

The Trajectory of Resistance to Authority in Online Academic Institutional Talk

Abstract

The ambiguous hierarchy existing in academia is a source of tension in academic discussions, where deliberation is encouraged, but those who rank highly are more likely to control the decision making process. This paper takes a conversation analysis (CA) approach to analyze online academic interactions among an Advisory Committee formed, in part, to solve a conference scheduling issue. This analysis will examine how participants invoke and negate hierarchy during these interactions. Robert G, the appointed leader of the listserv discussion group, OrgE, consistently tries to control the conversation and make decisions without the input of OrgE members. OrgE members resist Robert's control by constructing strong disagreements, negative assessments, and performing intersubjectivity work. This paper presents Robert's first email to the group and then follows by presenting three of the many resistance episodes to Robert. These emails illustrate the increasing hostility participants express, which leads to their resignation, causing a breakdown in communication on the listserv.

The Trajectory of Resistance to Authority in Online Academic Institutional Talk

In conversation analysis studies, institutional talk is defined more narrowly than ordinary conversation because while ordinary conversation is made up of “forms of interaction that are not confined to specialized settings” (Heritage, 2005, p. 104), institutional talk often occurs in restricted environments (i.e., classroom talk, courtroom talk, etc.). A primary characteristic of institutional talk is that “the goals of the participants are more limited and institution-specific” (p. 104). In other words, participants have institutionally relevant identities and conduct conversations to achieve goals that are tied to those specific identities.

Academia is one such institution, yet studies examining “academia talk” are sparse, both in conversation analysis and other linguistic disciplines. Tracy’s (1997) study of academic discussions and Lakoff’s (1990) characterization of academic committee meetings are two exceptions. In environments like academia, participants often have ambiguous institutionally relevant identities. The ambiguous hierarchy that exists in academia is a source of tension in academic discussions, where a deliberation among equals is encouraged, but those who rank highly are more likely to control the decision making process (Lakoff, 1990; Tracy, 1997). Discourse in these discussions is ideally supposed to be deliberative. Participants should be equal, respectful of one another, and “not try to change others’ behavior through exercise of coercive power” (Mansbridge, 2009, p. 2). However, because participants in academic committees simultaneously recognize the intra-institutional hierarchy (i.e., graduate student vs assistant professor vs tenured professor) (Lakoff, 1990; Tracy, 1997), these deliberations have potential to become non-deliberative negotiations (Mansbridge, 2009) in which participants use the power associated with their institutional role to influence the decision making process.

This paper problematizes the boundary between deliberation and non-deliberative negotiation by using a conversation analytic (CA) approach to analyze academic committee meeting interactions that take place over an email listserv. There have been numerous CA studies examining both meeting talk and online talk. Boden (1994) outlines how talk in organizational meetings can reflect and influence overall organizational structure. Other studies have shown how participants in a meeting can influence the decision making process and outcome of a meeting (Barnes, 2007; Clifton, 2009; Kangasharju, 2002). Markman (2009) studies quasi-synchronous chat communication in virtual teams, illustrating how openings and closings of meetings occur in online settings. Additionally, there have been several studies on how turn taking systems function separately in oral and online communication (i.e., Garcia & Jacobs, 1999; Rintel, Mulholland, & Pittam, 2001). Other studies of online communication focus on 'active listening' in online conversations (Danby, Butler, & Emmison, 2009), and on establishing membership in online communities (Stommel & Koole, 2010). This study contributes to these lines of work by outlining actions participants take in an online academic committee meeting setting to influence, negotiate, challenge, resist, or even reverse the decision making trajectory. More specifically, a CA approach will facilitate pinpointing actions participants take to frame the online committee meeting interactions as a deliberation in order to resist the attempts of their leader to frame the conversation as a non-deliberative negotiation.

The interactional data used in this paper is drawn from a larger study that investigates a variety of online interactional contexts, such as online dispute resolution, online civic engagement, and online discussion forums with the eventual goal of supporting higher quality engagement (see Murray et al. 2012). The particular interactions chosen for this paper are from a faculty dialogue conducted over a listserv. The participants in this discussion are academics

from multiple, non-communication related disciplines and departments, and all names used are pseudonyms. These academics have joined this online committee because they have an interest in deliberating over a proper solution to a conference scheduling conflict between two academic organizations, REDorg and BLUEorg. As will be illustrated below, the leader of this listserv, Robert G., attempts to conduct a non-deliberative negotiation, wielding his authority over the group to restrict communication and control the decision-making process. This paper examines how participants hold Robert accountable to properly engage in a deliberation by strategically achieving disagreement, agreement, and intersubjectivity in interaction. Overall, this paper illustrates the trajectory of resistance to Robert's repeated attempts to impose a non-deliberative negotiation on the group. To begin, this paper presents Robert's email starting a new thread of discussion in the group focusing specifically on conference scheduling. Then, three of the many resistance episodes to Robert are presented to illustrate the increasing hostility participants express, leading to resignation of the participants, which is the ultimate breakdown in communication on the listserv.

