speaker on contentious topics display very high rates of movement and speech rate coordination with them.

- 3 That said, disagreement in naturally-occurring conversations is often treated as potentially detrimental to speakers' relationships, whether inherently face-threatening (Brown & Levinson 1987) or fundamentally impolite (Leech 1983). Concurrently, agreement generally constitutes the preferred response to assessment according to conversation analysts (Pomerantz 63-64), while disagreement is tendentially dispreferred. When a speaker feels s/he has to disagree with the prior assessment in spite of it not being the preferred response, s/he may resort to delay techniques, requests for clarification, repeats, or token agreements in order to mitigate their intervention being perceived as discomforting, unpleasant or offensive (70-77). In other words, disagreeing with the other participant in the conversation involves engaging with the content of the conversation, but also managing the relationship with the other person.
- 4 These concerns have not traditionally been the realm of conversation analysts but of sociolinguists and pragmaticians, who have paid attention to speakers' positive and negative face needs and wants<sup>1</sup> (Brown & Levinson 1987). Muntigl and Turnbull have combined both approaches to analyze conversational structure and facework in arguing. They have identified four types of acts, which they rank from most face-aggravating to least face-aggravating, along an aggravation-mitigation continuum. The four types are the following: 1) irrelevancy claims, which attack the other speaker's rationality, 2) challenges, which attack the other speaker's competency, 3) contradictions, which repudiate the claim made by the other speaker and 4) counterclaims which propose alternative claims (i.e., not directly contradicting, nor challenging the other speaker).

**Type of conversational acts in arguing**  
(Based on Muntigl and Turnbull)

<p>Most face-aggravating</p>  <p>Least face-aggravating</p>	<p><b>IR – irrelevancy claim</b></p> <p>Example from Muntigl and Turnbull (229): T1 C: Yes it [her being allowed to stay out later than usual] should be such a big deal because I'm moving in a week. T2 D: So what.</p>
	<p><b>CH – challenge</b></p> <p>Example from Muntigl and Turnbull (234): T1 D: I'm not blowing it out of proportion, T2 C: Yes you are. T3 D: Tell me how.</p>
	<p><b>CT – contradiction</b></p> <p>Example from Muntigl and Turnbull (231): T1 C: He thinks you guys hate him. T2 M: I don't hate him. I think—</p>
	<p><b>CC – counterclaim</b></p> <p>Example from Muntigl and Turnbull (232): T1 D: Well, we'd like to know where you are in the late late hours of the night. T2 C: I tell you where I where I am but I don't have to tell you what I'm doing.</p>

## Disagreement in Scripted Conversations and in Reza and Polanski's *Carnage*

- 5 Conversations in movies are scripted and as such, of course, are not natural. They are not, nevertheless, idealistically irenic. They feature all types of speech acts, including disagreements. As Dynel puts it, skilled scriptwriters always keep in mind the principles of ordinary communication when imagining conversational exchanges. For her, there is, therefore, no tangible difference between an interaction that has been “carefully constructed by a scriptwriter and then rendered by actors under the director’s supervision,” and an interaction “intuitively employed by regular language users” (2011, 43)—hence the possibility to conduct qualitative analysis of such corpora. A similar position is defended by Richardson (2010, 83), who argues that screenwriters should maintain what she calls, after Davis (2008), a form of “naturalism” in the writing of dialogue, and in particular preserve “the general messiness of spoken language” (Davis’s expression quoted in Richardson 2010, 69), as well as by Quaglio (2009), whose study of *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) makes it possible to draw parallels between natural conversations and the dialogue of this sitcom.
- 6 This article thus takes Reza and Polanski’s 2011 movie *Carnage* as a case study to analyze disagreement in interaction. The opening sequence of the movie features a fight between children at a Brooklyn park—one boy, Zachary Cowan, hitting the other, Ethan Longstreet, with a stick. But arguably, the movie really begins with Penelope Longstreet’s writing a supposedly factual statement on her computer. Zachary’s father, Alan Cowan, disagrees with Penelope’s choice of the term “armed” to describe his son’s carrying a stick—which will turn out to be the very first of many disagreements between the parties present, Penelope and Michael Longstreet and Nancy and Alan Cowan. The whole movie then consists in interactions about the fight, its potential cause and the follow-up action that should be taken. The disagreements between the various characters are increasingly pronounced till conflict emerges, which begs the following questions: Are the disagreeing parties no longer cooperating or partaking in the “joint actions” that conversations are? Are disagreements instances of faulty interactions? And: What type of rapport-management with the audience is involved by these disagreements on screen?

## Joint Conversations And Harmonious Disagreements

- 7 In spite of the awkwardness of the situation, the Longstreets and the Cowans first make efforts to manage their disagreements and discuss them as affably as possible. In other words, it can be argued they do not engage in what I called “faulty interactions” and that they strive to promote harmonious social relations, or at least maintain the initial level of “harmony” of their social relations.

### Cooperation and Coordination

- 8 The interactions between the Cowans and the Longstreets are somewhat tense, but their conversation is not disjointed. One clear example of this is Nancy’s recurrent use of polar echo questions:

(1) MICHAEL: Houseware supply. **Penelope is a writer** and she works part time in a bookstore, mostly art books and history books.

