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Biographical note
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Abstract
This paper aims at clarifying the ontology of *conflict* as a preliminary for constructing a conflict mapping guide (Wehr 1979). After recalling the main definitions elaborated in different disciplines, the meaning of *conflict* is elicited through *semantic analysis* based on corpus evidence. Two fundamental meanings emerge: conflict as an *interpersonal hostility* between two or more human subjects, and conflict as a *propositional incompatibility*. These two states of affairs are significantly related, because the latter tends to generate the former whenever the incompatible positions are embodied by as many *parties* who feel personally questioned. The semantic analysis allows sketching the ontology of the conflictual situation that can serve to generate a conflict mapping guide, and facing several crucial aspects that are relevant both to the study and to the management of conflicts. In the former perspective, it allows the comparison of the situation of interpersonal conflict with the seemingly similar process of *controversy*.

Keywords: conflict resolution, socio-cognitive conflict, mediation, ontology, semantic analysis, controversy

The ontology of conflict

1   Introductory remarks[1]

It is not rare that the way a certain issue is confronted in the scientific and cultural debate is influenced by the polysemy that the terms and expressions related to it acquire in ordinary language. Now, as ordinary language presents a significant polysemy that often gives rise to ambiguities, sometimes the scientific debate is strongly affected by these ambiguities, and the necessity for conceptual clarification of terms becomes a primary scientific task for developing a consistent theoretical framework. In financial studies, for instance, the word *information* is used in the sense of *data*, mediated or not by the mass-media, and as an equivalent of *knowledge*, understood as true data. When it is said that "information provides competitive advantage", the second meaning is presupposed (since only true information gives real advantage). When, on the opposite, notions like *imperfect* or *false information* are introduced, the "neutral" interpretation of information as unverified data is assumed. Also the term *argumentation*, which has acquired a specific and well-delimitated meaning in argumentation theory, is sometimes evoked, in other branches of study, only in its value of polemising and quarrelling, and opposed to more conciliating and dialogue-oriented attitudes that would be perfectly consistent with the first meaning. This happens, for instance, in some analyses of dispute mediation; as in Besemer (1993), for whom *argumentation* and *discussion* are practices in which the stronger point of view tends to be imposed on the better one.

An analogous situation takes place in relation to studies on conflict and conflict resolution: in fact, the variety of approaches and of questions related to conflict can give the impression of an incoherent and even inconsistent picture; the present analysis brings to light the fact that many differences do not depend only on the complexity of the issue, but also on the different interpretations of the key-notion of *conflict*. This paper is aimed therefore at specifying the semantic domain of conflict within the area of polemical exchanges.

Mediation and other conflict resolution practices may in particular benefit from this conceptual framing. In fact, it is universally recognized, at least implicitly, that the most basic condition for the application of a strictly defined mediation practice is the presence of a conflictual situation (Herrman, Hollett and Gale 2006). However, studies in conflict and conflict resolution do not focus on the different contents covered by the word *conflict* in ordinary language, albeit they are thereby strongly affected.

The approach adopted here to analyse the ontology of *conflict* is based on a semantic-pragmatic account, namely Congruity theory (see Rigotti, Rocci and Greco 2006; Rigotti and Cigada 2004, pp. 77-111).

Now, before approaching the semantic analysis of *conflict*, I will start from the different meanings bound to this term in different scientific approaches. I refer first of all to studies in mediation and other conflict resolution practices that explicitly focus on conflict; useful insights to the nature of conflict in various other areas of research, such as organization theory, agency theory, and social psychology are also considered. Through this overview, it emerges that the term *conflict* is used in the literature for referring to two distinct and apparently unrelated events. Besides identifying these two meanings, this paper aims at showing the strong connection between them, by analysing the semantics of the term *conflict*.

2   Overview of the meanings of *conflict* in different scientific approaches

Rightfully, all studies in conflict resolution identify the existence of a conflict as a general precondition of the resolution intervention (Moffitt and Bordone 2005: 2-3; Herrmann, Hollett and Gale 2006: 30-31), and often remark that the analysis of conflict is necessary in order to effectively intervene and manage it. The opening statement of Wehr's (1979) volume on conflict regulation reflects this concern: "To effectively intervene in a conflict to resolve it, one must be able to analyze it properly" (p. 1). Wehr's well-known *conflict mapping guide* has indeed been elaborated as a tool for analysing the context and dynamics of the specific conflict that the practitioner faces. Second, it reflects the hypothesis according to which the situation of *conflict* is a general presupposition of any conflict resolution effort, and, as such, must be analysed thoroughly. About this second concern, different aspects have been brought to light. The *Dictionary of Conflict Resolution* (1999) highlights two distinct meanings of conflict: *disagreement* and *incompatibility* (p. 113). This text proposes a series of definitions of conflict extracted from previous studies (ibid.) whereby the prevailing meaning is surely that of a disagreement that involves overt hostility between two or more parties. However, it also emerges that such a state of hostility is generated by an incompatibility perceived by the involved parties. According to this second definition, conflict should be considered as "the broader state of incompatibility that may or may not give rise to a dispute" (p. 120), i.e. as an incompatibility between two parties' goals or perceptions. In some cases, such an incompatibility degenerates into a proper dispute, which involves "hostile action and the potential destruction of people and institutions" (Burton 1969: 2, quoted by Yarn 1999: 114). According to this more limited sense, which is at the origin of conflict resolution initiatives, conflict becomes a proper struggle between human subjects. It is clear, thus, that conflict as incompatibility and conflict as struggle emerge as two distinct meanings, which are separately assumed in different scientific approaches. In the present work, par. 2.1 reviews studies focusing on the former meaning, while par. 2.2 refers to the latter. In par. 2.3 and 2.4 two hypotheses are discussed that bring to light the connection between the two concerned meanings of conflict; the first

hypothesis is limited to a specific human relation (agency theory), while the second (socio-cognitive conflict) provides more general insights on the ontology of proper conflict and on its generation from incompatible points of view.

2.1   Conflict as a difference of opinion

The meaning of conflict as an incompatibility of positions is acknowledged in some studies, where its positive contribution in the development of knowledge and identity through communication is highlighted. It is the case of the notion of *conflict of opinion*, introduced by Barth and Krabbe (1982: 56) to indicate a perceived incongruity of judgments about the acceptability of a certain statement between different (individual or collective) subjects. This expression turns out to be consistent with the pragma-dialectical use of *difference of opinion*. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 21) found their pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation conceiving argumentation "as part of an explicit or implicit discussion between parties who try to resolve a difference of opinion (that may be implicit) by testing the acceptability of the standpoints concerned". In the normative account of the critical discussion proposed by Pragma-dialectics, the *confrontation stage* is defined as the moment in which a party puts forward a standpoint and the opponent either casts doubt on it, or proposes an alternative standpoint. The term *confrontation* refers to the viewpoints that give origin to a difference of opinion. More specifically, a difference of opinion, which is at the origin of the confrontation stage, can be defined as the emergence of the fact that a standpoint has not been accepted "because it runs against doubt or contradiction" (ibid., p. 60). A difference of opinion, thus, is clearly to be interpreted as an incompatibility between different worldviews.