Resistance to Non-Deliberative Negotiation

Each email presented in the analysis will be analyzed as a separate turn in a turn taking system of conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Each email counts as one speaker's turn of talk, and each turn is made up of multiple, differing actions taken by participants (i.e., Markman, 2009). Many actions can be characterized as first pair parts of adjacency pairs or second pair parts completing a previously started adjacency pair. Adjacency pairs are sets of actions that normally "go together" in a conversation (such as question/answer, greeting/greeting, invitation/acceptance-decline, etc.). In online settings adjacency pairs are often not adjacent, sometimes being separated by multiple turns of talk (Garcia & Jacobs, 1999).

In addition to pointing out actions and adjacency pairs in each email, this analysis will also elaborate on the membership categories participants orient to when taking actions. For this group, categories are brought to the forefront because participants perform “category bound activities” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 470). Members perform activities associated with a particular membership category or make relevant membership categories associated with the actions of others. Because this is a group of academics, there is tension between the membership category of “equal participators” and the more hierarchical categories of Robert the “founder and leader of the group” vs. “his subordinates”. By examining both the structure of each turn and the membership categories invoked by participants, this analysis sheds light on how participants in this group resist Robert’s attempts to use his elevated status to coerce members into having a non-deliberative negotiation.

Robert G. is the head of the newly formed online academic committee, OrgE, formed by the BLUEorg academic community. One objective of OrgE is to deliberate about ways in which BLUEorg can collaborate with a related academic community, REDorg, a larger academic field that encompasses research done in BLUEorg but does not provide enough support for researchers specifically focused on BLUEorg-related subjects. Thus, BLUEorg created a separate conference, BLUEconf1, to support members of its academic community. While one goal of BLUEorg is to establish and maintain a unique identity, another is to maintain a positive relationship with REDorg, as many of its members attend both BLUEorg and REDorg events.

The main conflict between BLUEorg and REDorg is the time and location of BLUEconf1. According to a post on the OrgE listserv, REDorg leader Samuel T. “seems to feel that the way BLUEconf1 is being advertised places it in direct competition with the REDorg meeting and doesn't seem to show an interest in collaboration.” The bulk of the OrgE listserv

deliberation revolves around whether to a) co-locate the REDorg and BLUEorg conferences so members of both groups can attend both conferences easily, b) push back the 2008¹ BLUEconf1 to early 2009 in order to avoid conflict with REDorg's conference, or c) proceed with the 2008 BLUEconf1 and make any date/time/location changes for the subsequent 2009 BLUEconf1.

While many participants in OrgE want to openly deliberate these options, the appointed leader of the group, Robert G., continuously attempts to conduct non-deliberative decision making. To illustrate how Robert G frames this discussion, I start by analyzing his first email on the listserv and then present the first example of participants' resistance to Robert. For the next two examples of resistance, Robert's actions are summarized and only OrgE participant emails are presented. As the listserv discussion progresses, instances of resistance become more direct, and eventually participants resign from the listserv, thus ending communication completely.

Conflict 1: Open deliberation vs. closed interaction

The emails included in this first conflict demonstrate participants' strategic use of disagreement to align themselves in opposition to Robert G. The email presented below is the first email of a new discussion thread and attempts to construct rules for interaction on the OrgE listserv. In this email Robert G., the leader and founder of BLUEorg and OrgE, discourages participants from contributing suggestions about collaboration between REDorg and BLUEorg and advocates for a closed interaction rather than an open deliberation.

Line # Robert G.'s Email

1 Hi,
 2 In the near future, there could be some conversation between BLUEorg and REDorg
 3 to discuss opportunities for interaction and collaboration between BLUEorg/OrgE and
 4 REDorg. To get prepared, we'd like to put together a list of ways in which we would
 5 like to see REDorg and OrgE interact and/or collaborate.
 6 Here is an initial list:
 7 *Lines 7-22 omitted for purposes of confidentiality. In these lines, Robert gives 9
 detailed suggestions about conference collaboration.*

¹ The year of the conference has been changed for purposes of confidentiality.

23 To avoid bombing people with too many emails, please don't use reply-to-all. I will
24 collect all the suggestions and put them together. If there is any suggestion/feedback,
25 please try your best to provide it in three days.
26 Thanks
27 Robert G.

The first action Robert takes in this email is a routinized opening (line 2). The purpose of Robert's next two actions is to minimize the likelihood of suggestions from participants in the OrgE discussion group. Lines 2-5 are the first pair part of a request/grant adjacency pair. Robert requests that his participants send in suggestions for collaboration between BLUEorg and REDorg. However, Robert's grammatical structure and lexical choice in this request indicates that he wants to discourage the "granting" of his request by his addressees. First, the use of the conditional tense (i.e., "*could be* some conversation" (line 2); "ways in which we *would like* to see" (line 5)) indicates that future collaboration is not imminent and therefore suggestions from participations will not impact the discussion. Furthermore, instead of directly stating that REDorg and BLUEorg will interact and collaborate, which would place importance on the suggestions given by OrgE members, Robert states that "in the near future" (line 2) there may be a conversation "*to discuss opportunities for* interaction and collaboration" (line 3). Robert downplays the importance of OrgE input by claiming that the input will not directly affect collaboration but instead only be part of another possible future conversation. Last, Robert strategically uses the pronoun "we" (line 4) to empower his own voice (the suggestions that he will list below) as representative of the whole group while trying to silence the voices of his fellow members. "We", even though it is a third person plural pronoun, is often used in place of "I" for purposes of inclusion (Watson, 1987), and Robert uses "we" instead of "I" to frame his contribution as inclusive of the group's opinions.

