



# The display of frustration in arguments: A multimodal analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the causes of frustration, and how speakers display their frustration in conversational arguments in terms of interactional organization, linguistic features, paralinguistic features, and embodied actions based on the method of discourse analysis. The expression of emotion is co-constructed by verbal cues, non-verbal vocal cues, and bodily behavior. The data presented here reveals two broad types of frustration. In the first type, verbal and non-verbal expressions of frustration are combined. In the second, frustration is displayed through non-verbal expression alone. This work seeks to uncover if they are associated with special types of linguistic and paralinguistic features, as well as interactional organization and embodied actions. The findings suggest that combined use of verbal and non-verbal expressions of frustration is displayed directly by linguistic features in conjunction with paralinguistic features and embodied actions. However, non-verbal expression of frustration displayed by embodied actions alone is a stronger emotional display than combined uses of verbal and non-verbal expressions of frustration. Moreover, the paper proposes that embodied action is a significant part of the interactional organization of a conversation.

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## 1. Introduction

We often express different opinions, disagreements, feelings, and emotions in conversational arguments. And such expressions may evoke emotional reactions in others, even though we may not intend that to happen. Different people have different attitudes and different means of coping with arguments. People in arguments may display a variety of negative emotions, e.g., distrust, disappointment, frustration, shame, confusion, worry, anger, or fear. The display of frustration is analyzed in this paper.

Frustration is the noun of frustrate. From the *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary (2000)*, the definition of frustrate is if something frustrates you, it upsets or angers you because you are unable to do anything about the problems it creates. The definition tells us that a frustrated person can be upset or angry.

The data in this paper reveals two broad types of frustration: the combined use of verbal and non-verbal expressions of frustration, and the non-verbal expression of frustration. The distinction between these two cues will be gradually revealed in the data analyses. In the combined use of verbal and non-verbal expressions of frustration, speakers display their frustration by active emotional cues, through the coordination of verbal and non-verbal interaction. In the non-verbal expression of frustration, they display their frustration by embodied actions alone.

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The findings suggest that the non-verbal expression of frustration is a stronger emotional display than the combined use of verbal and non-verbal expressions of frustration. Moreover, this paper proposes that the embodied action is an important part of the interactional organization of a conversation.

## 2. Earlier approaches to emotional expression in argument

Emotions have been studied by biologists, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, social constructionists, social psychologists, sociolinguists, conversation analysts and interactional linguistics. Chafe (1994) emphasizes that emotion is present in everyday conversation; emotion is what gives communication life. Coordination between partners in conversation occurs at many levels, which are all grounds for emotion. Emotion is thus identified as intersubjective.

Emotion can be displayed by prosodic cues. According to Chafe (2002), “particular prosodic phenomena express a generalized heightening of emotional involvement, and also sometimes specific affective attitudes.” Goodwin and Goodwin (2000) examine a video-recording of young girls playing hopscotch. They find that the girls effectively display an emotional “stance” towards actions of their co-participants, through precise coordination of pitch elevation, intonation, syntactic choice, timing and gesture. The prosodic features, such as markedly raised pitch, vowel lengthening and raised volume in oppositional turns, can display the speaker’s strong emotional stance. Selting (1996) also shows that prosody can be used to distinguish “normal” repair initiations from “astonished” repair initiations in German conversational data. The repair initiations with high pitch and increased loudness indicate problems with conflicting or contrasting expectations. Paralinguistic elements can be important in conveying the oppositional character of a turn and its level of intensity. Such cues include “increased volume, rapid tempo, contrastive stress and exaggerated intonation contours” (Schiffrin, 1985).

Scholars who study arguments or conflicts in naturally occurring data put their focus on the sequential organization and turn-taking in interaction from the conversation analytic perspective (Goodwin, 1983; Pomerantz, 1984; Schiffrin, 1985; Goodwin and Goodwin, 2000; Sandlund, 2004). Pomerantz (1984) suggests that agreeing is performed with a minimization of gap between the prior turn’s completion and the agreement turn’s initiation. But disagreeing assessment is frequently delayed within a turn, or over a series of turns, with the preface of pauses, questioning repetitions, requests for clarification, or repair initiators. Schiffrin (1985) proposes that turn taking becomes more competitive during verbal conflict. Overlaps and interruptions are frequent. She suggests that absences of forthcoming agreements or disagreements by recipients, with gaps, requests for clarification, and the like, are interpretable as instances of unstated, or as-yet-unstated, disagreements. Furthermore, she argues that verbal conflict puts participants in jeopardy of losing face and esteem, as well as losing concrete benefits that may be at issue in dispute.

Scheff and Retzinger (1991) propose that there is high frequency and prominence of shame cues in marital quarrel. The quarrels begin with shame and separation rather than anger. And the quarrels contain rapidly alternating sequences of escalating shame and anger. There are two dispute styles in marital quarrel: impasse or quarrel. An impasse can be likened to a cold war, in which there is little or no overt anger, but withdrawal, avoidance, and coldness instead. In a quarrel there may be shouting, name-calling, and other overt signs of conflict. Retzinger (1991) indicates that the expressions of shame are evident in paralinguistic cues, such as vocal withdrawal, overly soft volume, irregular speech rhythm, stammering, rapid speech, mumbling, hesitation, or long pause. By contrast, anger can be evident in staccato speech, loud volume, heavy stress on certain words, increased tempo, whiny, or in a singsong pattern for ridiculing.

Sandlund (2004) studies the display of frustration, embarrassment, and enjoyment in American English academic talk-in-interaction. She evaluates these conversations in terms of their sequential environment, their interactional elicitors, and their management or closing, by adopting a conversation analytic approach. Sandlund observes that frustration is primarily located in the context of violations of activity-specific turn-taking norms.

The above literature review mainly focuses on emotion in argument. The findings indicate that people can demonstrate their emotion in arguments by turn-taking, sequential organization, prosody, and gesture. In this paper, I will study how the verbal cues and non-verbal cues interact with each other in emotional expression.

## 3. Data, methodology and objectives

The data consists of a video-recording called “Never in Canada” (Haddington and Kärkkäinen, 2003). The three speakers in the video-recording were around 23 years old when the data was collected in 2003, at the University of Oulu, Finland. They were all exchange students at the time of the recording: Jason and Mary are from the United States, and Sophie is from Canada. The recording is around 2 h long, and the analyzed excerpt is a part of the recording. The corpus data was transcribed using the transcription conventions proposed in Du Bois et al. (1993, see Appendix 1). The data is transcribed into intonation units, or stretches of speech uttered under a single intonation contour, such that each line represents one intonation unit (Chafe, 1994). As Chafe (1994) and Du Bois et al. (1993) have argued, the intonation unit is a basic structure in conversation.

The argument analyzed in this study is around 4 min long, and concerns whether or not President George Bush will be re-elected in 2004. Jason holds the opinion that he will be re-elected, because a war always gets politicians re-elected. Mary is strongly against this opinion. Prior to this point in the conversation, the two had laughed about Bush and shared their dislike of him. The excerpt is named “He will get re-elected” and it is separated into two parts according to the argument. The first part starts from line 10 and continues to line 71. In this part, Jason argues that Bush will be re-elected, and that a war always

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