If conflict is understood in the "weaker" sense as an incompatibility of positions, it can be regarded as a superior category including differences of opinion, but also differences in the parties' desires, goals, etc. However, if conflict is taken in its meaning of overt interpersonal hostility, the relation between this notion and that of difference of opinion is much more complex. A difference of opinion, in fact, does not per se imply hostility between the carriers of the difference. Indeed, differences of opinion can be handled in different ways; *resolving* a difference of opinion properly means, in pragma-dialectical terms, that parties involved in the discussion "reach an agreement on the question of whether the standpoints at issue are acceptable or not" (ibid., pp. 58-59). In other words, one of the parties can realize that the other one's position is more reasonable, and change his or her mind consequently. This does not concern a settlement of the difference based on compromise, but rather the parties' real persuasion achieved through discussion. However, the pragma-dialectical account also acknowledges the possibility for a difference of opinion to turn into a proper conflict; in these cases, one or more differences of opinion might be involved, and the conflict might be handled in different ways; the solution may be non-communicative – one can decide to physically eliminate his or her adversary without assuming the burden of a

communicative solution – but it can also be achieved by communicative means[2]. In the latter case, an argumentative discussion may be implemented in a variety of activity types (mediation, arbitration or adjudication… see van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005) properly pertaining to conflict resolution interventions.

In the following paragraphs, without claiming to provide a complete overview of the innumerous studies on conflict and conflict resolution, I will focus on some major interpretations, trying to bring to light the most important insights in order to understand what type of event conflict – conceived as interpersonal or inter-group hostility – represents.

2.2   *Organization theory and other macro-approaches*

Several studies adopt a "macro" approach for studying the genesis of interpersonal and group conflict. Such an approach is not based upon the analysis of the specific interactional event in which conflict occurs; it rather aims at identifying the structural causes that might generate hostility and conflict. It has the advantage of searching for those variables that it is possible to work upon in order to regulate or prevent conflicts. On the other hand, it results as poor in the *esprit de finesse* with which the actual conflict is considered, and tends to neglect the reasons and motivations of the single individuals, and the role of specific communication moves in the genesis of the conflictual event; it is also not focused on the possible relations between the presence of an incompatibility and the insurgence of a proper conflict.

Organization theory is probably the most productive of these macro-approaches in terms of the study of conflict, considered in particular in organizational settings (Hatch 1997; March and Simon 1958). In this view, conflicts of interest amongst individual or collective interagents are generally (more or less explicitly) considered as bringing to distributive situations, i.e. to situations in which one agent wins and the other loses (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967: 12; Knight, 1992: 14). Generally, however, the process through which diverging interests may bring to overt conflict is neither explained not even explicitly focused on in these studies.

This can be said also of the *economic theory of conflict* (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Mansfield and Pollins 2001; Reuveny and Maxwell 2001; Sørli, Petter Gleditsch, and Strand 2005; Collier and Hoeffler 2005), which focuses, more in particular, on the dependence of hostility and conflict on the presence of scarce economic resources (Collier and Hoeffler 1998: 571) and on the economic interdependence of nations. Some other accounts, drawing on Marxist philosophy and other *coercion theories* (Wehr 1979: 3) bring the economic theory of conflict to its extreme, claiming that conflict is necessarily present in society, as it is intrinsically connected to the societal structure. The situation of a "fixed pie" of resources is always presupposed in these accounts, whereby the mere presence of different interests necessarily creates conflictual relations (Knight 1992: 8).

2.3   Agency relationship and conflict

Agency theory, developed in the economic-financial field (Ross 1973; Mann 1997) but also largely adopted in other fields, like theory of organizations, political sciences and sociology, assumes a more specific view on conflict, focusing on a particular kind of human relationship that may give origin to conflict. Agency theory, in fact, analyses the interpersonal relationship between a *principal* – someone who has a goal, and delegates its realization to someone else– and an *agent* – who is in charge of realizing the principal's goal in exchange of some form of remuneration. This theory offers a very realistic view on a very usual human relationship bound to various interactions that is typically institutionalised by a form of *contract*. The principal and the agent are both considered as human subjects having their own desires, interests and goals, and behaving consequently. This approach does not see two persons' desires or interests as necessarily opposite to each other, but it takes into account the complexity of the relation between institutional roles and the human subjects who implement those roles. Within this framework, the *agency problem* is singled out, which originates from the non-alignment of the principal's and the agent's goals, which might induce the agent to behave in a way that is not correspondent with the principal's goal. The agency problem (Eisenhardt 1989: 58), in fact, arises when "(a) the desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict and (b) it is difficult or expensive for the principal to verify what the agent is actually doing". The origin of this problem, thus, lies in conflict conceived of as an incompatibility of goals, which might turn out into an overt opposition between the principal and the agent.

The agency relationship is not the only form of relationship that can be established amongst human beings[3]; indeed, it is a very specific form of relationship, characterized by a particular type of asymmetry: only the principal enjoys and is interested in the proper aim of the interaction, whereas the agent assumes the principal's goal in exchange for remuneration; remuneration is a subservient goal for the agent in order to reach his or her specific goals. The asymmetry between principal and agent in relation to the goals of the interaction is not mirrored neither in other kinds of contracts, such as the selling and buying of an house, nor in other form of complex relationships, like the one binding two friends or two members of the same family. In agency theory, on the opposite, such an asymmetry is a characterizing feature: in a doctor-patient relationship, for instance, it is the patient who, as a principal, is affected and cares about the goal of the interaction. Such a characterising feature of agency relationships may become, as said, source of conflicts, given the different nature of interest for the goals of the interaction.

Moreover, in analysing conflicts bound to agency relationships, it is to be noticed that the principal-agent asymmetry, which defines the parties' institutionalised relationship, is often intertwined with other relationships that are not agency-based: just to quote an example, a doctor may become the best friend of a patient, thus assuming the goal of his or her health as a personal concern. Empathy is not part of the agency relationship, but these two dimensions can affect each other:

one can decide not to see his doctor any more just because he does not feel comfortable with his character or because his ethical views are unacceptable... vice versa, a problem occurred within the doctor-patient agency – for instance, the suspicion that the doctor is not adequately experienced - can affect the doctor-patient interpersonal relationship. Even a long-lasting friendship can be damaged by such problems, which can also turn into proper conflicts (see the example discussed in Greco Morasso 2007).

In sum, however, even though agency theory does not cover all possible forms of human relationship, and therefore it does not cover all possible contexts for the insurgence of conflicts, it provides a reasonable framework for understanding how differences in the people's interests can lead to real conflict, and how such conflicts can be prevented.

2.4 *From difference of opinion to interpersonal hostility: the notion of socio-cognitive conflict*

Conflict resolution studies in the psychological domain have pointed out that human beings feel questioned together with their positions, when these positions result incompatible with someone else's (Cigoli and Scabini 2004; Hicks 2001). In this relation, the notion of *socio-cognitive conflict*, introduced in researches in socio-psychology (Light and Perret-Clermont 1989; Grossen and Perret-Clermont 1994; Perret-Clermont, Carugati and Oates 2004), turns out to be particularly illuminating. This term was introduced to explain how children negotiate and make use of situations involving conflicts of ideas to make progress in their development. Such processes may lead to joint cognitive constructions as different points of view come into the discussion: a communicative difference of opinion needs thus to be managed. The empirical research on how children resolve such conflicts lead to considering that it is important to find of a social solution beyond the intellectual solution of the problem. Any contraposition (child-child but, even more clearly, child-teacher), in fact, implies a psycho-social challenge for the subject, who feels questioned or even attacked on his or her personal position and, in some cases, on him and herself too. The notion of *socio-cognitive conflict*, thus, helps understand how sometimes differences and incompatibilities between individuals' views may degenerate into proper interpersonal hostility. The relation emphasized by the notion of socio-cognitive conflict between the different epistemic positions and the human subjects holding them finds some interesting confirmation in the results of the semantic analysis that will be presented in what follows.