After half-heartedly making this request, Robert proceeds to complete the adjacency pair and grant his own request by writing a detailed list of suggestions for collaboration (lines 7-22). In computer mediated communication (CMC), since posts consist of multiple, differing actions, speakers often produce beginning pair parts for which they later, in the same post, provide a secondary pair part (Stommel & Koole, 2010). “This can be understood as saying that the addressees need not respond” (p. 367) to the primary pair part. Furthermore, it has been shown that in written discourse, higher word counts are correlated with higher status of the participant (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Thus, by writing such a long post and granting his own request in the post, Robert makes relevant his membership category as the leader and founder of BLUEorg and OrgE and uses the higher status associated with this category to discourage participation of his addressees.

Robert’s use of his “leader and founder” membership category is further evidenced in his next actions because he attempts to display his authority by setting the rules for interaction on the OrgE listserv. Robert directly instructs his addressees on how to respond to his email. In lines 23-25, Robert constructs a first pair part of a new request/grant adjacency pair: “please don’t use reply-to-all” (line 23). Robert provides an account, or explanation, for this request which indicates that his request is a dis-preferred action (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990). Robert’s account is that replying to him individually will “avoid bombing people with too many emails” (line 23). “Bombing” and “too many” are negative assessment segments (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992) Robert uses to describe potential emails that OrgE members will send to the group. By negatively assessing participation from fellow OrgE members, Robert further discourages participation in the OrgE listserv. In addition, Robert appoints himself to formulate, or summarize, these responses (lines 23-24), and gives group members an extremely short time

period to reply (line 25). Formulations, since they can be constructed persuasively and emphasize or eliminate certain suggestions, are often constructed by those who have institutional power roles, like Robert (Hutchby, 1996). Furthermore, by using the negative item “any” in his solicitation of feedback (line 24), Robert is characterizing “suggestion/feedback” as a dis-preferred, and possibly non-existent, response, again trying to fend off the “granting” of his request for suggestions. For his final action, Robert closes his email by signing his full name, indicated by the initial, “G”, (lines 26-27), reaffirming the formal relations he establishes throughout the post.

In his email, Robert has attempted to suppress participation in the OrgE listserv in several ways: he makes a half-hearted request for suggestions, grants his own request by listing detailed and almost comprehensive suggestions, makes a negative assessment of OrgE member participation, requests members not to have open discussions with one another, but rather just a closed discussion with him, and finally, puts an extremely short time constraint on what could potentially be an important deliberation. Furthermore, with all these moves Robert indicates that he, as a founder and leader of OrgE and BLUEorg, has more power and a higher status within the deliberation, thus turning this deliberation into a non-deliberative negotiation.

Resisting a closed discussion.

Participants in this group, however, would like to have a deliberation and therefore challenge Robert’s proposed rules for interaction and Robert’s status in the conversation by negatively assessing different actions in Robert’s email. This resistance is successful because shortly after the emails we discuss below, a new participant takes the role of facilitator, advocates for an open deliberation, and is thanked by many other participants in the group for facilitating the dialogue.

Excerpt from Corry's "reply-to-all" email**Line #**

1 I actually want all to see this (so it's not bombing).
 2 The ideas here are all good, but there may be others.
 3-24 *Lines 3-24 omitted – contain detailed suggestions for collaboration*
 25 Corry

Cathy's "reply-to-all" email

26 Hi Robert,
 27 All the items currently on the list seem to be very weak levels of interaction.
 28 I would favor a much stronger association, such as co-located and
 29 coordinated events (which could also include ALL the items listed below).
 30 Travel funds are tight, so I don't think that people want to have to attend
 31 multiple events, when they could attend one.
 32 Cathy

In their study of online chats, Rintel, Mullholland, & Pittman (2001) outline the first two necessary steps of online openings as 1) the server announces the entrance of a person to the conversation and 2) the entering person addresses fellow participants with an opening remark (i.e., hello, hi everyone, etc.). Corry rebels against Robert on both levels. The first step occurs when Corry sends a "reply to all" email despite Robert's explicit request not to do so. The Internet server announces Corry's entrance into the conversation to the inboxes of the whole group, not just to Robert's inbox. The second required step is to have an opening (i.e. hi, hello, etc.). Instead, Corry omits the greeting and proceeds to directly disagree with Robert's "bombing" assessment. The choice of an opening remark in a conversation indicates the relationship among the participants (Rintel, Mulholland, & Pittam, 2001; Schegloff, 1968). By omitting an opening remark even though his email is clearly addressing Robert, Corry ignores Robert's attempt to establish his status as "founder and leader" and orients to Robert as someone without power to coerce participants into having a non-deliberative negotiation.

After omitting an opening, Corry's first action is to construct a strong disagreement (line 1), "one in which a conversant utters an evaluation which is directly contrastive with the prior evaluation" (Pomerantz, 1984, p. 74), with Robert's assessment about "bombing people with too

many emails” (Robert’s email, line 25). Corry’s next action (line 2), is a weak disagreement, or an agreement-plus-disagreement structure (Pomerantz, 1984). The first part of the action, “the ideas here are all good” (line 2) is a positive assessment of Robert’s list of his suggestions for collaboration between REDorg and BLUEorg. This positive assessment is tempered by the use of “but”, which indicates the impending disagreement, “but there may be others” (line 2). Corry softens this weakened disagreement by adding the qualifier “may” because although he has other suggestions, he cannot be certain that other people will have suggestions. Corry then proceeds to list detailed suggestions for collaboration (lines 3-24, omitted). This action can be considered a strong disagreement as it is in opposition to Robert’s earlier request. Last, Corry, unlike Robert, closes his email informally by signing only his first name. Using this closing, Corry orients to all participants, as his email is intended for them as well, as familiar equals. Orienting to fellow participants as equals helps shift this conversation from a hierarchical non-deliberative negotiation to an equality driven deliberation.