NANCY: **A writer?**

(2) PENELOPE: There's Courtney; she's nine. She's very angry at her father right now. **He got rid of the hamster last night.**

NANCY: **You got rid of the hamster?**

(3) MICHAEL: Yeah. It was making such a racket at night. Those things sleep during the day. It was driving Ethan crazy so, you know. He couldn't take the racket that thing was making. Look, I don't mind telling you, I been wanting to get rid of the thing for the longest time. So finally I said, that's it. I took it out and **left it on the street.**

NANCY: **You left it on the street?**

- 9 Nancy's repetition of the prior speaker's words reveals a high rate of coordination with them. Yet, the shocked expression on Nancy's face, along with the intonation with which she asks them, reveals that she does not merely want her interlocutor to repeat what has just been said in order to make sure her interlocutor said or meant to say what s/he said (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, 886). These polar echo questions are, pragmatically speaking, indirect expressives in Searle's terms (1979, 15-16)—Nancy being unable to refrain from indirectly expressing her shocked disbelief in what Michael has done to the family hamster, though she does refrain from bluntly telling him so.
- 10 As Spencer-Oatey indeed explains (2000, 2005), communicating does not only involve transmitting information, but also managing one's social relations. Accordingly, when people disagree, as she puts it,
- there will be a *content* aspect to their disagreement, which concerns the 'what' of the disagreement, such as disagreement over the accuracy of a piece of information, or the suitability of a course of action. However, there will also be a *relationship* aspect to their disagreement; for example, whether the expression of disagreement conveys lack of respect for the other person, whether it is interpreted as a bid for one-upmanship or whether it leads to feelings of resentment or dislike. (2000, 2)

## Rapport-Enhancing Disagreement

- 11 Contrary to what emerges from the example given at the end of Spencer-Oatey's quote, disagreement should not be necessarily considered as "an a priori negative act" though (Angouri & Locher 2012, 1551). As Tannen and Kakavá have shown (1992, 24-25), native speakers of modern Greek do not tend to treat disagreement as a dispreferred act—at least they do so at a much lower frequency compared to speakers of other languages—which is signaled by the frequent use of markers of solidarity in turns expressing oppositional stances. While these markers of solidarity *can* be interpreted as ways to redress the potential harm caused to the interpersonal relationship, Tannen and Kakavá argue that, in the conversations analyzed, they overall code solidarity and sociability. Disagreement can indeed create or connote involvement with the other person and therefore be rapport-enhancing. In *Carnage*, the speakers can be said to amicably disagree with one another at first. Here are three examples of friendly disagreement<sup>2</sup>:

(4) T1 PENELOPE: But hey, thank you so much for coming. It's so much better than getting caught up in that adversarial mindset.	
T2 NANCY: Well, <b>we thank you</b> . Really.	CC
T3 PENELOPE: <b>I don't think</b> there is any reason to thank each other. Luckily some of us still have a sense of community, right?	CT + CC
(5) T1 PENELOPE: I don't think we have to thank each other. At least some of us still have a sense of community, right?	
T2 ALAN: <b>Though the kids haven't got that notion straight yet</b> . I mean our kid.	CC
(6) T1 NANCY: We're very touched by how generous you're being. We realize how you're trying to smooth things out here instead of making them worse.	
T2 PENELOPE: <b>Please, it's the least we could do</b> .	CC
T3 MICHAEL: Yeah!	
T4 NANCY: <b>No</b> , come on. So many parents just take their kids' side, acting like children themselves. If Ethan had broken two of Zachary's teeth, I'm thinking Alan and I might have had more of a knee-jerk reaction. I'm not sure we would see the big picture.	CT + CC
T5 MICHAEL: <b>Sure you would!</b>	CT
T6 ALAN: She's right. <b>I'm not so sure</b> .	CT
T7 MICHAEL: <b>You would</b> . Because we all know this could have happened the other way around.	CT + CC

- 12 In these three examples of disagreement, disagreements take the form of what Muntigl and Turnbull call contradictions (CT) and counterclaims (CC), which both lie in the lower part of the aggravating-mitigating continuum, and are highly mitigating when used in combination, as is the case in (4) T3 and (6) T4 and T7.
- 13 What's more, these examples show how Leech's first four maxims of politeness prove to be relevant when it comes to managing relationships in oppositional context. In (6), all the speakers try to implement the "Approbation Maxim" and the "Modesty Maxim". While in T1, Nancy uses an exclamatory clause and the intensifying adverb "very" to "maximize" the praise of her interlocutor (Approbation Maxim b), in T2, Penelope uses a superlative to "minimize" the praise of her self (Modesty Maxim a), and in T3 Michael concurs. Similarly, in T4, Nancy implements Modesty Maxim b (Maximize dispraise of self), which Michael instantly disagrees with, in an effort to "minimize the dispraise" of the interlocutor (Approbation Maxim a). In (5), Alan tries to mitigate the indirect praise that Penelope voiced, thereby implementing Modesty Maxim a (Minimize praise of self). As he immediately realizes how this may be construed as a criticism of Ethan, he

qualifies his statement to maximize the dispraise of his son, Zachary (which may be understood as a form of maximization of the dispraise of the self, i.e., Modesty Maxim b). In (4), while Nancy insists that *they* should thank the Longstreets, in keeping with Generosity Maxim b which reads “Maximize cost to self”, Penelope disagrees, in keeping with Tact Maxim a, which reads “Minimize cost to other”.