3   Approaching conflict and its related notions through semantic analysis

The method which the semantic analysis proposed here relies on stems from a theoretical and methodological approach denominated *Congruity theory*. First

proposed in Rigotti (1993) as an approach to the analysis of textual sequences, Congruity theory rests on a pragmatic account considering communicative texts as actions, having thus a pragmatic goal; it interprets the whole textual structure as a hierarchy of interconnected predicate-argument structures, which are activated at different (semantic and pragmatic) levels, and which respond to the pragmatic aim of the text (Rigotti and Rocci 2001; Rigotti 2005). The notion of *predicate* is at the core of the theory, and, from the methodological point of view, the analysis is centred on predicates present in texts at various levels: "A *predicate* is conceived ontologically as a possible "mode of being", a general notion that subsumes more specific ontological distinctions such as those between properties and relations, states and events, actions and non-actions" (Rigotti 2005: 78). Such an approach allows analysing texts at the level of simple structures manifested by lexical and syntactic structures (from predicates like "to conflict with", to simple sentences), but it also accounts for more complex structures, like higher-level pragmatic predicates which assume as arguments text sequences, and may have no linguistic manifestation at all. In Congruity theory terms, "doing a semantic analysis means to rewrite natural language utterances in terms of predicate-argument structures" (Rigotti, Rocci and Greco 2006: 259). Within this framework, the semantic analysis of lexical items also takes into account the communicative situation where they occur. In other words, it may be said that this form of semantic analysis is not independent from the pragmatic perspective, as it considers the semantics of lexical items as it emerges from their textual uses.

More in detail, analysing a predicate-argument structure, be it at any level in the text hierarchy, means identifying the conditions that the predicate imposes onto its argument places, namely *presuppositions*, and effects produced in reality if the predicate is true (i.e. if the corresponding mode of being takes place), namely *implications* of the predicate (Rigotti and Rocci 2001). If implications allow specifying the proper meaning of the predicate, presuppositions define the conditions of *congruity* for the predicate to assume specific arguments to cover its argument places[4]. Since this paper aims at conceptually clarifying conflict-related notions, semantic analysis in this case is focused on the ontological constituency of these specific modes of beings. The task is theoretically a crucial one – since, as Aristotle warned in the first book of his Topics, if the terms we use are not clearly defined, we risk to be mislead in our reasonings[5].

Examples of application of the method of semantic analysis based on Congruity theory to clarify lexical predicates and identifying their pragmatic implications have been given in Rigotti, Rocci and Greco (2006) and in Rigotti and Rocci (2006), focused respectively on a central notion of argumentation theory, namely *reasonableness*, and on *context*. As in those cases, the semantic analysis performed here is supported by empirical evidence taken from a 100 million-word corpus of current British English, named the British National Corpus (henceforth BNC), consisting of 3261 written texts from a variety of genres (90 million words) and 863 transcribed oral samples (10 million words). It can be accessed online

through a dedicated client called SARA which can carry out sophisticated queries, build concordances and perform standard relative frequency calculations. For the present research, the corpus has been exploited mainly in order to have a complete picture of the actual uses of the words that have been investigated; in particular, the insights gained from the literature on the relation between incompatibilities and interpersonal conflicts are tested against semantic evidence. The results of the semantic analysis are then interpreted in order to elicit their pragmatic implications on the subjects involved in conflict. The goal of the analysis, thus, is reconstructing the ontology of conflict and its implications on human relations; identifying the social relations that are endangered by conflict is in fact the first step towards its resolution.

The term *conflict* is a noun belonging to the category of abstract names, which do not represent *entities* of (possible or real) world, but are rather *names of predicates* or *modes of being*; they can be defined as *depredicative* names (Rigotti and Cigada 2004: 209). Abstract names, thus, may indicate states of affairs, events, actions, but also properties, etc. When semantically analysing an abstract name, it is useful to recall its corresponding predicate(s). In this paper, beyond the noun *conflict*, the verb *to conflict*, the verbal phrases "to be in conflict", "to enter (into) conflict", and "to bring someone into conflict", and the adjectives *conflictual* and *conflictory* have been analysed.

It might be the case, as it is for *conflict* and its related terms, that a single word covers different predicates, which are distinguished in the analysis by considering the relevant features of (a) number of arguments, (b) quality of arguments (or essential traits of the presuppositions imposed by the predicate onto its specific argument places) and (c) order of arguments (ibid., pp. 95-106). When two uses of the same word differ under one or more of these respects, then different predicates have to be distinguished. In the case of the terms related to *conflict*, two fundamental meanings have been identified through the semantic analysis, which will be illustrated in paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2 respectively.

Before facing the specific traits of these two meanings, it might be useful to have a first approach to this family of concepts through its etymology. "To conflict with" derives from the Latin verb *confligo* (*cum* et *fligo*), which can be rendered as "to bump into", or "to collide".

3.1   *Conflict as an hostility between individuals (conflict 1)*

The first meaning identified in the semantic analysis closely recalls the etymological value of the considered forms, having to do with a struggle between two or more human subjects (persons or groups of persons), which is characterized by hostility and by the reciprocal endeavour of eliminating one's adversary. As emerging from the BNC corpus, a series of linguistic forms are frequently associated to this meaning. First of all, "to be in conflict (with)" (analysed in the forms: *to be in*

conflict, *is in conflict*, *are in conflict*, *was in conflict*, *were in conflict*), which has a durative value, often manifests this first meaning, although this verbal phrase can also indicate the second meaning (see par. 3.2). The ingressive forms "to enter conflict" and "to enter into conflict" exclusively refer to this first meaning; the same is true for the expression "to bring someone into conflict with" (to cause someone's entering into conflict), in which the ingressive is submitted to a causative. The verb "to conflict", instead, is almost exclusively associated to the second meaning, which will be explored in the next paragraph. The very rare occurrences of the verb "to conflict" related to the first meaning can be found in the form "conflicting" (see example IV in this paragraph), which is quite close to the durative value of "to be in conflict". The adjective *conflictual* has brought to light some occurrences of this first value. The noun *conflict*, which makes the event of conflict become a topic, is largely present with this meaning in the corpus, but it can also refer to the second meaning (see par. 3.2).

Some examples in which this first meaning emerges are the following:

(I) *He **was** constantly **in conflict with** the religious and legal authorities of his day.*

(II) *As far as we are concerned, if nurses **are in conflict with** their employer - and they are the least-able section of our society to fight — it is incumbent upon workers to take a stand to support nurses and other workers.*

(III) *But of all Koresh's dubious activities it was gun dealing that would **bring him into conflict with** authority.*

(IV) *Clulow and Vincent (1987) describe the role of the Divorce Court Welfare Service as "no-man's land between the interests of parents and children, between the **conflicting** parents themselves, and ultimately between the interests of the State and the individual; the meshing of private complaint and public response".*

(V) *Before the Gulf **conflict**, about two million Arabs and 250,000 non-Arabs visited Jordan each year.*

(VI) *While the party contains many who actively seek peace and reconciliation, it would be wrong to think of them in any sense as overcoming the basic **conflictual** components of bloc power in Ireland.*

(VII) *Hitler had no wish to provoke an armed **conflict** that he was not certain of winning.*

All the considered forms can be considered together as reflecting a predicate C1 whose semantic analysis can be formulated as follows:

> **C1** (x_1, x_2, x_3): Presuppositions: x_1 and x_2 exist; x_1 and x_2 are human (single or collective) subjects; there exists some form of relationship between x_1 and x_2 which is in some degree a cooperative relationship; x_3 is an issue (understood as an object of interest) in which some form of difference between x_1 and x_2 emerges

Implications: x_1 and x_2's relationship is 'shaken'; a new state of affairs is established, in which the relationship between x_1 and x_2 becomes questionable because of the divergence on x_3; each agent (x_1 and x_2) is committed to hinder that the adversary party obtains the desired good, because this is perceived as the condition to obtain his or her own good.