The next reply to Robert’s email is a reply-to-all email from Cathy. Cathy also rejects Robert’s request to not “reply-to-all” by sending her email to the whole listserv, thus challenging his authority to set rules for interaction in the OrgE listserv. In her first action, Cathy addresses just Robert. However, because she sent her email to the whole group, there are many ratified hearers in the conversation, several of whom reply to Cathy’s email. As pointed out by Goffman (1981) there can be more than one speaker and one hearer in a given conversation, and a listserv is a prime example where there are multiple ratified speakers and hearers. Cathy’s second action is a negative assessment of Robert’s list of suggestions, or in her words “the items currently on the list” (line 27). Cathy assesses these items of being “very weak levels of interaction” (line 28). By negatively assessing Robert’s suggestions, Cathy establishes her position in opposition

to Robert. Then, in her third action, Cathy makes her own suggestion despite Robert's discouragement of suggestions from the OrgE group. Cathy establishes contrast between her suggestions and Robert's by assessing her suggestions as "strong" (line 28) and Robert's many suggestions as "weak" (line 27). By negatively assessing Robert's suggestions, giving her own suggestion, and framing it in opposition to Robert's, Cathy constructs a strong disagreement with Robert's email. Her evaluation of Robert's list is in direct opposition to his evaluation, which is so positive that he doubts there will be any additional suggestions from the OrgE group.

As Cathy proceeds to elaborate on her suggestion, she softens her opposition to Robert by constructing a formulation. Formulation, or characterizing "states of affairs already described or negotiated (in whole or in part) in the preceding talk" (Heritage & Watson, 1979, p. 126), is a strategy used by speakers to openly demonstrate their understanding of the relevant implications of prior talk. In this case the "affairs already described" are Cathy and Robert's suggestions. Cathy characterizes the relationship between these suggestions by stating that her suggestion, while different from Robert's suggestions, "could also include ALL the items listed below" (line 29). Here, Cathy shows that despite her earlier disagreement, she understands the importance of Robert's suggestions. This formulation is a form of "intersubjectivity work" that "allows the potential for joint activity in the social world" (Barnes, 2007, p. 274), such as agreement on suggestions that should be used for collaboration between REDorg and BLUEorg. By constructing a formulation, Cathy encourages an open deliberation in which opinions of all participants are valued. Cathy closes her turn by supporting her argument about having a co-located conference and also signing her email informally with just her first name.

Corry's and Cathy's emails are two examples that show how disagreement can be constructed in a listserv deliberation. By using strong disagreements in combination with

negative assessments and weak disagreements, Cathy and Corry jointly challenge Robert's attempt to establish his authority over the group. Also, Cathy does intersubjectivity work with her formulation in order to emphasize shared goals of the group. Ultimately, Cathy and Corry re-establish rules for deliberation, where participants are equal and engage in an open discussion about their opinions.

Conflict 2: A call for papers

The following example is an exchange between OrgE participants in which members collectively align against Robert by constructing strong disagreements with Robert's "decision maker" role and strong agreements with one another, a strategy that has proved successful in other studies of meeting talk (Kangasharju, 2002). This conflict occurs towards the end of an open, productive deliberation about REDorg-BLUEorg collaboration. OrgE has reached a consensus where they decide the best decision is to move BLUEconf1 from late 2008 to early 2009 and avoid conflict with REDorg's meeting. Subsequent to this, Robert, who has not been participating in the discussion, announces a second call for papers for the 2008 BLUEconf1. The group members respond to his decision below:

Oran's Email

Line#

- 1 Robert
- 2 I find it startling and puzzling (at the least) that you are going ahead with planning for
- 3 this meeting in this way.
- 4 The recent lively interactions among members of the team seems to me to have made it
- 5 very clear that there is a growing consensus that the current plans have the meeting in
- 6 the wrong place, or at the wrong time, or both, and that continuing with the current
- 7 plans is causing increasing trepidation in some quarters.
- 8 I would hope that at this point there you would be conducting an open and careful
- 9 conversation about alternatives, rather than ignoring what seemed to be a very useful
- 10 and important conversation.
- 11 Especially since hotel contracts do not appear to have been signed, this would seem to
- 12 be the time for constructive conversation and community building. Can we please have
- 13 that now?
- 14 Oran L.