14 Two conclusions can be drawn from these analyses:

1. While Leech’s first four maxims are implemented in *Carnage*, Leech’s Agreement Maxim (Maxim V), which states “Minimize disagreement between self and other”, proves to have to be qualified. As is evidenced by these interactions in oppositional context, in polite conversations, there can be both a tendency to exaggerate agreement<sup>3</sup> and a tendency to exaggerate disagreement in a rapport-enhancing way.
2. The Longstreets and the Cowans display two different styles of politeness in the excerpts selected. While Penelope and Michael implement submaxims a, Nancy and Alan implement submaxims b. As Leech clarifies, the purpose of all submaxims a is to “avoid discord”, while submaxims b aim at “seeking concord” (133). In the three excerpts analyzed above, the Cowans try to enhance their rapport with the Longstreets when disagreeing with them, which replicates Tannen and Kakavá’s results about disagreement as a marker of solidarity and sociability in a different context.

## Rapport-Maintaining Disagreement

15 Obviously, because it is their son who has hit Ethan Longstreet, the Cowans (and in particular Nancy Cowan) feel that they have to redress the wrong done to the Longstreets, hence their attempts to enhance their rapport with them, concord-seeking disagreement being only one of the strategies implemented. The Longstreets, on the other hand, feel they are the wronged party, and, accordingly, would like the Cowans to take some action. They do not want the situation to spiral into conflict though.

16 The reason why Penelope and Michael’s interventions are (first) oriented towards rapport-maintenance is thus because of their interactional goals, that is to say what they hope the meeting will achieve, i.e., have the Cowans bring Zachary over to present heartfelt apologies to Ethan, which intersect with their face sensitivities and sociality rights and obligations. As is clarified by Spencer-Oatey indeed (2000,14; 2005, 100), there are three distinct, though interdependent bases of rapport between speakers:

1. the first base is “face sensitivities”, in other words, concerns regarding the speaker’s self-concept; at the beginning of the movie, Penelope and Michael consider that their faces have been threatened by proxy, with their son being attacked by Zachary<sup>4</sup>;
2. the second base is “sociality rights and obligations”, among which are “equity rights”—the right to “personal consideration from others so that we are treated fairly”—and “association rights”—the right to adequate social involvement with others.
3. and the last base of rapport is “interactional goals” (which can be relational or transactional, i.e., task-oriented).

17 Here are four disagreements about the analysis of the situation and the action to be consequently taken—and how each speaker deals with them by taking the three bases of interpersonal rapport into consideration:

(7) PENELOPE: Well is he, sorry?	
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T1 ALAN: He doesn't realize how serious it was. He's eleven years old.	CC
T2 PENELOPE: Eleven is not a baby.	CT
T3 MICHAEL: It's not an adult either.	CT
(8) T1 NANCY: We won't give him a choice.	
T2 PENELOPE: It has to come from him.	CT
T3 NANCY: Zachary acts like a thug, we're not going to wait around for him to see the light.	CT + CC
T4 PENELOPE: If Zachary sees Ethan in a punitive context, because he's forced to, I really, I just <b>don't</b> see anything positive coming out of that.	CC
T5 ALAN: Mrs. Longstreet, our son is a maniac. If you hope he'll suddenly and spontaneously get all apologetic, you're dreaming. Look I'm sorry, but I really do have to get back to the office.	CC
(9) PENELOPE: So what do we decide?	
NANCY: Could you come over to our place at about seven-thirty, with Ethan?	
PENELOPE: Seven-thirty? (looking at Michael)	
T1 MICHAEL: Well, if you want my opinion...	CC
NANCY: Yes, please.	
T2 MICHAEL: I think Zachary should come over here.	Follow-up CC <sup>5</sup>
PENELOPE: Yes, I agree.	
T3 MICHAEL: The victim shouldn't be the one who makes the trip.	Follow-up CC
PENELOPE: That's right.	
T4 ALAN: I can't be anywhere at seven-thirty.	CC
T5 NANCY: Who needs you? You're useless, right?	CH
T6 PENELOPE: Seriously, I think it's important for his father to come.	CC
ALAN: (answering PENELOPE:) All right but not tonight.	