From the examples reported above, it clearly emerges that x_1 and x_2 can be either individuals or (more or less institutionalised) groups (nurses, like in example II, or nations, as implicitly indicated in example VII). The hostility between x_1 and x_2 – the "parties" in conflict – may be more or less exacerbate, and may involve different degrees of violence, including physical violence; the expression "armed conflict" in example VII indicates an extreme form of physical contraposition which is typical of wars.

It is noteworthy that x_1 and x_2's positions are reciprocal; that means that, in order to have a conflict in the strict sense of the word, both parties need to recognize it. Of course, in the initial phases of a conflict, there might be a situation in which a party feels hurt and the other one does not perceive that; nonetheless, in the proper conflictual phase, both parties are reciprocally hostile. A single person can *fight* against someone who is not aware of it, but nobody can have a proper *conflict* without the acknowledgement of his or her adversary.

As specified in the analysis, the proper meaning of C1 implies that a pre-existing cooperative human relationship of any sort – at least that cooperative relationship which is commonly expected from members of the human kind – becomes questionable, or enters a state of crisis. One could wonder, however, if conflict is always a negative state of affairs, or if, rather, there are some cases in which the relationship that becomes questionable was negative, and, consequently, conflict turns out to be a positive event. Indeed, a human relationship can be considered negative in two (very generally defined) cases. First, if there is a substantial lack of trust (*fides*) between the involved subjects. It is the case, for instance, of a party which betrays the other, or breaks a contract, etc. Second, a relationship may be negative if it does not correspond to the real needs of the involved parties, i.e. it is inappropriate, or incongruous. In these cases, questioning the existing relationship may be positive. C1, however, always implies at least a negative projection of the future, since it constantly develops under the risk of escalating into a violent conflict, thus assuming the form of physical collision.

Particular attention is to be devoted to the identification of the third argument (x_3); this argument, in fact, is so frequently left implicit in the corpus, that its elicitation in the semantic analysis may even seem strained. Indeed, the presence of x_3 can be indicated in a number of different ways.

First, it is sometimes explicitly specified, like in the following example, where the issue is articulately expressed: "*In March 1985, he came into conflict with the Lord Chancellor over an article he had written for the Daily Telegraph on Government pressure on the judiciary to shorten sentences and on the inadequacies*

of the prison system". When the main issue of the conflict is expressed, the construction "conflict over" is very frequent. Another less frequent construction found in the BNC corpus to indicate x_3 is "conflict about": *"This concern has been manifest in the debate over intergenerational conflict about access to resources"*.

In other cases, the main issue of the conflict can be indirectly indicated in expressions like "Northern Ireland conflict", or "Gulf conflict" (example V)[6]. Here, the main issues and even the conflicting parties of the respective conflicts are assumed to be well-known; thus, the identification of the geographical area is sufficient for metonymically recalling them, and expressions like "Gulf conflict" work as proper names.

Finally, the third argument can be left implicit if the characterization of x_1 and x_2 is specified in such a way that it allows the identification of x_3. If we consider, for instance, example I, the characterization of the second argument ("the religious and legal authorities of his day") turns out to be a clear indication of the kind of issues involved in the conflict, which will be very likely related to religious and legal aspects. Even more clearly, a sentence as *"He had a long-running conflict with the rabbis"*, also found in the BNC corpus, implies the presence of a conflict of religious nature; in fact, if a person, for instance, were a rabbi's neighbour, and he were in conflict with the rabbi over the boundaries of the respective proprieties, we would expect a different characterization of x_2, like, for instance, *"He had a long-running conflict with his neighbour"*, which would sound more fitting in terms of the categories used for describing x_2.

The presence of x_3, however, can be more or less emphasized and specified from case to case. I will come back to the implications of this fact in the discussion of the results of the semantic analysis (see paragraph 4).

3.2   *Conflict as a propositional incompatibility (conflict 2)*

The broader meaning of *conflict* as an incompatibility of positions or goals, which is identified in some of the theoretical accounts examined above, also finds correspondence in the BNC corpus. This meaning presents a slight metaphorical connotation, as one is tempted to imagine "conflicting opinions" or "conflicting interests" as two opposite armies fighting one against the other. Concerning its linguistic manifestation, the verb "to conflict", which has been analysed in the forms *to conflict*, *conflict*, *conflicts*, *conflicted*, and *conflicting*, is always associated to this meaning. This verb shows to be used with an atemporal value, analogous to that of "to equal" in mathematical calculations like "2+3 *equals* 5". Occurrences of "to conflict" referred to the first meaning, as said above, can only be found in the form "conflicting", which can be interpreted, in these cases, as "being in conflict". The verbal phrase "to be in conflict (with)" (analysed in the forms indicated above) can also be related to this second meaning; in these cases, the same atemporal value identified for "to conflict" prevails. The noun *conflict* is present with this second

value, as it clearly emerges from expressions like "conflict of opinion", "conflict of evidence" or "conflict of interest"; however, the prevailing function of the noun is indicating the event of an interpersonal conflict (C1). The adjectives *conflictual* and *conflictory* are also used with this meaning[7].

Some of the examples in which to this second meaning (C2) has been identified are the following:

(I)   *If a State concludes a treaty that **conflicts with** its obligations under an earlier treaty, other parties to the former treaty (although third parties to the subsequent one) can regard that State as remaining bound by its commitments to them.*

(II)   *His point of view **conflicted with** the spirit of the age and, despite his example, the glorious art of true fresco died out, its practice being incompatible with the new social attitude to time.*

(III)   *Liz Sayce, MIND's policy director, said the study's general optimism **conflicted with** earlier reports.*

(IV)   *Egypt protested at FIFA's original date of 28 March as it **conflicted with** a religious festival.*

(V)   *To the extent that maximising profits **conflicts with** the public interest, the solution from this perspective is not to modify corporate objectives, but to strengthen the limiting conditions within which companies are required to operate.*

(VI)   *Yet the government as promoter at times **conflicted with** the government as regulator, particularly in the area of competition policy.*

(VII)   *In this poem, as in 85, the Poet claims that his Muse is 'tongue-tied'; in 76, 102, 103 and 105 he gives **conflicting** reasons, all ingenious, why he writes such repetitive or uninspired poetry.*

(VIII)   *All of these decisions involve dilemmas in which equally important values **are in conflict** and however one resolves the dilemma, potential problems will arise.*

(IX)   *The apparent **conflict** of evidence is still not completely resolved, but there is a possible explanation.*

(X)   *New York publishers echo accusations of a **conflict** of interest in the choice of Knopf without prior competitive bidding.*

(XI)   *There is an inherent **conflict** between the demands of local autonomy and the principle of 'territorial justice', requiring that citizens in different geographical areas secure comparable treatment.*

(XII)   *For example, a union representative may feel a **conflict** between his need to fulfil a spokesman's role for his constituents, and his need to act responsibly as an employee of the company.*

(XIII)   *In this epoch the military elite was subordinate to the political elite, and the economic elite was divided, pursuing **conflictual** economic goals due to the massive expansion of the frontier.*

(XIV)   *Are Marx and Aristotle **conflictory** or reconcilable?* (Example found in Google)

In relation to the number of arguments involved, the predicate C2, which these examples make reference to, only foresees two arguments (x_1 and x_2). Its semantic analysis can be formulated as follows:

C2 (x_1, x_2): Presuppositions: x_1 and x_2 are two possibile states of affairs (propositions); │ Implications: x_1 and x_2 are incompatibile, i.e. mutually exclusive.