Corry's Email

15 I too was puzzled and disappointed.

16 Corry

When Robert decides to send out a second call for papers, he performs a “decision maker” category bound action, adding this membership category to his “leader and founder” role. In the first few lines, Oran accuses Robert the “decision maker” of ignoring the group’s conversation and making decisions the group does not support. Oran’s accusation is received by all members of OrgE. Oran starts the accusation by curtly addressing Robert (line 1) without a greeting term. Oran then assesses Robert’s action, “planning for the meeting in this way” (lines 2-3) as “startling and puzzling” (line 2). In lines 4-7, it becomes clear that Robert’s decision is “startling and puzzling” because of the consensus drawn in the previous deliberation. Oran positively assesses the OrgE deliberation as “lively interactions” (line 4) and assesses the “current plans” as “wrong” (line 6) and as “causing increasing trepidation” (lines 7-8). Furthermore, Oran contrasts positively assessed group interaction (“lively”) with negatively assessed Robert’s decisions (“wrong”) and aligns the group, who has reached a “growing consensus” (line 5) about changing the date and time of the conference, against Robert, causing a division in OrgE. Thus, as demonstrated by Goodwin (1990), Oran’s accusation not only points out Robert’s faults but also aligns non-referenced members as an audience to, and therefore involved in, the accusation.

Oran’s next action is a request for Robert to conduct “an open and careful conversation about alternatives” (lines 9-10). Here, Oran orients to Robert as an “equal participator” and tries to re-establish a deliberation. Oran encourages Robert to participate in the dialogue as an equal with fellow OrgE members, and then contrasts this action with the action taken by Robert the “decision maker”, who ignored the group’s consensus when sending out a second call for papers.

This is the first time Oran explicitly states that Robert “ignored” the group. While the first few lines (lines 2-7) imply that Robert ignored the group’s deliberation, when Oran uses the word “ignore” in line 9, he strengthens his accusation by overtly labeling Robert’s actions.

Until this point in the message, Oran has accused Robert by negatively assessing Robert’s actions, positioning Robert in opposition to the group, and by overtly labeling Robert’s actions as “ignoring” the group. Oran continues his accusation by constructing a formulation (Barnes, 2007; Heritage & Watson, 1979) that passive-aggressively accuses Robert of abusing his decision making power. Oran’s formulation summarizes the gist of previous conversations, “hotel contracts do not appear to have been signed” (line 12) and then states the upshot, or relevance of the information summarized, “this would seem to be the time for constructive conversation and community building” (lines 13-14). By using “do not appear to have been signed” instead of a more definitive “have not been signed”, Oran implies that Robert could have possibly signed hotel contracts without the group’s knowledge. Thus, while Oran feigns using a formulation to perform intersubjectivity work so that Robert will grant Oran’s request and engage in a discussion with OrgE members, Oran continues to accuse Robert of abusing his power as a decision maker and acting against the interest of the group.

Oran closes by using a question as his last action. Often, when a turn is made up of multiple actions and one of those actions is a question, the question falls last because “the question will ordinarily have made it someone else’s turn to talk” (Schegloff, 1987, p. 104-105). Posing a question at the end of his email is a strategic move on Oran’s part to encourage Robert to reply immediately to Oran’s accusation. If Robert does not want the group to believe Oran’s accusation, then the preferred response would be denial (Blimes, 1988; Goodwin, 1990), and if

Robert would like align himself with the group instead of against it, then an apology would also be necessary (Blimes, 1988).

Corry replies and piggybacks (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1990) off of Oran's email. Corry shares a short reply in the form of an upgraded assessment of Robert's actions, thus agreeing with Oran's reply (Pomerantz, 1984). Corry starts his turn by stating that he, like Oran, is puzzled by Robert's decision. Then, Corry upgrades his agreement with Oran by using the term "disappointed" (line 16). Disappointed is a stronger word than Oran's "startled" or "puzzled" because disappointment does not express surprise and confusion, but rather unhappiness with Robert's decision. Corry, therefore, negatively assesses Robert's decision as disappointing and simultaneously agrees with Oran. Now, instead of having to answer just Oran's accusation, Robert is faced with answering "a set of *contradictory claims* and is being invited to focus his response on the specific issue that has been called into question" (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1990, p. 114) by Oran's original accusation.

Robert replies to the whole listserv in response to Oran's accusations with a denial that includes some accusations of his own. Often denials can include further accusations (Goodwin, 1990). Robert denies making a bad decision because delaying the conference would cause BLUEconf1 to skip a year "while disappointing people who have been planning to attend". Here, Robert denies making a bad decision while at the same time accusing the OrgE group of wanting to "disappoint" those who wish to attend BLUEconf1 in 2008. Robert then explains that he is waiting to "hear about the discussions between BLUEorg and REDorg" committees and "proceed accordingly" afterward. For the time being, however, Robert is obstinate about going through with the conference as scheduled, even if it negatively affects BLUEorg's relationship with REDorg.

The following are two replies to Robert's emails received by the whole listserv. Both replies contribute to the hostility developing towards Robert as a tyrannical leader and decision maker for the group. Participants in the replies construct strong disagreements with Robert and agreements with one another to resist Robert. However, the second reply from Sally, the group member who has taken on an unofficial facilitator role for the group, encourages intersubjectivity in the deliberation and attempts to reposition all group members as being on the same side and having the same goals for the outcome of the OrgE listserv deliberation, thus attempting to negate the growing tensions within the group.