(10) T1 NANCY: Look, the main thing is to get the kids to talk. So, I'll come over to your place at seven-thirty with Zachary and we'll just let them talk it through. What? You don't seem convinced.	
T2 PENELOPE: If Zachary hasn't acquired any accountability skills, they'll just glare at each other, it will be a disaster.	
T3 ALAN: Accountability skills, Mrs. Longstreet? What are you talking about?	
T4 PENELOPE: I'm sure your son is not a maniac.	CT <sup>6</sup>
T5 NANCY: Zachary is not a maniac.	CT
T6 ALAN: Yes he is.	CT
T7 NANCY: Alan, don't be an idiot. Why are you saying that?	CH
T8 ALAN: He's a maniac.	CT
T9 MICHAEL: How does he explain what he did?	CC
NANCY: He won't talk about it.	
T10 PENELOPE: He should. He should talk about it.	
T11 ALAN: That's a lot of "shoulds" Mrs. Longstreet. He should come here, he should talk about it, he should feel sorry. I'm sure you're much more evolved than we are. We're trying to get up to speed, but in the meantime try to indulge us.	CC
T12 MICHAEL: Hey come on! What happened here? This isn't what we're all about.	CC

18 These four conversational exchanges feature disagreements of all kinds, whether direct or indirect, with three of the four different types of turn-structures identified by Muntigl and Turnbull, i.e., challenge (CH), contradiction (CC) and counterclaim (CT). What these interactions reveal in terms of rapport-managing in disagreement context is the following:

1. Penelope maintains rapport when disagreeing with Nancy and/or Alan by resorting to reason and external parental or behavioral norms. Her use of "has to" instead of "must" in (8) T2 shows she believes in general rules, and in this particular case, in the rule according to which no one can be forced to apologize. Her use of logical link words (in (8), T3; and in (10), T2) further highlights the fact that she gives greater weight to equity rights than to association rights;
2. While Muntigl and Turnbull focus on disagreement between two speakers, these conversations feature disagreements between two couples. The analysis of these multiparty interactions clarifies the fact that rapport is, more often than not, (mis)managed by several people in conjunction. In particular:
  - a) When Michael voices some disagreement with the Cowans, he tends to maintain the rapport with them by using mitigating strategies such as opting out devices ("if you want my opinion" (9) T1, information-seeking questions (as in (10) T9 and T12) or negative statements contradicting Penelope (as in (7) T3),
  - b) Nancy repairs the rapport with the Longstreets by using what Muntigl and Turnbull call

challenges and attacks her husband, Alan (as can be seen in (9) and (10)). These attacks can be seen, evidently, as forms of dispraise of the self (if Alan and Nancy are taken as forming a unit), uttered to repair the damage to the relationship between the Longstreets and the Cowans. Yet, Michael's and Nancy's contradicting their spouses also prefigures the shifting affiliations to come, ultimately showing how faultlessly maintaining rapport in disagreement context with multiple speakers is a delicate balance to achieve.

## Emergence and Dissemination of Conflict

- 19 As the title of the movie indicates, the interactions between Penelope, Nancy, Alan and Michael cannot but go wrong. The disagreements within each family that were first latent soon come to the forefront and spiral into conflict, hinting at the fact that there is such a thing as an opposition between faultless management of disagreement vs. faulty management of disagreement.

### Rapport-Challenging Disagreement: FTA and Attacks on Sociality Rights and Obligations

- 20 Even though the line proves to be thin sometimes between rapport-maintaining and rapport-challenging disagreement in *Carnage*, one can argue that Nancy's physical reaction, i.e., her vomiting violently, is a tipping point in the movie and that most disagreements from that moment onwards are of the rapport-challenging type. After coming back from the bathroom and apologizing, Nancy decides to launch a counter-attack, which Alan backs up:

(11) NANCY: In the bathroom I was thinking.  
 PENELOPE: Yes?  
 NANCY: Yeah, maybe we glossed over the... Well, I mean...  
 MICHAEL: What? What is it?  
 NANCY: Well, name-calling is a kind of abuse.  
 MICHAEL: Sure.  
 PENELOPE: Depends.  
 MICHAEL: Right, depends.  
 NANCY: Zachary has never been a violent child. He must have had his reasons.  
 ALAN: Like getting called a snitch!

- 21 Nancy seems to be perfectly aware of the shift in the type of rapport management involved by her intervention as is made clear by her use of hedges such as “maybe”, “I mean” and “well” twice—revealing how difficult it may be to intentionally damage the rapport with another person.
- 22 Precautions were taken not to criticize each other's children when disagreeing with the other party in the first thirty minutes of the movie. Indeed, criticizing someone's child is likely to be perceived as indirectly attacking their parents' faces. Yet, after Nancy broaches the question of what she calls “the source of the problem”, Michael and Nancy attack each in turn Ethan and Zachary:

(12) T1 ALAN: Call me a snitch, it gets a rise out of me.	
T2 MICHAEL: Unless it's true.	CT

T3 ALAN: What?	CH
T4 MICHAEL: You know, if the shoe fits.	Follow-up CT
T5 NANCY: You think my son is a snitch?	CH
T6 MICHAEL: Come on, I am joking around.	
T7 NANCY: So is yours anyway.	CC
T8 MICHAEL: What do you mean so is ours?	CH
T9 NANCY: He snitched on Zachary.	Follow-up CC

- 23 As can be seen in this heated argument, what Muntigl and Turnbull call challenges (CH), which lie in the higher part of the aggravating-mitigating continuum, now appear quite frequently and Michael's attempt to de-escalate the conflict in T6 does not work. Penelope's subsequent attempt to calm Nancy down turns out to be an example of "how not to implement the modesty maxim", since she maximizes her own praise—resulting in a blunt face-threatening act on Nancy's part:

(13) T1 PENELOPE: Nancy, there is no reason to lose our cool here. Michael and I have gone out of our way to be fair-minded and conciliating...	
T2 NANCY: Not so fair-minded.	CT
T3 PENELOPE: Oh really?	CH
T4 NANCY: Superficially fair-minded.	CT

- 24 Penelope's challenge in T3 only results in another attack on Nancy's part—leading to further attacks, not only on each other's faces, but also on each other's sociality rights and obligations. Penelope reminding Nancy and Alan that her "son lost two teeth, two incisors" only gets the following response: "We got that right" and her insisting that one of them was lost "permanently" leads Alan to deny the gravity of the situation and to declare: "He'll get new teeth! Better ones!"—thereby attacking Penelope's association rights (in particular her right to empathy).
- 25 Association rights and equity rights are subsequently infringed from all sides. Michael attacks Nancy's association rights, in particular her right to empathy and respect, when he makes fun of her being sick instead of politely not mentioning it anymore: "Well, you've certainly perked up since you tossed your cookies". Nancy attacks Michael's association rights and his equity rights by explicitly giving her opinion about Michael's getting rid of the family hamster, (which can be said to be an inappropriate amount of involvement). Penelope attacks Nancy's equity rights when rebuking her comment "It was a mistake not to consider the source of the problem" with "There is no source. There's an eleven-year-old who hits people. With a stick", thereby unfairly generalizing from one isolated incident to a general truth.

## Leading to Shifting Affiliations

- 26 Face is usually discussed on the base of individuals in pragmatics. As is well known, Brown and Levinson define face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (1987, 61). However, as I’ve already hinted at with the case of children, attacks against one member of a group, not just attacks against the group as a whole, can be perceived as face-aggravating for all the members of the group.
- 27 In *Carnage*, in the first thirty minutes of the movie, group affiliation is very strong; the Longstreets tend to disagree with the Cowans and vice versa; there is very little disaffiliation in the form of disagreement among the Longstreets or among the Cowans. When they do disagree with the other member of their family, it is to repair the damage done to the rapport with the other family. There are two notable exceptions though: when Penelope reproves Michael for bringing up his personal memory of a fight against a certain Jimmy Leach when he was a child and when she rejects Michael’s siding with Nancy about how they will reprimand their son. In both cases, Penelope tries to get her husband in line, the first time with a rhetorical question attacking the relevance of his intervention (“What does that have to do with anything, Michael?”), implying that he should not have told his anecdote about his childhood) and the second time with an echo question casting doubt on the soundness of his judgment (“What absolutely?”<sup>8</sup>). Both couples discuss their respective alignment when they are briefly separated after Nancy’s vomiting. While Nancy disagrees with Alan’s “bickering over every word” (her words), but seems to accept Alan’s justification for his behavior, Penelope confronts Michael’s taking the Cowans’ side, which Michael denies.
- 28 The ground is therefore fertile for rapport-challenging or even rapport-aggravating disagreements not only between the Longstreets and the Cowans, but also between Penelope and Michael. They start expressing their disagreement with one another in a rapport-challenging way, leading to disaffiliation among the Longstreets:

(14) T1 MICHAEL: Look. We’re all decent people. All four of us. I don’t know how we got carried away, losing our tempers. This is totally unnecessary.	
T2 PENELOPE: Michael, stop it! Stop mitigating. All right, we’re only superficially fair-minded, so why should we be fair-minded at all?	CC
T3 MICHAEL: Oh no, I’m not going to be led down that path.	CC
T4 ALAN: What path?	
T5 MICHAEL: The path those two little shits led us down! All right?	Follow-up CC
T6 ALAN: I’m afraid Pen doesn’t see things that way.	CC
T7 PENELOPE: Penelope!	
ALAN: Sorry.	
PENELOPE: So Ethan is a shit now. That really takes the cake.	

- 29 Penelope's use of the imperative form "stop" in T2 attacks Michael's right to autonomy. Michael rejects Penelope's "we", disassociates himself from her and ends up attacking the children, including his own son—using the offensive sh- word to describe both children, along with the distal "those" in T5. He makes it clear that he no longer sees himself as part of a group called "the Longstreets"<sup>9</sup>.
- 30 Rapport-challenging disagreements reveal that alliances are not iron-clad, even among members of the same family. Penelope, who did not expect this from a member of her "group", then aligns herself with Nancy, who attacks Michael about the family hamster:

(15) T1 NANCY: Worse. You just left it out there, trembling with fear in a hostile environment. That poor critter was probably eaten by a dog or a rat.	
T2 PENELOPE: She's right about that!	
T3 MICHAEL: What do you mean she's right?	CH
T4 PENELOPE: I mean, come on, Michael. It's horrible, what must have happened to that poor animal!	CC

- 31 Penelope's agreeing with Nancy (T2) can be interpreted as an indirect form of disagreement with Michael about what he did, which she clarifies next (T4). Affiliations are subsequently renegotiated, Alan siding with Michael while Nancy defends Penelope.
- 32 These affiliations are very unstable though. When Nancy brings up again her opinion about the shared responsibility for the incident, the Nancy-Penelope alliance gets broken:

(16) T1 NANCY: I'd say both sides share the blame. So there you are. Both sides share the blame.	
T2 PENELOPE: Are you serious?	CH
T3 NANCY: Excuse me?	CH
T4 PENELOPE: That's what you really think?	Follow-up CH
T5 NANCY: It's what I think, yes.	CT
T6 PENELOPE: My son Ethan, who had to take 2 codeine at three in the morning, he shares the blame?	CH
T7 NANCY: He's not necessarily innocent.	CC
PENELOPE: Get out of my house. Get the fuck out! Get out the fuck of my house.	