In order to clarify the nature of the states of affairs which might conflict in the sense identified here, it might be useful to recall the real arguments covering the argument places x_1 and x_2. The set of arguments found covers: points of view (*example II*); theories, statements, reasons, arguments (*examples III, VII, IX and XIV*); obligations (*example I*), rules, duties, roles (*examples VI and XII*), codes, laws, principles; goals (*examples V and XIII*), interests (*examples X and XI*), needs, values (*examples IV and VIII*).

This meaning of *conflict* brings to light the mutual exclusiveness of x_1 and x_2, which implies the need for a solution which can be of different types: if we are in front of "conflicting evidence", we might need to further investigate in order to discover which pieces of data correspond to reality; if we face an incompatibility of goals of values, a pragmatic decision is needed, which should be made in accordance with a reasonable hierarchy of goals: in example XI, for instance, if the demands of local autonomy are considered more important than the principle of "territorial justice", the principle could be suspended in this particular circumstance.

4   Semantic versus social connections: the degeneration of C2 into C1

Beyond helping identify two distinct uses of the term *conflict*, the semantic analysis presented in the preceding paragraphs gives some clues for interpreting the relation between propositional incompatibilities of the type C2 and proper interpersonal conflicts of the type C1; these latter define, by the way, the proper conflicts that are presupposed by mediation and other conflict resolution practices.

When analysing C2, an initial characterization of the arguments x_1 and x_2 as "states of affairs" (propositions) has been given. There are, indeed, different levels of incompatibility or alternativity that can be touched in C2 situations. At a first level, propositional incompatibility only concerns the *ontology* of the situation i.e. it is a mere propositional incompatibility. In this sense, for instance, if there is a fixed amount of financial resources to be distributed between two persons A and B, it is unavoidable that, the more A gains, the more B loses. Analogously, in a democratic system, if two candidates are running as president, the more votes the one gets, the more he or she "steals" votes to the other. At a second level, the incompatibility concerns *beliefs*: one cannot believe and not believe the same thing at the same time. Finally, the incompatibility can concern *commitments*: the same person cannot be committed to two contradictory positions at the same time (once he or she has

resolved possible interior conflicts and has decided to support a position in public). Of course, the incompatibility of beliefs and commitments cannot be accepted at the level of the single individual, who is expected not to be inconsistent in his or her beliefs or commitments, but there can be incompatibilities of beliefs or positions held by different human subjects. Now, such incompatibilities turn out to be, indeed, the proper origin of the conflict C1. In fact, when a propositional incompatibility involves the level of beliefs, and, even more, when it turns out to touch the level of commitments, the degree of *personalization* increases. In other words, the human subjects assume social positions as "parties"; and, at this point, a reaction can be triggered that brings C2 to degenerate into a real interpersonal conflict (C1). Such degeneration is based on a reasoning that could be formulated as follows: "If you do not esteem my position (my goal, my desire, etc.) you do not esteem me as a person". This reasoning stems from an argument scheme, or *locus*, that can be called *locus from the product to the producer* (Rigotti and Greco 2006). The *maxim*, i.e. the inferential principle which the argument is based on, can be formulated as a very general law: "the quality of the product mirrors the quality of the producer". Indeed, we often apply this rule in our reasonings: a good cook, i.e. someone who deserves to be esteemed as a cook, is somebody who "produces" (prepares) good dishes. If a cook's culinary creations were all of bad quality, we would not consider him a valuable cook. Similarly, when a person undertakes a commitment, he or she is bound to it as the producer of this "communicative product", and the acknowledgement of his or her position can be interpreted as the acknowledgement of him or herself as a person. Thus, questioning one's view turns out in somehow threatening one's identity. Certainly, I am not implying that such a reasoning is always legitimated; on the contrary, in many cases it is not. However, it is undoubtful that its application is common, and generalising it to all cases is a subtle temptation[8].

It is true that facing a difference of opinion sometimes also turns out into a positive acquisition of the involved subjects, i.e., more in particular, to learning, and to the establishment of a much more mature identity, whereby dialogue and confrontation with others become a source of personal richness (Grossen and Perret-Clermont 1994: 256). But, at least in some cases, it generates overt hostility, disagreement, and personal opposition – in other words, a real conflict of the type C1. In Dascal's (1998) terms, the different communicative ways of dealing with a difference of opinion are positioned in a dichotomy having *discussion* and *debate* as poles. A discussion can be interpreted as an argumentative exchange in which the parties are committed together to the search for truth and, though having different positions, they do not commit to them personally. At the opposite pole, we find disputes, where the only aim of the participants is winning, irrespectively of the truth. In disputes, the adversaries lack esteem in each other as reasonable arguers and, thus, they are ready to use manipulative devices such as stratagems in order to win the cause. To this, I would add that, sometimes, conflicts can escalate so much that they overcome any communicative category and become non-communicative events, in which the parties simply tend to eliminate each other. The dichotomy

discussion-debate can thus be viewed as a pole of a higher-level dichotomy between communicative and non-communicative ways of dealing with conflicts.

In general, the hypothesis can be made that the more a person feels identified and also "dominated" by his or her positions, the more he or she will be inclined to accordingly interpreting any criticism on the positions as an attack at the identity level. On the opposite, if somebody has a more "solid" identity, he or she will not feel personally questioned by objections concerning his or her positions.

By the way, the observations made on the implications of C2 at the subject's identity level lead us to discuss the well-known principle of the conflict resolution practice that proclaims: "separate the people from the problem" (Fisher, Ury and Patton 1981: 17). This account acknowledges that the subjective relationship between the conflicting parties is crucial in the conflict resolution process: "You are dealing not with abstract representatives of the "other side", but with human beings. They have emotions, deeply held values, and different backgrounds and viewpoints; and they are unpredictable. So are you" (ibid., pp. 18-19). However, separating the relationship from the substance of the problem is considered as an ideal move for conflict resolution. Now, if this is interpreted as trying to solve the problem by putting apart its relational dimension ("*I am sorry but I have to fire you from my company; but nothing personal!*"), can be an unhappy enterprise, and a very quixotic one.

The degeneration process going from C2 to C1 is witnessed by the semantics of the predicate C1 itself. In fact, the presence of an original incompatibility C2 that has given rise to conflict can be found in the third argument (x_3) of C1, which represents the main issue of the conflict. The fact that, as said, x_3 can be more or less explicitly focused on depends on how much C1 has escalated. When, in fact, C1 is not managed for a certain amount of time, the parties' reciprocal attempts to hinder the realization of the other's goals may turn into a *global conflict*, whereby they ultimately try to eliminate each other. In such a degree of conflict escalation, the original C2 may be progressively left in the background, or even completely forgotten. Thus, in many exacerbate and long-lasting conflicts (be them at the interpersonal level, or at the level of more or less institutionalised groups), identifying the main issue, or even a set of relevant issues, is already an important step towards the resolution of the conflict itself. Thus, the hypothesis can be made that the focus on x_3 within C1 and the escalation of the conflict are in inverse proportion: the more the issue of the conflict is specified and delimitated, the less the conflict has assumed a global dimension, and the easier it is manageable. On the opposite, the less the presence of x_3 is clearly emerging in the linguistic formulation, the more exacerbate the conflict; in these cases, a reasonable intervention for conflict management and resolution may become very difficult.