Corry's Email

Line #

36 I do not think that proceeding further, until we have the outcome of the BLUEorg-
 37 REDorg discussions, would be appropriate. Delaying into 2009 is not a disastrous
 38 outcome. What do others think?
 39 Corry

Sally's Email

40 It was disheartening to see another call go out while we were having this discussion
 41 and did not know the outcome of the REDorg-BLUEorg meeting.
 42 I agree that we should not proceed until we know about the outcomes and plan
 43 accordingly. I agree that delaying until 2009 is not that bad - people can continue to
 44 edit/iterate on papers and submit them later. If they are looking forward to attending
 45 BLUEconf1 2009, they would be equally excited to attend BLUEconf1 2009.
 46 It is important to build a strong community that understands BLUEconf1's niche
 47 contribution to BLUEdiscipline while maintaining good relations with other
 48 REDdiscipline associations and groups.
 49 Sally

Corry's first action (after yet again omitting an opening) negatively assesses Robert's decision to continue planning for a 2008 conference as inappropriate. He states, "I do not think that proceeding further...would be appropriate" (lines 36-37). Then, Corry positively assesses the decision advocated by OrgE, "delaying into 2009", as "not disastrous" (line 37). Corry adds a question, "What do others think?" (line 38), to encourage others to reply to his email. These

actions combined together position Corry and the OrgE group in opposition to Robert, and Corry's question elicits a response from the group to take sides in the matter.

Sally responds chronologically to the previous emails and then closes her email by constructing a formulation to encourage intersubjectivity in the OrgE discussion. First, Sally negatively assesses Robert's decision to continue planning for the 2008 conference. She characterizes the "call" for papers (line 40) as "disheartening" (line 40). In addition to being a negative assessment, the characterization of Robert's action as "disheartening" is also an upgraded agreement with both Oran and Corry. Oran characterizes the decision as "startling and puzzling", which Corry piggybacks and upgrades to "puzzling and disappointing", and Sally upgrades even more to "disheartening". Sally is unhappy with Robert's most recent decision but is also generally losing faith in the group's deliberative process. Despite several efforts on the part of group members to conduct a deliberation, Robert seems bent on having a non-deliberative negotiation in which he makes decisions without taking the group's opinions into account. Sally's actions position her alongside Oran and Corry and in opposition to Robert.

Sally then constructs a same agreement structure (Pomerantz, 1984) with Corry's earlier argument about "proceeding further" (line 36). Sally states, "I agree we should not proceed..." (line 42) and "I agree that delaying until 2009 is not that bad" (lines 43). This further establishes Sally's position as someone who strongly opposes Robert's dictatorial style of leadership. After constructing disagreement with Robert and agreement with others, Sally takes it upon herself to conduct intersubjectivity work so OrgE members are realigned in agreement with one another. Sally uses a gist formulation to reiterate OrgE's points of group agreement, which are to "build a strong community...while maintaining good relations" (lines 46-47) with other REDorg associations. A gist, even though it is a summary of previous talk, also has the power to

“transform and/or delete other elements of prior talk” (Barnes, 2007, p. 278). Sally constructs a gist formulation to emphasize agreement among the group and “deletes” the group disagreements with Robert so the group interaction can achieve its goal of finding an appropriate solution for collaboration between REDorg and BLUEorg.

Conflict 3: A Crisis

The following email is the strongest accusation yet against Robert because it is marked as “official”. Corry constructs a series of accusations against Robert, expresses his frustration with the group’s decision making process, and ultimately points out the breakdown in communication that is happening on the listserv and blames this breakdown on Robert’s poor leadership. The below email is “An Open Letter to Robert G.” that is a response to Robert’s decision to schedule BLUEconf1 in 2008 instead of moving it to 2009. Although this email is rather long and could be micro-analyzed for many purposes, this analysis will focus only on sections of the email that illustrate growing hostility towards Robert and the breakdown of communication occurring on the listserv.

Corry’s Open Letter

Line#

1 **An Open Letter to Robert G.**
 2 Dear Robert:
 3 This morning I received your email (see below) indicating that OrgE is proceeding
 4 with BLUEconf1 as previously planned. I have sent this to those who are on the
 5 Advisory Board as well as participants in our previous exchanges.
 6 I know that you are aware that I have strongly recommended that the conference be
 7 rescheduled so as to address any concerns regarding the REDorg conference and the
 8 impact of BLUEconf1 on the broader REDorg community. That may indicate that I
 9 have a conflict of interest wrt this letter.
 10 However, putting my own opinion to the side, it seems like the situation has
 11 approached a kind of crisis. This AM, 3 members of the OrgE Advisory Board
 12 resigned in response to the BLUEconf1 2008 decision and a 4th member (yours truly)
 13 indicated that his resignation is pending. Others receiving this email have also
 14 indicated to me that they are considering resigning their roles. In addition, I think you
 15 are aware that many others believe that proceeding with BLUEconf1 on the old
 16 schedule is a mistake. Despite that advice and feedback, it has been elected to proceed.

17 That stands against the apparent will of at least those on this email. I say ‘apparent’, as
18 there has been no vote, although one has been suggested. One way to determine this
19 ‘will’ is to take a formal vote now.

20 What disturbs me about this situation is that important issues are not being addressed
21 in a way that (apparently) is consistent with expressed opinion, or are being
22 sidestepped with a statement like “there is no perfect solution at this time”. Given this
23 latter statement, the decision to proceed with one of the more imperfect ones seems
24 flawed.

25 I am appealing to you and our community to give this one further consideration as a
26 group. Please subject this to an open vote and learn where we all stand.