- 33 While Nancy goes from a challenging type of disagreement (T1 and T3) to a counterclaim type of disagreement (T7), thereby trying to de-escalate the conflict, Penelope keeps using what Muntigl and Turnbull call challenges (T2, T4, T6) and finally

bluntly uses the imperative form “get out” along with the dysphemistic use of the f-word<sup>10</sup>, while violently throwing Nancy’s bag to the ceiling—thereby metonymically throwing Nancy out of her apartment. Similarly, the Michael-Alan alliance does not stand the test of time, since Alan thinks too little of Penelope, even for Michael:

(17) ALAN: I saw your friend Jane Fonda on TV the other day. Made me want to run out and buy a Ku Klux Klan poster.

PENELOPE: My friend Jane Fonda? What does that mean? What the hell does that mean?!

ALAN: You’re the same breed. The same kind of involved, problem-solver woman. Those are not the women we like, the women we like are sensual, crazy, shot full of hormones. The gatekeepers of the world, the ones who want to show off how perceptive they are, huge turnoff. Even poor Michael, your own husband is turned off...

MICHAEL: Don’t you speak for me!

- 34 Disagreements in *Carnage* end up being highly rapport-aggravating, so much so that even statements that should be treated as face-enhancing and be met with agreements or thanks result in further disagreements and rapport-challenging reactions:

(18) ALAN: You know I’m actually starting to like you.

PENELOPE: Shut up!

- 35 And:

(19) ALAN: (to NANCY:) Let him talk, honey. (to MICHAEL:) Explain to me, Michael, exactly how you care. What does that mean anyway? You’re more credible when you’re being openly despicable. Truth is, nobody here cares. Except maybe Penelope, one must acknowledge her integrity.

PENELOPE: I don’t need your acknowledgment! I don’t need your acknowledgment!

- 36 In *Carnage*, disagreement is only used briefly to enhance the rapport between the protagonists. The interactional goals of the two families prove to be too conflicting, leading the interlocutors to aggravate their rapport. While their interactions cannot be said to be disjoint actions, as the direction of the interactions is the result of paradoxically joint efforts, they cannot be adequately described as faultless. The pragmatics of disagreement in the oppositional context of *Carnage* proves to be radically faulty.

## Concluding Words: Rapport-Management with the Audience

- 37 Yet, as is highlighted by Dynel, two levels of communication need to be taken into account when one analyzes film discourse: the “inter-character/characters’ (communicative) level” and the “recipient’s (communicative) level” (2011, 49). The whole film production team, which she calls “the collective sender”, are aware of the recipients, the viewers, and “convey meanings especially for their benefit” (50). As several scholars have argued indeed, whenever there is a conversation between characters, whether in the context of drama (Short 1995, 146) or narration (Phelan 2005, 2017), there are (at least) two communication channels indeed: the character-character channel and the author (or collective sender in our case)-character-character-audience, which relies on the phenomenon of indirection (Phelan 2017; Sell et al. 2013). When the collective sender plans for a character to disagree with another character on screen, it does not mean, obviously, that the collective sender disagrees

with the audience, or that the character voicing his or her disagreement disagrees with the audience either. Another type of interaction seems to happen at the recipient's level.

38 That *Carnage* is described as a “comedy”, just like the play it is adapted from (Tylski 2011, 95; Jacomard 2016, 191), certainly hints at the possibility that interactions along the collective sender-character-character-audience track are not necessarily faulty, or at least not as faulty as at the inter-characters' level. Some parts of the movie may be deemed cringeworthy, notably Michael's making fun of his mother's concern about what is going to be left of her prosthesis after she is cremated. However, I'd argue that the movie as a whole does not rely on rapport-challenging interactions with its audience, but rather on rapport-enhancing phenomena. While some movies tilt on the “cringe” side and really test the audience's comfort zone (one thinks of Haneke's 1997 *Funny Games*, for instance), *Carnage* relies on the audience's understanding the collective sender's interactional goal, exposing selfishness and an inflated sense of one's own self-importance hidden under the veneer of politeness. In other words, *Carnage* preserves the viewers' faces and their sociality rights.

39 The collective sender-character-character-audience track and its rapport-managing function are visible, I contend, through Alan's repeated phone calls with various members of the pharmaceutical company he is representing. At the inter-character's communicative level, these phone calls highly damage the relationship between Alan and Nancy, who sees them as infringing on her association rights, as it shows that Alan is insufficiently involved in his relationship with her (she describes the life of her family as “chopped up by the cell phone”<sup>11</sup>). At the recipient's communicative level though, the audience is likely to see these phone calls as respecting their equity rights. Indeed, the cost of listening to these conversations is vastly outweighed by the benefit of understanding and relishing Alan's *modus operandi*, which the following cues exemplify:

(20) ALAN: (raising his voice:) I want a press release that doesn't sound defensive at all. Just the opposite. Go for the jugular. Something like TW Pharma is a target. Attempt at manipulation of the stock prize two weeks before the stockholders' meeting. Where did this study come from anyway? How does this suddenly drop out of a clear blue sky, etcetera. Not one word about the health issue. Only one question: Who is behind the study? Who?