Going back to C2, it should be noticed that a particular kind of propositional incompatibility is more inclined to turn into C1: the so-called *conflict of interest*. This fact can be better explained by introducing a *theory of action*, since interests and goals are bound to an agent's potential intervention on reality. Following Rigotti

(2003), I define action as the intervention of a human (rational and willing) subject who, on the basis of his knowledge of the actual world and of possible worlds, activates a causal chain in order to pursue his desire to reach a new corresponding state of affairs (see Figure 1).
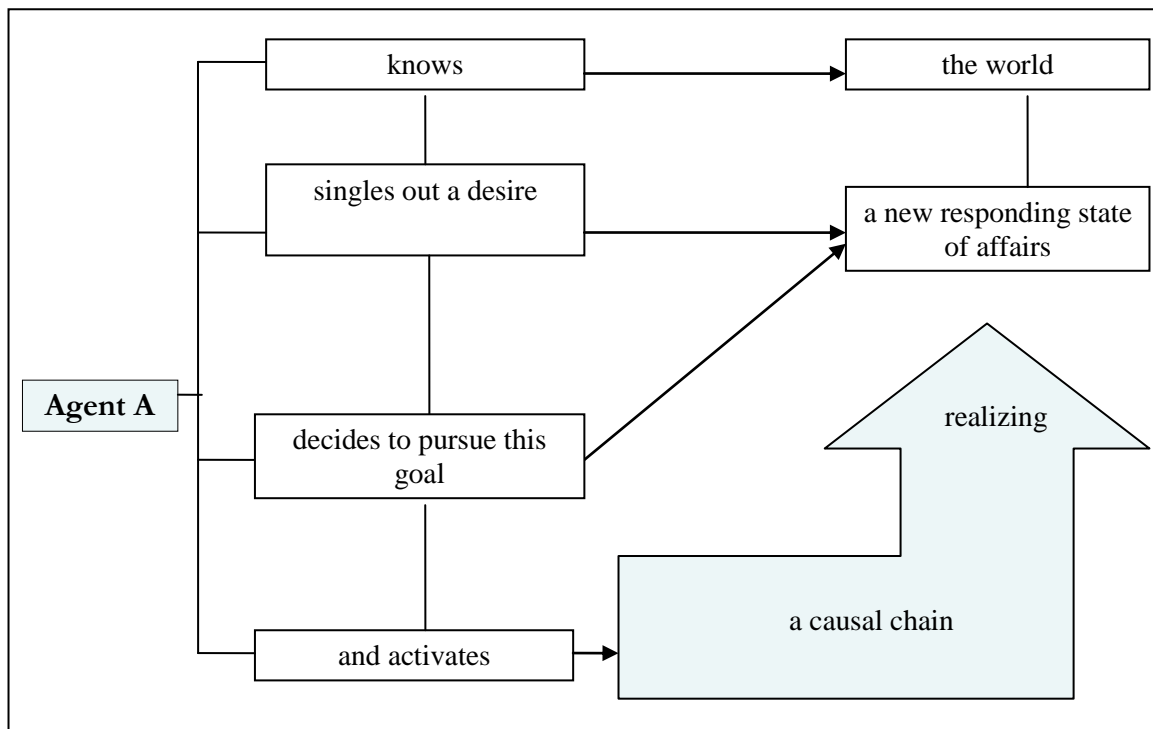

Figure 1: Structure of action (Rigotti 2003)

Now, when two agents have a conflict of interest, as far as they decide to pursue their goal, their reciprocal positions tend to become *competitive.* This can happen for two main reasons. The first one is that the new responding states of affairs they desire may be contradictory, i.e. they could not become at the same time part of the real world: if it is necessary that agent A's good is the possible world Q, and it is necessary that agent B's good is the possible world ¬Q, since Q and ¬Q are contradictory, it is impossible that these two worlds are realized together in the real world. We may think, for instance, to a political competition where only one of two candidates will become president. Since the desired good (the election as president) is exclusive, the two candidates have contradictory interests, i.e. they imagine and whish the realization of contradictory states of affairs. In such cases, if both agents deliberately pursue their respective interests, an interpersonal competition arises where the fulfilment of A's desire automatically turns into B's ruin; the Latin saying "mors tua vita mea" represents this situation synthetically but quite clearly. The second cause of degeneration of conflicts of interest into proper interpersonal conflicts is realized when the interests of the agents are per se not contradictory, but

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the realization of their respective desires is impossible, because it exploits an exclusive causal chain. For instance, imagine that two citizens' associations would like to propose alternative measures for promoting the cultural development of their town: the one would like to improve the library service, whereas the other one wants to open a new museum. Of course, the two interests are not *conflictual*; but the city counsel only has a limited budget, therefore only one of the projects will be accepted. Also in this case, a competitive situation is generated, which may bring to a real interpersonal conflict.

As a final observation, we might wonder whether the conflict of interests that parties perceive is always correspondent to a real propositional incompatibility. *Fortunately not* is the answer. In fact, when two persons appear to have incompatible interests, the search for a win-win solution seems to be vain. However, it is important to verify whether the opposition between A and B's goals reflects a real opposition between the fulfilment of their desires, or if it is only a perceived opposition. In the latter case, if the conflict is based on an apparent incompatibility, the resolution will be clearly easier. Dascal (forthcoming) discusses how sometimes the resolution of an incompatibility (or more properly, in his terms, a *dichotomy*) occurs through a de-dichotomizing strategy, i.e. through the acknowledgment that the poles of the dichotomy, if taken in a pragmatic perspective, allow for intermediate alternatives in the actual use that is made of them within an argumentative debate. It is argued that, often, the dichotomization is an *oversimplification* of the presence of a complex difference of opinion; this observation is particularly precious for conflict studies, because the underlying and maybe complementary concerns of the parties may be incorrectly "represented" by a "clear" contradiction at the superficial level of positions. Thus, we might say that interpersonal hostilities can be hidden behind a so-claimed ontological dichotomy which, at a closer look, could be reinterpreted and dissolved.

Conflict resolution studies have rightly devoted much attention to this topic, as witnessed by the well-known principle "focus on interests, not positions" (Fisher, Ury and Patton 1981: 3). In this relation, it is worth reporting a famous "myth" which is transmitted to new generations of conflict resolution practitioners with the aim of warning them of this possible discrepancy between the parties' image of their advantage and their actual advantage. The story can be resumed in the following terms: two old sisters have a single orange to share, and both declare that they need the whole fruit. After a long conflict, they agree to a distributive compromise. They each take half the orange, and end up with… a very small glass of juice for one sister and a very small cake made with the orange peel for the other. Of course, if the two sisters had focused on their real desires rather than on their positions, they would have noticed that the former were compatible: the one sister could have enjoyed more orange juice, and the other one could have had the whole peel for her cake. Both sisters would have been more satisfied. The principle that conflict resolution practicitioners want to convey by this anecdote is quite clear: one should be aware of

possible discrepancies between the parties' positions, which can be contradictory, and their real concerns, which often turn out to be complementary[9].