27 I would also suggest that, from my vantage point, you seem to have lost the
28 confidence of the Advisory Board. There are only 3 solutions here: (1) for you to alter
29 this decision – if altering it is consistent with the group’s will, (2) for those disagreeing
30 with you to resign from the Advisory Board (and we thereby lose some very good
31 advisors) and other roles, or (3) for you to move aside and allow someone else to carry
32 out your role and determine how best to proceed.

33 Perhaps a vote will alter the options, or maybe the OrgE community as represented
34 by us will disagree with what I have said. If the community does see this differently,
35 then these statements are mine only and I apologize for wasting your time. –

36 So, will you have an open vote? Or is this decision final?

37 Corry

Corry’s first action in this email, the opening, marks this email as an official accusation against Robert. First, Corry titles the email as “An Open Letter to Robert G.” (line 1). By labeling the email an open letter, Corry marks it as a complaint against Robert G. that is meant to be read by a wide audience. Then, for the first time, Corry opens with a proper greeting. He does, however, use the most formal type of opening, saying “*Dear* Robert” and following it with the business-like colon instead of a comma. Lines 3-5 continue Corry’s opening by clarifying the purpose of his email, which is typical of formal introductions to business meetings (Markman, 2009). All of these actions mark the accusation to follow as official.

Corry then negatively assesses the current situation as a “crisis” (line 11) and accuses Robert of causing this crisis by making decision that the group would characterize as a “mistake” (line 16). Corry then outlines the two communicative acts OrgE members engage in during this “crisis.” One is the act of resignation (lines 12, 13, 14). Three members of OrgE, not including

Corry who threatens to be the fourth, have resigned from the group. The repeated use of the word resignation indicates a complete loss of faith in the group decision making process.

Resignation is the strongest action one can take to display his or her disagreement with Robert's decisions because participants are, after engaging in numerous oppositional turns with Robert, withdrawing from interaction and ending the conflict altogether (Vuchinich, 1990). Participants are no longer attempting to rein Robert in, to reason with him, or to provide input for the deliberation. Robert's repeated snubs have caused a complete breakdown in communication for this group.

A second communicative action that participants take in the "crisis" is a request for a "formal vote" (line 19). Corry's account for taking this vote is to determine the "will" (line 17, 19) of the people. Corry tries to ensure a democratic and egalitarian decision making process, and thus although he believes his opinion is supported by OrgE members, Corry requests a formal vote in order to mark the group's consensus as official. Requesting a formal vote is another action that marks this email as an official accusation against Robert, who instead of leading in a democratic way, decided unilaterally against what seems to be the groups' collective position. By asking for a formal vote, Corry re-emphasizes the importance of the deliberative process. Corry does not advocate his opinion as the better one, but calls for a democratic process so the group's collective opinion can be made apparent.

Corry continues his accusation against Robert by constructing an upgraded agreement with previous expressed opinions (including his own) about the nature of the deliberation. In line 20, Corry describes "this situation" as disturbing. Disturbing is an upgrade from the earlier used startled, puzzled, disappointing, and disheartening. Disturbing not only expresses unhappiness but also disgust and anger about the whole process. Furthermore, since Corry

describes the conversation as a “situation”, he implies that he is not disturbed with the process, but with the outcome of the process. The current “situation” is the outcome of the non-deliberative negotiation forced upon the group by Robert, and Corry and other participants are disturbed that their multiple attempts to conduct a deliberation has yielded this result. Corry then openly accuses Robert of causing this disturbing crisis by claiming that Robert is not only ignoring the group’s input, but attempting to manipulate his supposed “equal” participants with phrases like “there is no perfect solution at this time” (line 22).

Corry follows this accusation against Robert with a request. In this official letter, Corry presents Robert with some official options for resolving the current “situation”. One of the options, for OrgE members to resign, is given but immediately characterized as unfavorable because resignation of OrgE members would result in the loss of “some very good advisors” (lines 30-31). The other two options involve Robert either altering his decision according to the formal vote, or “will” of the OrgE members (lines 28-29) or Robert moving aside and resigning his role as leader (lines 31-32). Both of these requests double as accusations against Robert for being an ineffective leader and making bad decisions. These options do not offer Robert the opportunity to deny the accusation but rather to accept his guilt and either make changes or resign his position. Corry closes his turn with a question. Since this email is rather lengthy, Corry states the gist of his email, what he wants from Robert, in two succinct questions, “So, will you have an open vote? Or is this decision final?” (line 36). Corry gives Robert one final chance to amend his leadership style and respond to the concerns of the group².

² There is a limitation of the data here. It is clear that offline discussions were conducted among Corry and other OrgE members, which is why Corry is aware of previous resignation of members. Furthermore, it is apparent that some members thought resignation was necessary, while Corry advocated giving Robert a chance to reform before resigning. These negotiations were not accessible through this listserv data, but they can be reconstructed in future work.

Conclusions

This analysis has illustrated the trajectory of resistance to Robert's multiple attempts to use his decision making power to coerce group members into participating in a non-deliberative negotiation. Group members start by disagreeing with Robert and conducting intersubjective work to encourage a fruitful deliberative process. Then when Robert ignores the group, members use strong disagreement and negative assessments to accuse Robert of making decisions without consulting the consensus drawn in the committee discourse. Furthermore, group members piggyback each other's statements, thus aligning themselves with one another and against Robert. This strengthens their accusations and places further pressure on Robert to amend his leadership style. When Robert persists in ignoring the group, many group members resign, and Corry constructs an open letter asking Robert to resign. The conflict between Robert and the group members has escalated to the point where a breakdown in communication, through resignation of one side or the other, has become the main solution. Ultimately, Robert's problematic actions have caused an end to the functioning committee.