(21) WALTER (O.S. - TEL) CNN is inviting me for a panel discussion. What do I do?

ALAN: As long as there are no victims on the panel. No victims. I don't want you sitting down with victims.

WALTER (O.S. - TEL) And I deny...

ALAN: Deny, deny, deny. And if we have to, we'll sue the Journal.

40 The viewers cannot but draw parallels between Alan's vindictive strategy of defending the pharmaceutical company who deliberately hid the side effects of its drug for profit and his repeatedly questioning the use of the word “armed” and downplaying the children's fight as roughhousing.

41 Not only are viewers' sociality rights well managed because they are respectfully constructed as involved enough to “connect the dots” but their faces are also enhanced, as they are presupposed to be able to see through so-called polite behaviors. In this sense, it can be argued that Alan Cowan constitutes a partial stand-in for the viewers. In spite of his ethically questionable values and his apparent lack of involvement in his son's education, viewers may appreciate his perceptiveness, see



themselves as equally observant and therefore enjoy his mock-polite or poli-rude<sup>12</sup> comments about Penelope. For instance, when Penelope is enraged at Michael for suggesting he disagreed with her inviting the Cowans, he deliberately misunderstands the presuppositions underlying the rhetorical questions she asks and jeeringly compliments Penelope:

(22) PENELOPE: Who said not to touch the cobbler this morning? Who said we should keep the rest for the Cowan's? Who said that?!

ALAN: That was very nice of you.

42 Alan's intervention enhances Penelope's face only mockingly, as it actually shows his support for Michael's claim that he did not think the meeting with the Cowans was a good idea. What is particularly interesting here though is the fact that no one picks up on Alan's cue, showing that ultimately, the intended recipient of Alan's comment is the audience, and not the people in the room.

43 *Carnage* addresses its audience in indirect though very potent ways indeed—thereby not unduly imposing itself upon the viewers while creating indirect pathways. This is strikingly the case with Alan's reaction to Nancy's and Penelope's uncontrollable laughing after Nancy suddenly decides to dunk Alan's cell phone in the tulip vase:

(23) ALAN: And they think it's funny, they think it's funny!

44 Alan points in their direction, but the camera being very close to Nancy's shoulder gives the impression that the audience is in the living-room, as it were. Nancy asks "who is *they*?" earlier in the movie in a different context, and the question proves to be very relevant here—who is "they"? On one level, "they" is Nancy and Penelope who are attacking Alan's and Michael's faces, and implying they are ridiculous people giving too much importance to a cell phone. But on another, "they" refers to the audience who are both gently upbraided for laughing without compassion at these characters, while at the same time expected to enjoy the display of unstable and messy relationships behind closed doors.

45 *Carnage* features a whole array of disagreements at the inter-characters' communicative level, from rapport-enhancing to rapport-damaging ones, but it also relies on a closely knit relationship with the audience, showing that displaying disagreements on screen does not necessarily imply faulty interactions with the hearer.

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## NOTES

1. Brown and Levinson (1987) define “positive politeness” as “the expression of solidarity” (2) and “negative politeness” as “the expression of restraint” (2). They contend indeed that any “competent adult member of a society” (61) has “face”—a concept which is to be construed as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (61). “Face” is composed of two types of needs and wants, the wish “to be approved of”, corresponding to the speaker’s positive face, and the wish “to be unimpeded in one’s actions”, corresponding to the speaker’s negative face (13). Brown and Levinson argue that speakers, who are all aware of the vulnerability of their faces, generally cooperate in maintaining face in interaction (61), therefore attending to their hearers’ negative and positive face needs and wants to avoid face loss.

2. In the following examples, “T” stands for “turn” (in the conversation): T1 is the first turn of the conversational exchange in which a disagreement occurs, T2 the second, etc. The turns are not numbered when there is no disagreement.

3. Nancy does resort to exaggerated agreement, saying “of course”, “naturally”, “yes” and “right” seventeen times over the course of her interactions with other characters in order to emphasize her approval of her interlocutor’s position.

4. Zachary’s attack on Ethan could be described as an indirect form of attack on both Penelope’s and Michael’s positive and negative faces to take up Brown and Levinson’s concepts. Not only did the attack reveal that Ethan was treated as part of an out-group, which can be considered to reflect on them, the attack has also drastically altered for the worse their life, with their having to go to the dentist’s and wake up at night to give painkillers to their son. Spencer-Oatey (2005, 102) does not take up this distinction though, but identifies two types of face, one that is situation-specific (which she calls *respectability face*) and another which is pan-situational (which she calls *identity face*). She argues that “it is *identity face* rather than *respectability face* that is threatened or enhanced in specific interactional encounters” (103).