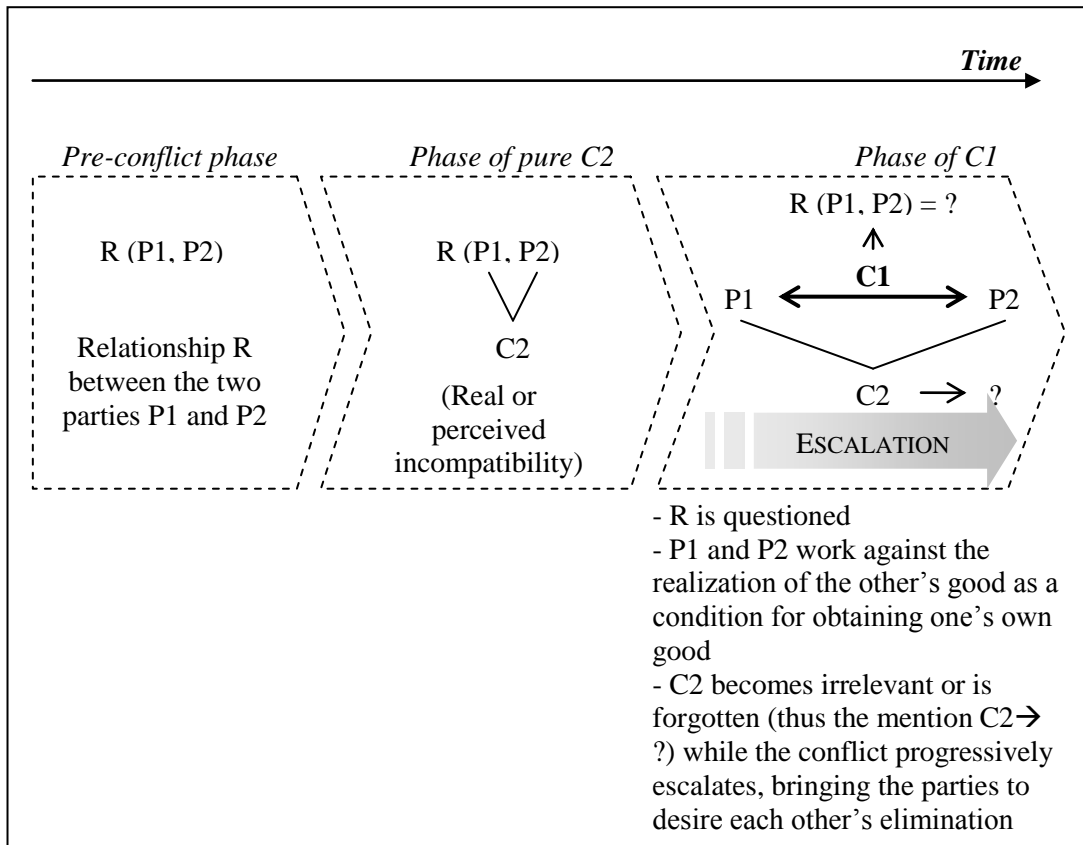## 5   Towards a new "conflict mapping guide"

When Paul Wehr, in 1979, proposed his *conflict mapping guide* (see also par. 2), he developed a valuable tool for intervening into social and international conflicts, constructed on the basis of his experience in the field (Wehr 1979: 18). This tool aimed at achieving "a clearer understanding of the origins, nature, dynamics, and possibilities for resolution of the conflict" (ibid., pp. 18-19). The conflict mapping guide approach has, indeed, numerous merits. Above all, the map is a particularly suited instrument for identifying a series of factors that emerge as relevant in the process of conflict conceived, in this case, as overt hostility (C1) between persons, social groups, or nations. In particular, Wehr's map is founded on the identification of the conflict *history*, *context*, *parties*, *issues*, *dynamics*, of the *alternative routes to a solution(s) of the problem(s)*, and of the *conflict regulation potential* (ibid., pp. 19-22). Moreover, the mapping guide accounts for the continuous evolution of the conflictual situation, which can be constantly developed and modified by the parties' interaction, and by the intervention of third neutral parties, as mediators.

However, the origin of the conflict does not come to the fore in the model, which is conceived of as an instrument for intervening in conflicts that are already overtly acknowledged by the parties; furthermore, although the model mentions the possibility of *issue emergence, transformation and proliferation* (ibid., p. 21), the relation between issues management and conflict development is not explained. Again, about the typology of conflict issues (*facts-based, values-based, interests-based* and *non realistic*, p. 20), a more detailed account of the concept of "issue" that may generate a conflict would help prevent possible sources of conflict or effectively intervene on them.

In relation to all these aspects, the semantic analysis performed in this paper can help define the basis for integrating Wehr's conflict mapping guide in a theoretically more justified and comprehensive framework. As shown in the results of the semantic analysis, the identification of two main meanings of the term *conflict* – conflict as interpersonal hostility (C1) and conflict as a propositional incompatibility (C2) – and the analysis of the degeneration of C2 into C1 helps shed more light on the origin of conflict and on its dynamics.

In figure 2, a sketched ontology of the conflictual situation is represented, whereby, following the results of the semantic analysis, the essential factors of conflict and the essential relations between them have been highlighted. This ontology can work as a matrix for elaborating a new integrated conflict mapping guide. Of course, in order to develop a tool for conflict study and conflict resolution interventions, the matrix has to be further developed; however, it already helps

identify some aspects that indicate as many directions of research on crucial issues for the prevention and management of conflicts.

Figure 2: Matrix for developing a new conflict mapping guide

The temporal development of the conflict origin and escalation, which is indicated in Figure 2, should not be understood as an unstoppable degenerative mechanism. Indeed, many crucial aspects can be considered for the study of conflict and for planning effective conflict resolution interventions that block this development:

1. In relation to the pre-conflict phase, the first question to be answered is whether R is really a positive relation for P1 and P2 or not.
2. In relation to the phase of pure C2, it is important to verify whether C2 is a real incompatibility or if it is only perceived as such by the parties. As mentioned above (see paragraph 4), sometimes the degeneration into conflict C1 is avoided because parties perceive that their apparent contraposition manifests deeper complementarities.
3. When the proper interpersonal conflict has arisen (phase of C1), it is important to understand how the conflict could be managed without letting it degenerating.

Conflict resolution interventions, like mediation, constitute precious instruments in this relation, as they are conceived of as tools for intervening in proper C1 conflicts. Some authors (see Glasl 2004), also relying on their professional experience, suggest how to use the various conflict resolution practices in relation to the different phases of escalation of C1.

4. A crucial point is the passage from C2 to C1. Here, I just suggest the hypothesis that the sound management of C2 situations largely depends on how much space for sound discussion and argumentation is foreseen by the context, considered in its *institutionalised* and *interpersonal* dimensions (see Rigotti and Rocci 2006 for this double characterization of context). In other words, if a certain institution, or a certain interpersonal relationship (like a relationship of friendship) does not foresee any space for confrontation and discussion – including not only the possibility of advancing positions arguments, but also the space for expressing one's emotions and personal commitments[10] to those positions and arguments – in its written or unwritten rules, the presence of a difference of opinion or of another contraposition of the kind C2 will more likely turn into a proper conflict C1; parties, in fact, having no space for expounding their reasons, will feel more threatened in their personal identities.

6   Conflict and controversy: some final annotations

Some conflictual interactions and polemical exchanges of views are sometimes associated to conflict; as a final remark to this paper, it is useful to make a clear distinction between the state of affairs of conflict and those communicative interactions that are clearly associated to a non-cooperative attitude, but do not overlap with the conflict situation (see also par. 4). A prime example of such interactions, whose denomination, however, brings it to be often assimilated or confused with conflict, is *controversy*, a "quasi-dialogue type", in Dascal's (2003) definition. Again, semantic analysis reveals some important aspects which help distinguish conflict and controversy.

The analysis will start from the adjective *controversial*, which helps us shed light on the abstract name *controversy*. Differently from *questionable*, which refers to an object of possible discussion, the adjective *controversial* indicates a topic that has already given rise to discussion, as it emerges clearly from the following examples:

*(I) Textbooks on research methods rarely mention the problems that arise when undertaking research on **controversial** topics or conducting it in sensitive locations.*

*(II) Although their views appeared to carry little weight, they had raised a fundamental question about the relationship between tax allowances and cash allowances which remains a **controversial** issue.*

Therefore, the following semantic analysis can be proposed:

> **Controversial** (x_1): Presuppositions: x_1 is a possible issue of discussion │ Implications: there has been debate on x_1

Notice that x_1 is always to be interpreted as an object of discussion, even if it is apparently a physical object: for example, in the case of "…*the eventual security of the **controversial sculpture** in its Hyde Park home*", what is controversial is the judgment about the sculpture, not the physical monument in itself. From the example, however, it is not possible to say whether it is the very existence of the sculpture to be controversial, its collocation in the park, or its realization (style, material…).