This analysis also highlights how membership identity categories are intertwined with communicative action taken by these group members. There are multiple shifting membership categories for Robert: "leader and founder", "decision maker", and "equal participator". When starting the conversation, Robert performs the category bound action fitting the "leader and founder" of the group in order to coerce participants into having a restricted, closed conversation about REDorg and BLUEorg collaboration. Participants, however choose not to accept Robert as a "leader and founder" and instead orient to Robert as an "equal participator". Robert then further emphasizes his power over the group when he enacts his "decision maker" membership category and makes decisions that participants in OrgE do not support. Group members orient to

Robert the “decision maker” as tyrannical and dictatorial and immediately accuse him of ignoring group conversation. Sally attempts to negate tension by performing intersubjective work to reposition Robert (and all group members) as “equal participators” with shared goals for this conversation. Robert, however, continues to ignore the group. The conflict between having an “equal participator” deliberation and having a hierarchical non-deliberative negotiation cannot be resolved, ultimately causing resignation of group members and a breakdown of communication on the listserv.

This analysis also provided evidence of participants’ use of emotion to construct passive aggressive accusations. While studies in CA do not typically examine emotion as a cognitive concept, as argued by Goodwin and Goodwin (2000), participants do use emotion “to visibly take up stances toward phenomena being evaluated within the midst of situated interaction.” (p. 239). In the analysis presented here, these participants take stances of increasing disappointment towards the decision making process by naming the following emotions: startled, puzzled, disappointed, disheartened, and disturbed. Because Robert is the person who is ruining the deliberative decision making process, disappointment in the process is actually a passive aggressive accusation of Robert. The passive-aggressive stance is achieved primarily through pronoun use. Instead of using a second person singular pronoun, “you”, to directly accuse Robert, participants use first person singular pronouns, “I” and “me”, to express the negative, hurtful emotions they feel as a result of Robert’s actions, thus creating a passive “we-are-hurt because of your actions” discourse instead of a more direct “you-are-wrong” discourse. Each time participants use a more intense emotion, they strengthen their accusations against Robert until finally, in his open letter Corry explicitly states the hurtful nature of Robert’s actions and asks him to resign. A scale of expressed emotions used to construct passive-aggressive

accusations and the conversational actions accompanying can be abstracted from this correspondence (Table 1).

Startled/Puzzled	>	Disappointed	>	Disheartened	>	Disturbed
Resistance by constructing strong disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984)		Piggyback conversation by repeating a previous participant's assessment and upgrading it, thus forming an alliance and converting accusations into set of contradictory claims (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1990)		Resistance by constructing disagreement with Robert the authority and agreement with participants– to fortify the alliance		Resignation from group members and/or requested resignation of the leader
Use formulation to encourage intersubjectivity (Barnes, 2007; Heritage & Watson, 1979)				Attempt to perform intersubjective work by emphasizing shared goals.		Withdraw from conflict (Vuchinich, 1990)

Table 1: Escalation of emotion evidenced in the faculty discourse and participants' communicative actions

The emotions in Table 1 are listed chronologically as expressed throughout the discourse and also as they increase in intensity while moving from the beginning of the conversation (startled) to the end (disturbed). Below each emotion are the communicative actions taken by participants when they express a particular emotion. Expressions of emotion, therefore, can be matched to the trajectory of resistance in a conversation, and the use of a particular emotion can indicate the level of conflict participants perceive at different stages of the discourse.

Overall, this analysis has problematized the notion of deliberation and non-deliberative negotiations in a particular instance of online academic institutional talk. The conflict in OrgE was caused primarily because of the tensions between equality and hierarchy that often exist in an academic community. The conversation analytic approach provided a tool for micro-analysis that illustrated how tension manifested itself in interactions and how resistance to coercion escalated until communication was completely stopped because members of OrgE withdrew

from the academic committee. Furthermore, this study contributes to the corpus of work in CA that examines meeting talk and computer mediated communication. Future research might investigate communicative action in multiple online arenas, compare this case with a case of a successfully conducted deliberation, or examine other cases of online academic conflict talk to evaluate whether the trajectory of resistance uncovered here applies in similar settings.

Analyzing one's own academic discipline is usually a risky endeavor and often only full professors can undertake it (Lakoff, 1990), as one's status is always based on peer review. Therefore, I hope that by analyzing a discipline that is not our own we can learn about ourselves without suffering risks or creating scimmages that analyzing one's own discipline might encourage. This analysis of an outside discipline might help avoid pitfalls experienced by members of the OrgE, and by being reflective we can only become better members of the academic community. Academia is a unique institution primarily because of the tensions and ambiguities outlined in this paper, and as members who are a part of this institution, it is important that we recognize the intricacies of communicative action that take place in our everyday professional lives³.

³ As a side note, according to the "BLUEconf1" website, there was a conference in 2007 and another in 2009. It appears as if the 2008 Blueconf1 was indeed pushed to 2009 despite the breakdown in communication on the OrgE listserv.

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