5. The mentions “Follow-up CC”, “follow-up CT” or “follow-up CH” mean that the counterclaim, the counterattack or the challenge are conveyed over the course of two turns.

6. While T4 and T5 include a disagreement about Zachary’s mental status, I chose to keep this disagreement within example (10) because the whole exchange is about getting the children to talk, which the Cowans and the Longstreets have different views on and Zachary’s being “a maniac” or not pertains to his being able to discuss what happened with Ethan.

7. PENELOPE: What is our business is this unfortunate incident. Violence is our business.

MICHAEL: When I was the leader, I beat up Jimmy Leach in a fair fight and he was bigger than me.

PENELOPE: **What does that have to do with anything, Michael?**

MICHAEL: No, nothing.

PENELOPE: I mean this isn’t a fair fight, these boys weren’t fighting.

MICHAEL: Right. I was just remembering something.

8. NANCY: I think so. Mrs. Longstreet, if we decide to reprimand our child, we’ll do it in our own way and on our own terms.

MICHAEL: Absolutely.

PENELOPE: **What absolutely?**

9. See also later his arguing that his daughter belongs to the category of “snotnose brats”: “Bring her on! I’m not going to be told how to act by some nine-year-old snotnose brat!”

10. See Allan and Burridge’s definition of dysphemism: “A dysphemism is an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both” (1991, 26) and their precision regarding the reasons for the use of dysphemistic expressions: “they are

motivated by the desire to offensively demonstrate such feelings and to downgrade the denotatum or addressee” (1991, 31).

11. He is insufficiently involved in all aspects of his life apart from his work, as his calling Michael “Steven” towards the end of the movie reveals it too.

12. See Kerbrat-Orrechioni (2010) for a discussion of poli-rudeness.

## ABSTRACTS

Naturally-occurring conversations have been described as a collaborative activity. Grice’s central tenet, the cooperative principle, holds that every speaker participates in the conversational exchange as is required “by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange” (26). However, cooperation has often been (mis)understood as meaning “being benevolent to the other person” (Jobert 2010, my translation)—hence the need, maybe, to shift the focus from cooperation to coordination. Thinking of conversational exchanges on the basis of coordination does not suggest all exchanges have to be idealistically irenic though. Conversations are “joint actions” (Clark 1996) in which co-participants work together towards the building of common ground, and expressing opposing views can be part of the “joint action” that a conversation is.

That said, disagreement in naturally-occurring conversations is often treated as potentially detrimental to speakers’ relationships, whether inherently face-threatening (Brown and Levinson 1987) or fundamentally impolite (Leech 1983). In this article, Reza and Polanski’s 2011 *Carnage* is taken as a case study to analyze the pragmatics of disagreement on screen. The whole movie indeed consists in interactions about a fight between two children, its potential cause and the follow-up action that should be taken. The disagreements between the various characters are increasingly pronounced till conflict emerges, which begs the following questions: are disagreements instances of faulty interactions that are necessarily rapport-challenging (Spencer-Oatey 2005, 2005)? Are the disagreeing parties no longer cooperating or partaking in the “joint actions” that conversations are? What type of rapport-management with the audience is involved by these disagreements on screen?

Les conversations naturelles sont généralement décrites comme étant des activités collaboratives. Selon le principe coopératif de Grice, chaque locuteur participe à la conversation selon « l’objectif ou la direction acceptés de l’échange de paroles » (26, je traduis). Cependant, coopérer a souvent été compris à tort comme signifiant « être bienveillant envers son interlocuteur » (Jobert 2010) — d’où la nécessité, peut-être, de parler de coordination plutôt que de coopération. Penser les échanges conversationnels en termes de coordination ne signifie pas pour autant qu’ils doivent être idéalement iréniques. Les conversations, autant d’« actions conjointes » (Clark 1996) dans lesquelles les coparticipants travaillent ensemble à l’élaboration d’un terrain commun, peuvent tout à fait comporter l’expression de points de vue opposés.

Cela dit, l’expression du désaccord au sein de conversations naturelles est souvent considérée comme potentiellement préjudiciable aux relations entre locuteurs, qu’elle soit intrinsèquement menaçante pour sa « face » (Brown et Levinson 1987) ou fondamentalement impolie (Leech 1983). Dans cet article, *Carnage* de Reza et Polanski (2011) est pris comme étude de cas pour analyser la pragmatique du désaccord à l’écran. Le film repose en effet sur des échanges portant sur la cause possible d’une bagarre ayant éclaté entre deux enfants et les suites à y donner. Les désaccords sont de plus en plus prégnants, au point que le conflit émerge, ce qui amène à se poser les

questions suivantes : l'expression du désaccord est-elle le signe d'interactions défectueuses, qui mettent nécessairement en péril les rapports interpersonnels (Spencer-Oatey 2005, 2005) ? Les parties en désaccord ne coopèrent-elles plus ou ne participent-elles plus aux « actions conjointes » que sont les conversations ? Quel type de gestion du rapport avec le public est impliqué par ces désaccords à l'écran ?

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** désaccord, pragmatique, analyse conversationnelle, gestion du rapport à l'autre, conflit, Carnage

**Keywords:** disagreement, pragmatics, conversation analysis, rapport-management, conflict, Carnage

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