The noun *controversy* reflects some of the features of the correspondent adjective, clearly referring to communicative interactions characterized as debates or discussions:

*(I) Much **controversy** is caused by Luxemburg's low rates of 6 per cent and 10 per cent, because Belgians simply shop 'over the border' and fill up their cars with cheap petrol.*

*(II) A notable feature of the resultant **controversy** was that the British Medical Association, the virulent opponent of Aneurin Bevan in 1946, was now most forceful in defending the health service, in denouncing the government for threatening its existence and failing to fund it as was properly required.*

The following analysis can thus be proposed:

> **Controversy** (x_1, x_2, x_3): Presuppositions: x_1 and x_2 exist and are human beings; x_3 is a possible issue of discussion │ Implications: there is a communicative contraposition between x_1 and x_2, who have different standpoints about x_3, and this contraposition gives rise to protracted discussion.

In comparison to C1, *controversy* clearly indicates that the divergence on x_3 is managed through communicative means (in particular, through a discussion).

Dascal has devoted a series of studies to the nature of controversy, which help deepen the results emerged from the semantic analysis of this concept. At the level of content, semantic analysis has revealed that controversy always involves an issue of discussion (represented as x_3); Dascal points out that, in practice, controversies normally involve more than a single issue: "An actual controversy is never a matter of a *single* difference of opinion on *any* issue" (ibid., p. 281). Controversies turn out

to be, rather, "(protracted) dialogues" (ibid., p. 280), or, as it might be said, interactions of communicative nature characterized by a high level of competition and a low degree of confidence in the possible resolution of the difference of opinion between the disputants. Their dialogical nature distinguishes controversies from conflict, which are events that can be lacking any communicative involvement. In particular, Dascal (1998; 2006: xlii) highlights the pursuit of reasonable argumentation which is present in controversies, and which is also required by the actual decision maker – the public as "judge" of the controversy – because "the public praises Reason as well" (Dascal 2003: 290).

Furthermore, Dascal emphasises the impossibility of defining controversies only by pointing at logical inconsistencies between the disputants' statements (Dascal 2003: 290); the inconsistency of the disputants' statements, in fact, turns out to be only a part of the nature of controversy; moreover, the mere propositional incompatibility does not necessarily give origin to a controversy. Controversies, in fact, involve not only a cognitive dimension, but also an existential and a public dimension (ibid., p. 288), which engages the disputants globally as persons, and also affect their relationship with the community – the "public" – which acts as decision-maker for deciding who the winner is. The global involvement of the disputants' personal identities highlights a certain similarity between controversy and conflict: both events concern the person as a whole, putting into discussion not only his or her opinions, but also his or her personal identity.

In this sense, controversies can be considered particular developments of socio-cognitive conflicts, which have not degenerated into interpersonal hostility. More specifically, these observations on the social nature of controversies, by indirectly recalling the issue of socio-cognitive conflict, suggest us a possible hypothesis for studying the relationship between controversy and conflict: it might be said that interpersonal conflict can be the outcome of a controversy if this latter is not correctly managed as an argumentative discussion, and the social questioning of the parties' identities becomes preponderant.

Notes

[1] I am sincerely grateful to Marcelo Dascal, Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont and Eddo Rigotti. This work has been really enriched by their observations, which "challenged" me to go deeper in my analysis. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers, all the participants to the 2007 edition of the Amsterdam-Lugano Colloquium on argumentation and Peter Houtlosser for their precious comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

[2] Indeed, one of the problems faced in third parties' interventions is to find a right time for intervening (Princen 1992: 51-54), because the conflict should not have escalated so much as to have degenerated into a sort of communicative epilepsy (Greco 2005).

[3] First, the category of contract is broader than that of agency relationship. There are contracts that cannot be interpreted as forms of agency: selling or buying a house puts both interagents at the same level, and it is unnatural to interpret the one as the other's agent. Even more clearly, marriage includes a contract signed by husband and wife; but it would be odd to ask who the principal is and who the agent is. Furthermore, not all human relationships are regulated by contracts: in some relationships, the reciprocal commitments are not made explicit and enforced by an external authority. Think, for

instance, to friendship, or to the ties linking the members of the same linguistic or, more generally, cultural community, which are forms of communal identity somehow "inherited" by the individual.

[4] Congruity theory shows to have important similarities with other semantic and pragmatic approaches. In particular, Pieter A.M. Seuren (1998; 2000) analyses the semantics of predicates in terms of *preconditions* (presuppositions) and *satisfaction conditions* (implications). A similar approach to semantic analysis is to be found in Fillmore; see, for instance, Fillmore 1971, where the author analyses verbs of judging, like "to blame", "to criticize", and "to accuse". Moreover, see the works by Igor A. Mel'čuk on the meaning-text linguistic model (Mel'čuk 1997) and on the communicative organization of utterances (Mel'čuk 2001). About pragmatic predicates, see the approaches to text coherence introducing the notion of *relational predicates*, i.e. predicates that take text units as arguments, and impose specific conditions onto them. Different authors speak of *discourse relations*, *coherence relations*, *rhetorical relations*, *rhetorical predicates*, etc. (see Bateman and Rondhuis 1997 for a comparison of these different approaches).

[5] In this relation, it is worth quoting the entire passage by Aristotle. See Pickard-Cambridge (2004): "It is useful to have examined the number of meanings of a term both for clearness' sake (for a man is more likely to know what it is he asserts, if it has been made clear to him how many meanings it may have), and also with a view to ensuring that our reasonings shall be in accordance with the actual facts and not addressed merely to the term used. For as long as it is not clear in how many senses a term is used, it is possible that the answerer and the questioner are not directing their minds upon the same thing".

[6] Notice, however, that though the syntactic structure of expressions like "Northern Ireland conflict", "armed conflict", or "intercultural conflict" seems equivalent, the specification preceding the name *conflict* may assume extremely different values from the semantic point of view.

[7] For reasons of completeness, it is to be said that the adjective *conflictual* covers two further predicates, namely C3 and C4. In both these cases, *conflictual* identifies a one-place predicate. C3 identifies human actions or activities that typically become sources of conflict, like in the example *He stresses the way in which the acquisition of a gendered subjectivity is necessarily **conflictual** and involves struggle,* where x_1 is a human action or activity that generates conflicts (in the sense of C1); in C4 (a value confirmed also by the only occurrence of *conflictive* found in the corpus), x_1 is some social reality that is often affected by conflicts, like in the example: *If post cold-war Europe is not to be violent and **conflictual** then the sources of rivalry and mistrust need to be addressed head-on.*

[8] Such a temptation is particularly poisonous in asymmetrical relations, where the "inferior" person may be continuously "tested" on his or her positions in order to be accepted as a person.

[9] Uspenskij proposes the challenging hypothesis that even cultural differences can often express deeper complementarities. A significant example is brought in Uspenskij (2005), where it is shown that the differences about benediction with the sign of the Cross that can be found in the different Christian traditions are, in reality, expressions of different perspectives on the same relationship between the human being and God (see in particular pp. 43-49, and pp. 56-57, footnote 13). This profound complementarity, however, as it generates an actual – one could say "physical" – difference, has leaded to reciprocal accusations between the different Christian traditions, in particular between the Orthodox and Catholic communities (ibid., see in particular Ch. 5).

[10] Dumont, Perret-Clermont and Moss (1995) analyse the positive effects that a framework of friendly relationships can have on the cognitive progress made by children in co-constructing moral reasonings.

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